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8 July 2019
Monday 8 July 2019

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRA YERS

[MR Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Veterans: Recognition

1. Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps her Department has taken to recognise officially the sacrifice that veterans have made for the UK. [911762]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): My Department commemorates the contribution and sacrifices of our armed forces veterans through occasions such as D-day and Armed Forces Day. We keep such events under review and ensure that veterans are properly considered and represented.

Jack Brereton: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response. Next year, the early May bank holiday will move to mark the 75th anniversary of VE Day. Does she agree with me that we should do much more to recognise the service and sacrifices of our veterans and that it would be a fitting tribute permanently to rename one of our existing UK bank holidays Veterans Day?

Penny Mordaunt: We should always look to do more to honour the sacrifices that individuals have made. Armed Forces Day is supposed to be the day that we do that, and I have asked my officials to undertake some work so we can ensure that Armed Forces Day is a day for them, not just about them. It is incredibly important that we ensure that our veterans, our service personnel and their families can really enjoy the day, not have to do extra shifts. On that point, I would praise Salisbury, which held Armed Forces Day this year for the nation. It arranged some amazing events for the public and also put on some spectacular events for serving personnel, families and veterans, including free concerts.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I know the Secretary of State would agree that there is a real need for a permanent memorial for veterans who have fallen in the two world wars and in all the wars that have followed. Will she join me in praising the communities of Evanstown and Gilfach Goch in my constituency, which have spent the last 18 months refurbishing the memorial and tracing veterans from the Gilfach valley? Will she ensure, where memorials have fallen into disrepair, as some have, that the MOD has funding to help refurbish them?

Penny Mordaunt: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating that organisation and all the organisations across the country that are not just looking after historic monuments to and commemorations of our armed forces, but ensuring that the history of those individuals is properly recorded. Support for different memorials is split across Departments, and local government is involved, as obviously is the Commonwealth War Graves Commission for certain memorials. If he writes to me about the specifics, I will ensure that the relevant Department hears his plea.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): One group of veterans who undoubtedly deserve our respect are the veterans of Northern Ireland who served for years on Operation Banner to uphold the rule of law against the IRA, yet some of them now face subsequent investigation—even up to 50 years on, even including Chelsea Pensioners—while those in the IRA are off
scot-free with letters of comfort from Tony Blair. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that, as some have recently suggested, to “treat both sides the same” is not only patently ludicrous, but a deep insult to all those veterans without whose courage there would never have been a Good Friday agreement in the first place?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend will know my views on this matter. Although we have obligations under the Stormont House agreement and have to approach these things in different ways, our obligations to our veterans—whether they have served in an operation on UK soil or overseas—are the same.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Throughout his brave service in our forces in Northern Ireland, Germany and Kenya, my constituent Tony Pitt was exposed to asbestos that led to a cancer diagnosis in 2017. He is now in the impossible position that he has just six months before the immunotherapy treatment that is keeping him going runs out. Will the relevant Minister meet Tony and me to discuss his case, as surely the high standards set by the armed forces covenant do not envisage our veterans crowdfunding to stay alive?

Penny Mordaunt: That sounds like an appalling situation, and I thank the hon. Lady for raising it. The Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), will be very happy to meet Tony, and I will get my officials to talk to the hon. Lady after this session.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): May I ask my right hon. Friend to ensure that, all these years later, someone in the Ministry of Defence checks on veterans from Northern Ireland who were grievously hurt there—such as Lance Corporal William Bell and Private Mark Young from my own company, when 17 people were killed—to make sure that they are having a good life, or as good a life as possible?

Penny Mordaunt: I would be very happy to look at the cases of those two individuals. It is vital that we have a clear line of sight on what is happening with individual cases. We still need to make improvements to veterans support, and part of the problem relates to the need for continuity and to ensure proactively that people are getting the care they need.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The best way to recognise our veterans is to ensure that they are well served today, yet SSAFA research shows that only 16% of veterans believe they are well served by the armed forces covenant. How is the Secretary of State auditing the armed forces covenant, to ensure that local authorities are applying it proactively?

Penny Mordaunt: The prime organisation that holds everyone to account for delivering the covenant is the Veterans Board, which will meet again very shortly.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): The whole of Wiltshire was delighted to welcome the Secretary of State, together with the Princess Royal, and a whole host of other luminaries, to Salisbury last Saturday to celebrate Armed Forces Day. Of course, it is right that we think very carefully about veterans and their needs, particularly those suffering from the physical or mental after-effects of warfare. None the less, does the Secretary of State agree that the purpose of Armed Forces Day is to think very carefully about the 200,000 fit, healthy and committed young men and women who are today serving our armed forces, to celebrate their commitment to their duties and to wish them well as they do it?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree with my hon. Friend and again praise Salisbury for its work in ensuring that service personnel and their families had an amazing few days. As we take the event forward, however, we need to ensure that, as an additional Saturday on which to work, it does not put a burden on our armed forces. We should be doing more free events, and businesses across the land should consider how they can contribute to making that day special.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Secretary of State will know that one way to honour our veterans population is by fully implementing the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland. She will also know that the reason why our Departments do not adhere to the spirit of the covenant is the sectarian intransigence of Sinn Féin. Is it not wrong that the people from whom our armed forces community protected us are precluding our offering service to our armed forces in return? Will she take steps to ensure full implementation?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree with the hon. Gentleman completely. We are talking about the armed forces of the United Kingdom. Wherever they are serving, wherever they are based and wherever they are from, I want them to be able to take part in events, and I also want to ensure that the public services provided to them are as they should be.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The importance of support for veterans should unite the whole House. Given the appalling track record of outsourcing, will the Secretary of State explain why her Government have invited private contractors to bid to run the medal office and certain veterans services?

Penny Mordaunt: I acknowledge the work that the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) has done on veterans support, including through the gateway and the veterans strategy, on which we are currently consulting. I have also been doing work in the Department, looking at our obligations and how we are constituted.

Veterans: Universal Credit

2. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for armed forces veterans in receipt of universal credit.

[911763] The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): As veterans are civilians, the majority of care comes from other Departments and devolved Administrations. The Ministry of Defence works closely with other stakeholders to target and improve veterans’ access to services, including those who are eligible for universal credit.
Mr Cunningham: The Minister has just spoken about the relationship between the MOD and other Departments. A study by the Forces in Mind Trust charity has found that ex-service personnel have an overwhelmingly negative experience of universal credit and the fit for work test. What is he going to do about that?

Mr Ellwood: When those who have served in uniform depart for civilian street, it is very important that they are aware of the benefits for which they may or may not be eligible. Our transition programme now includes making sure that we improve the understanding of what armed forces personnel veterans can receive. I am pleased to say that the Secretary of State is working with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to make very clear that universal credit is available for those who are eligible.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss further how we can create the position of an armed forces covenant ombudsman, who would be an advocate for those who, like the constituent of the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), cannot get the resources they need from our public services and whose MPs are also unable to make progress?

Mr Ellwood: I am aware that my hon. Friend has spoken to the Secretary of State about it and we would be delighted to meet her to discuss it further.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Does the Minister recognise that the question raised by the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) is an addition to the litany of failures for those leaving the armed forces trying to access universal credit? Let us bring this issue to a head. Does he not now agree that it is time to support my Armed Forces Representative Body Bill to ensure that the armed forces can speak with one strong voice when they leave the armed forces as veterans?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman raises this matter almost weekly, but he misses the point. We ensure that we look after our veterans and they know whether they have almost 4,000 signatories—but it is important that if somebody signs the covenant it meets their expectations. If it fails or falls foul of that, we need a system to recognise that. She raises a very interesting idea. I have spoken to the Secretary of State about it and we would be delighted to meet her to discuss it further.

Mr Speaker: For the benefit of people observing our proceedings who are not Members of the House I would simply add, non-pejoratively, that raising something weekly in the Chamber is a very modest effort. Raising things daily, or in some cases several times a day, is by no means unknown in, or condemned by, the House of Commons. It is perfectly normal.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Has the Minister had the opportunity to discuss with the Department for Work and Pensions the symptoms and expectations relating to post-traumatic stress disorder and how it impacts on veterans applying for benefits and occasionally having to visit offices to receive the benefits they deserve?

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for that question. It has been raised many times and it is important to put it in context and in perspective. Not everybody who joins the armed forces will be affected—just two in every 1,000 people—but they need the attention and support that they absolutely deserve. The Secretary of State is meeting the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to discuss that very matter.

Outsourced Contracts

4. Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the quality of service provided through contracts outsourced by her Department.  [911766]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The Ministry of Defence regularly monitors the performance of all contractors, including outsourced key services. This is done via the use of contract performance indicators and action is taken when standards are not met.

Bambos Charalambous: Capita has completely failed to fulfil its contract for Army recruitment. This service should now be brought back in-house. When will the Government accept that their dogmatic insistence on outsourcing everything imaginable to the private sector is failing our armed forces and the taxpayer?

Mr Ellwood: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman’s assessment. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces, may have the opportunity to speak on this matter in a little bit more detail in a later question, but we are seeing a change in the trend. More people are showing an indication of interest in the armed forces. It is important we translate that into ensuring they actually sign up, but last year alone we had 77,000 applications of interest for the armed forces. I think that is a good step forward.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The Ministry of Defence has a target of spending 25% of its budget with small and medium-sized enterprises by 2022. What progress has been made towards achieving that target?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), the Minister with responsibility for procurement, that is exactly what is happening.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It was good to see members of the armed forces and the Secretary of State herself at the Pride event in London at the weekend.
Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend raises two issues. I join him in paying tribute to Care after Combat; what it does to provide support for those who find themselves imprisoned or on the wrong side of the law is absolutely brilliant, and we should all tip our hats to that. However, we must also recognise that the defence budget is under strain. It was affected by the spending review and austerity measures. In 2011 and 2016, we were obliged to find £5 billion-worth of efficiencies, which we did. We have subsequently been asked to find another £7 billion-worth of efficiencies. There is only so long that we can do this before it starts having an impact, and that is why it is important that we argue now, with the next spending review coming up, that we need more money for defence.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): If we are to get this resettlement programme right for all our veterans, do we not need to make sure that we have properly assessed the medical injuries that they sustained during their period of service? In that light, is it not a shame that while the United States of America makes sure that every single person in the perimeter of a bomb blast is assessed for brain injury, we are not yet able to do that? We may still be misdiagnosing people who are suffering from PTSD when they have actually had a brain injury.

Mr Ellwood: I know that the hon. Gentleman knows a lot about this issue. He is absolutely right to say that the advancement in the science now reflects the fact that even if someone can walk away from a blast, they can be affected long term by what has happened, and we are learning from the Americans on that. We have our transition programme, which can last up to two years to make sure that we manage the transition from the world of the armed forces to civilian life, but I absolutely agree with him that more can be done in this area.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): This Government have invested heavily in strengthening the UK’s armed forces so that we can deliver the tasks that we require of them, from maintaining the nuclear deterrent to defending against threats in airspace, and from supporting the police in counter-terrorism to providing disaster relief. We are committed to maintaining the size of the armed forces and Joint Force 2025 will offer us choice, agility and global reach.

Mr Sheerman: The Secretary of State might be aware that my father and two brothers served in the British Army, and I am very concerned at the moment should we be threatened with invasion. Our Army is down to 82,000 men and women, yet the Russians have 1 million in their army and 1.5 million in reserves. Could we really defend this country if push came to shove?

Penny Mordaunt: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman’s family members who have served, but yes we could defend ourselves. Just the other week, I was with HMS Albion and others from the nine Joint Expeditionary Force nations. There were 44 ships and submarines. It was the largest Royal Navy deployment in that region—just off
Lithuania—for 100 years. Yes, we could defend ourselves, and the size of our trained and untrained strength is growing.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): It is positive policies that this Conservative Government have implemented, such as the armed forces income tax compensation for those serving in Scotland and the decision to secure the long-term future of my base, RM Condor in Angus, that mean we can continue to recruit in Scotland. Will the Secretary of State commit to visiting RM Condor to see at first hand the Government’s great work in Angus?

Penny Mordaunt: These are the armed forces of the United Kingdom. We should celebrate them and ensure that our basing is spread across the four nations, and I would be delighted to visit at the earliest occasion.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): With Devonport-based HMS Montrose forward deployed, we now need to consider how we can rotate crews effectively, not just on the Type 23s, but on the Type 31s, which hopefully will also be Devonport based. What advances and learnings have arisen from the forward deployment of HMS Montrose that could be applied elsewhere?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman is right. We can ensure that we are much more operationally effective and that people have a better quality of life while serving in the armed forces by enabling crews to be sent out and rotations to happen without their having to come back to base port. We continually learn from those exercises. It is another example of how the fleet is changing, and I think it suits everyone that it does.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I call the good doctor, Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I am pleased that the Secretary of State mentioned HMS Albion in an earlier answer. Does she recall that it is not that many months since her predecessor had to fend off moves to scrap HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark and to reduce the size of the Army by 11,000, the Royal Marines by 2,000 and the RAF by 1,250? Does she accept that there is a fight to be had with the real enemy here, and that is the Treasury?

Penny Mordaunt: I should declare an interest, as HMS Bulwark was the last ship I served on. I am very glad that she and Albion are still going. We are approaching a spending review, and I think we need to do more to tell the Treasury and the nation how much defence brings to this country—to the prosperity agenda, social mobility, research and development, innovation, and many other things. We need to tell that story because we need to keep our armed forces strong.

Mr Speaker: When the Treasury is up against the right hon. Gentleman, they ought to know when they are beaten. I say that having known him for 36 years in October.

Penny Mordaunt: The pipeline for our pilots is one of the first things I asked about when I entered the Department. The numbers are improving, but it is an area where we are fragile; it is probably one of the areas where we are most fragile. That said, I would gently point out to the hon. Lady and the Opposition Front-Bench team that last I heard the leader of her party wished to reduce the headcount of our armed forces to zero.

Penny Mordaunt: The pipeline for our pilots is one of the first things I asked about when I entered the Department. The numbers are improving, but it is an area where we are fragile; it is probably one of the areas where we are most fragile. That said, I would gently point out to the hon. Lady and the Opposition Front-Bench team that last I heard the leader of her party wished to reduce the headcount of our armed forces to zero.

UK Personnel: Local Support Services

7. Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the availability of local support services for service personnel based in the UK.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Every local authority has signed the armed forces covenant, and the MOD works with local authorities and partner organisations to ensure that there is fair access to local support services.

Stephen Gethins: MPs provide a valuable local service, not least for our military personnel, and I am grateful to Lieutenant Colonel Fraser McLeman and his team at Leuchars for the help that they have given me in that regard. The MOD recently sought to cancel one of my surgeries before the decision was overturned at the last minute. Will the Minister explain why there is a four-week wait following requests for surgeries by military families, and will he ensure that surgeries are cancelled only in exceptional circumstances—not least when they are held in local community facilities, where surgeries such as my own have been held in the past?

Mr Ellwood: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his compassion in which he has raised this matter. He had the courtesy to raise it before questions. I should be delighted to meet him afterwards to see whether we can bring about some reconciliation and make this work.
Armed Forces Personnel

8. **Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the number of Army personnel. [911770]

13. **Susan Elan Jones** (Clwyd South) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the number of armed forces personnel. [911775]

16. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the number of armed forces personnel. [911778]

**The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster):** We remain committed to maintaining the overall size of the armed forces, including the Army. A range of measures are under way to improve recruitment and retention, and those measures are kept under constant review. Importantly, the services continue to meet all their current commitments, keeping the country and its interests safe.

**Toby Perkins:** The Minister, along with every other Conservative Member of Parliament who was elected or re-elected in 2015, was elected on a manifesto promise that there would be a standing Army of 82,000. That has never been achieved since 2015, and, indeed, on 1 April the size of the fully trained Army was down to 75,000. The Minister may claim that the Government are meeting their commitments, but one commitment that they are not meeting is the commitment to an Army of the size that they promised in their manifesto. Is that still their policy, and, if not, can the Minister tell us at what point the policy was dropped?

**Mark Lancaster:** Let us just see whether we can debunk this myth that Army numbers are somehow in freefall. On 1 May, the total size of the British Army, including the Brigade of Gurkhas, both trained and untrained, was 85,430. As of 1 June, one month later, according to the most recent figures that we have, the total size of the British Army, including the Brigade of Gurkhas, both trained and untrained, was 85,730. That is an increase of 300.

**Susan Elan Jones:** In 2010, there were 30,000 more fully trained armed forces personnel than there are today. Does that concern the Minister and does it concern the Government, and if it does not, why not?

**Mark Lancaster:** As we enter the 21st century, we must accept that the armed forces are about more than simply mass. That is precisely why we are investing in technology, and it is why the battlefield of the 21st century will be a very different beast from that of the 20th. I am concerned about the drop below that figure that we have seen in recent years, but, as I have just demonstrated, we are turning the supertanker around. The size of the trained strength of the British Army can only be increased if it has untrained recruits. As I have demonstrated, we are now seeing an increase in the number of people joining the Army, and that is a positive development.

**Nick Smith:** By when does the Minister think that the size of the Army will reach the Government’s target of just 82,000 fully trained personnel?

**Mark Lancaster:** I am not going to predict exactly what that date will be. We are seeing an increase month on month, but that does not apply to all establishments: for example, Sandhurst has only three intakes per year and Harrogate has only one. I cannot give the exact date when the target will be hit, and I do not think that the hon. Gentleman would really expect me to, but I believe that we are now heading firmly in the right direction.

**Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): I visited Carterton Community College last week and observed the striking success of the science, technology, engineering and mathematics programme set up there by RAF Brize Norton. Does the Minister agree that such programmes not only teach young people important life skills, but provide the inspiration that may lead them to take up careers in the Royal Air Force or other armed forces, which will help to increase service numbers?

**Mark Lancaster:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Indeed, there are many good reasons why young people would wish to join the armed forces, not least because our armed forces are now the largest provider of apprenticeships in the United Kingdom.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): In 2012, we had 220,000 armed forces personnel; that number is now 190,000. Are there things that we were doing that we are no longer doing, or have we maintained operational readiness with fewer people?

**Mark Lancaster:** That is quite a complicated question, particularly when we get into the question of readiness and the ability to hold people at the appropriate readiness for the threat that we face. As I have said, technology has changed significantly; for example, not every aircraft we have in the air is now manned by a pilot. We are investing in a number of things which mean that we require less overall manpower to deliver the effect we require in the 21st century.

**Veterans: Education**

9. **Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve access to education for veterans. [911771]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood):** When armed forces personnel put their hand up and decide to leave the armed forces, most of them participate in a transition programme, and that includes the opportunity to complete examinations such as A-levels and GCSEs—or O-levels in our old language—as well as tertiary education. It is very important to give them the best opportunity once they depart into civilian street.

**Sir David Evennett:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that veterans having better access to education could be of huge benefit to them and upskill them so that they are ready to get back into the workforce? Furthermore, it would help reduce the barriers many veterans face on their return to civilian life.

**Mr Ellwood:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. As the Secretary of State said, one of the advantages of having an armed force is that personnel provide such
important skill sets while serving, but they can all be translated back into civilian street. It is important that we make people and society in general aware of the skill sets that are available—grip, tenacity, leadership and determination—and we must also make sure we translate military qualifications into civilian ones, to give personnel the best opportunity in life.

**Mental Health Provision**

10. **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve mental health provision for service personnel.

*The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood):* We can be proud of the changes we have introduced through the armed forces mental health and wellbeing strategy—which I inherited when I came into this job from my predecessor as Armed Forces Minister. Of all the things we have been involved in, we can be particularly proud of changing the stigma associated with mental health issues in the armed forces, getting more people to talk about it and move out towards parity with physical injury. There is still much work to do, but we are heading in the right direction.

**Alex Burghart:** I thank the Minister for that response and congratulate the Government on what they are doing. Will the Minister set out what steps his Department is taking to achieve that parity of esteem, which is so important to serving personnel?

*Mr Ellwood:* The challenge we faced was that people were reluctant to come forward. They thought that if they put their hand up and said there was something wrong with their mind, that would somehow impact on their ability to be promoted or hold them back in some way. They would keep their problems to themselves, which would then incubate and eventually they would have to quit the very thing they loved: the armed forces. We have changed that with our focus on promoting better resilience, prevention to stop these things happening, and earlier detection and treatment. From putting that in place, we can be proud of the changes we have introduced through the armed forces mental health and wellbeing strategy—which I inherited when I came into this job from my predecessor as Armed Forces Minister.

**Jenny Chapman** (Darlington) (Lab): According to the Centre for Mental Health, there is not a greater likelihood of veterans experiencing mental ill health than the rest of the population, but there is a significant increase in the likelihood of their having problems with alcohol, so can the Minister tell us what he is doing specifically on the issue of alcohol misuse among veterans, which is something I see in my community?

*Mr Ellwood:* I am really pleased that the hon. Lady has put this in context because a myth is perpetuated that those who join the armed forces will be affected by mental challenges, but she is right that there are other challenges that we face, not least with alcoholism. We work closely with a number of charities, and we are also doing work as part of the transition services so that people are aware of where they can get treatment early on.

**Fleet Solid Support Ships**

11. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): When her Department plans to make an announcement on the award of the contract for the fleet solid support ships.

*Mr Ellwood:* We have changed that with our focus on promoting better resilience, prevention to stop these things happening, and earlier detection and treatment. From putting that in place, we can be proud of the changes we have introduced through the armed forces mental health and wellbeing strategy—which I inherited when I came into this job from my predecessor as Armed Forces Minister.

**Christian Matheson:** This has been a shambolic process in which overseas bidders have dropped out and the Government have begged them to rejoin the bidding process. Have Ministers not read the report by the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) on the importance of defence spending to the UK economy? Is it not about time that the Government stopped this whole process and started offering the bids to UK-based shipyards, so that we can get the benefits of this major Government contract?

**Stuart Andrew:** I remind the hon. Gentleman that we do have a team UK bid in there, and I am pleased to see that. As I have said on many occasions, we are trying to ensure that we get the very best price for all the capability we need. If we were to cancel this competition now, we would put at risk the services that we need for the carrier. That being said, we have been listening to all the debates and the many questions on this matter, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has written to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union stating that the option to support onshore defence funding for shipbuilding should be a red line in our future relationship with the EU. Of course, that will apply only to future programmes.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** Other countries such as France and Italy classify these vessels as warships, meaning that they have to be built in domestic yards. Why will the Minister not just guarantee that a UK contractor will be the successful bidder and give a much-needed boost to UK industry?

**Stuart Andrew:** As I have said, the EU has raised questions about the classification of some of those countries and the decisions that they have made. Also, some of those vessels are manned by those countries’ navies, whereas ours will be manned by the auxiliaries.

**Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): All of us on the Opposition Benches were heartened to hear the Defence Secretary say recently of the Ministry of Defence that “we can and we must buy British”.

That would represent a welcome shift from her predecessor’s tendency to simply buy off the shelf from abroad, but the British shipbuilding industry needs action, not just warm words. So will the Minister now reconsider the Government’s short-sighted decision to put these ships out to international tender, and build them here instead?
Stuart Andrew: As I have just announced, my right hon. Friend has made that policy decision. I also remind the hon. Gentleman that we have significant orders in UK shipyards. There is 20 years of work on the Clyde, for example. I cannot think of any other industry in the UK that can say that it has 20 years of work on its order books.

VE and VJ Days: Anniversary

12. Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): What plans she has to mark the anniversary of VE Day. [911774]

17. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What plans she has to mark the anniversary of VJ Day. [911779]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): The nation will be forever grateful to the greatest generation, who lived and fought through the second world war. The Government will provide opportunities to mark the 75th anniversaries of both VE and VJ Days next year. The move of the May bank holiday to Friday 8 May has already been announced, and planning is under way for the commemorative events. Details will follow very soon.

Maggie Throup: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. My father is a veteran of the second world war; he served in India and Burma. Like many other veterans, he will be unable to get to any of the national VE Day celebrations due to his fragility. What more can be done to ensure that all our brave veterans feel part of these important commemorations?

Penny Mordaunt: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his service. Those who have served in our armed forces must be able to take part in those commemorative events. Indeed, they make those events; it is their stories and their presence that make them what they are. My Department will be writing to local government, and particularly to the armed forces covenant champions, to remind them that events must be accessible and that we must think about how to include in those events veterans who are too frail to travel.

Sir David Amess: I am absolutely delighted with my right hon. Friend’s announcement, but will she please reassure me that equal expenditure and prominence will be given to VJ Day? These heroes have been forgotten for too long, as the late Lord Louis Mountbatten said, and they suffered terrible atrocities in the Japanese prisoner of war camps.

Penny Mordaunt: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The events are tailored in regard to their tone and scale and the number of people attending them, and we might not be able to guarantee that the cost will be split exactly between the two events. That might differ, but the prominence of the events will not differ. That will be the same.

Defence Procurement: Jobs

15. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What recent estimate she has made of the number of jobs that defence procurement supports in the UK. [911777]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): MOD official statistics show that our spending with UK industry in 2017-18 directly supported 115,000 jobs across the country.

Mark Pawsey: I thank the Minister for his work to ensure that the propulsion systems for the Navy’s Type 26 frigates will continue to be built in Rugby and for the security and future opportunities that that will give much of the workforce. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that we train up the next generation of skilled engineers to continue that vital work?

Stuart Andrew: I recognise the important role that my hon. Friend played in ensuring that the GE facilities were maintained in Rugby. I agree that it is absolutely vital to ensure that the defence sector has the right skills to meet all our needs. Many of our suppliers have well established programmes and schemes to ensure that that happens, and we continue to work through the Defence Suppliers Forum and the Defence Growth Partnership to ensure that those skills and training are maintained.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): What weighting is given to VJ Day? These heroes have been forgotten and they suffered terrible atrocities in the Japanese prisoner of war camps.

Mr Speaker: Ah! Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Or, as one might say, R2-D2 and C-3PO.

Mr Jones: The Secretary of State highlighted in an earlier answer the importance of the prosperity agenda for defence contracts. I know that the Minister has read the recent report on shipbuilding and ship procurement in the UK by the all-party parliamentary group on shipbuilding. Will he tell the House what weighting will be given to prosperity in awarding the fleet solid support contracts?

Stuart Andrew: I was looking at the two right hon. Gentlemen and wondering whether it was more like Waldorf and Statler, but I will not be so rude—although I have just have been. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: when we look at the contracts, not just for the shipbuilding but for the content within, there are huge opportunities for the UK supply chain, where much more of the value exists. I recognised that in his all-party group’s recent report, and his and other right hon. and hon. Members’ work will inform much of the decision making on our future policy.

Mr Speaker: Come, come, young Spellar—your turn now.

John Spellar: I hope that the Minister will also acknowledge the great role of the Defence Committee, under the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) as Chairman, and the trade unions in maintaining the facility at GE Rugby and seeing off GE’s attempts to close it. May I bring the Minister back to the solid support ship contract and ask him to answer the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones)? What weighting is given to prosperity? Will he please stop blaming the European Union, when every other country in the European Union looks after its own industry and supports its own yards and its own steel industry? Why will he not show some gumption and do the same?
Stuart Andrew: I thought I had shown some gumption. As I have said, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said that the policy will be changing—

John Spellar: Why don’t you change it now?

Stuart Andrew: I have just explained that the timelines are critical in the current competition, because the existing fleet that will offer support to the carrier will be coming to the end of its life. We have to have that capability. Surely he thinks that is more important than just trying to score a political point.

Royal Fleet Auxiliary

18. Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve (a) pay and (b) industrial relations in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): Members of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary are MOD civil servants. Their terms and conditions, including their pay, are subject to civilian rules for the wider public sector. As such, pay is subject to HM Treasury civil servant pay guidance. The Royal Fleet Auxiliary continues to engage with the maritime trade unions and has further meetings planned to discuss pay.

Grahame Morris: I point out to the Minister that in 2018 the Royal Fleet Auxiliary carried out about 64% of the tasks credited to the Royal Navy. Nevertheless, the pay cap, which has been lifted for Royal Navy personnel, is being maintained for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. We in this House value the contribution and dedication of the seafarers who keep our Royal Navy at sea. What steps has the Minister taken to resolve the current dispute?

Mark Lancaster: I think it is fair to say that the whole House values the role of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. Indeed, last summer I spent the most fascinating week on board RFA Mounts Bay in the Caribbean to see the work being done in preparation for the hurricane season. I have explained the conditions under which the Royal Fleet Auxiliary’s pay is reviewed, as civil servants, but I reassure the House that of course we would like to see a constructive end to this dispute, and I am confident that that will be the case.

Topical Questions

T1. [911787] Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): I welcome The Sun’s campaign. We will shortly bring forward the first stage to legislate on closing down litigation against our armed forces for historical allegations. Although we hold our armed forces to the highest standards, we have seen that so much litigation against them has not been in the pursuit of justice. Although I note and pay tribute to the work of the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), on the veterans strategy and the veterans gateway, the MOD is not constitutionally responsible for veterans. The MOD, as a consequence, has not directly commissioned services and support for veterans, which has meant that some services we provide for serving members of the armed forces that could benefit veterans have not been available to them. I believe that needs to change, so we are consulting partners on changing the MOD’s constitutional role with regard to veterans.

Mr Baron: The all-party parliamentary group on the British Council, which I chair, has been overseeing an inquiry into aspects of the UK’s soft power capabilities. How does defence diplomacy fit into the Government’s overall soft power strategy?

Penny Mordaunt: Defence engagement, in all its forms, is vital to promoting the UK’s influence, values and intentions around the world, whether it is promoting stability and prosperity, tackling environmental challenges or responding to natural disasters and humanitarian need. Our strongest relationships with some nations are military to military, and we need to make sure that the contribution of defence to the objectives of One HMG is really understood.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): At a time when Army numbers are consistently falling, it is all the more important that we draw on the widest possible pool of recruits. Why, then, has there been a 45% increase in the number of officer cadets admitted to Sandhurst from independent schools, compared with just a 7% increase from state schools? I know the Secretary of State is personally committed to creating a level playing field, so could she set out what she will do to seek out the brightest and best from all backgrounds?

Penny Mordaunt: If the hon. Lady had listened to my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces earlier, she would know that our trained and untrained strength is actually not decreasing. The number of recruits coming in is actually going up, but social mobility is important. Of course the MOD can always do more, but our armed forces are one of the greatest agents for social mobility in this country. They are one of the largest education providers in this country, and we ought to continue encouraging them to do more.

Nia Griffith: I am a little disappointed by that answer because when it comes to officers, there is a lot more that can be done. It is not just those from state schools who face barriers: just 10 of this year’s 600-strong cadet intake to Sandhurst are from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds—just 10. According to the MOD’s own statistics, the regulars and the reserves are also missing the Government’s 2020 target for BAME representation.

Will the Secretary of State now commit to a root-and-branch review of recruitment barriers to ensure that we have properly staffed and fully representative armed forces?

Penny Mordaunt: We already have a very clear idea of the barriers that exist and of the barriers that existed in the past, which is why our community engagement programmes are so important and why, since coming to the Department, I have protected those budgets.

T3. [911789] Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking the North Staffordshire armed forces committee, the Queen’s
Park Partnership and everybody who took part in the recent Armed Forces Day celebrations at Queen's Park in my constituency?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in thanking everyone who took part in Armed Forces Day at Queen's Park. I understand that regular personnel, veterans, reservists and cadets were all represented in that celebration, and I applaud the county, too, for its work on several events held across Staffordshire.

T2. [911788] Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): One area where the MOD has been performing well is on diversity in LGBT circles. I am sure the Secretary of State will join me in welcoming the contribution of so many armed forces personnel, and indeed MOD civil servants, at the Pride march in London on Saturday, where I was alongside them. Many of them were proudly wearing campaign medals. However, I have to share the concern of my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), because when I looked at recruitment figures for my constituency, I saw that there was very little recruitment from black and minority ethnic, and ethnically and religiously diverse, areas. Does the Secretary of State agree that much more needs to be done on that if we are to have truly representative armed forces?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree that more needs to be done, and indeed Members of this House can help us do this as well. Community engagement is vital. [Interruption.] Indeed, I understand that the hon. Gentleman is doing his bit to ensure that that happens. We have to ensure that our armed forces look like the individuals they are there to defend and protect. They are there for us all; they are our armed forces, and that must be the view and sentiment in every community in the UK.

T4. [911791] Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Given the increasing threat that drones pose to our national security, as recently highlighted by the insightful BBC documentary “Britain’s Next Air Disaster”, what assessment has my right hon. Friend made of our armed forces’ ability to respond to a potential drone strike, and what investment is her Department making in new technology to rapidly neutralise such threats?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): My hon. Friend raises an important point, and the MOD takes the threat of the nefarious use of drones very seriously. Using the defence transformation fund, we are working with the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, international partners and industry to further develop our counter-drone capabilities, and of course they will be used to protect defence infrastructure wherever they are needed. More broadly, a lot of the responsibility for protecting other sites in the UK lies with the police, but we will always be there to help if needed.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The last time the Secretary of State was at the Dispatch Box, we discussed an internal MOD policy on torture that contravenes domestic and international law. She promised a review. Has the review happened? Has the policy been dumped?

Penny Mordaunt: That review has concluded. I have looked at it and the policy will be changing.

T7. [911794] Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): For all the warm words from the Armed Forces Minister about Army recruitment moving in the right direction, is the truth not that for every single year we have had a Conservative Government the size of the fully trained Army has been smaller than the year before? Is it not time that he confronted the reality we are facing and stopped trying to kid people that this is moving in the right direction?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): I think the figures I have quoted speak for themselves; we are now increasing the size of the British Army.

T8. [911795] Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): With the latest NHS statistics identifying that about 60 veterans a day are seeking professional assistance for mental health issues, what steps is the Department taking to ensure that our service personnel receive the tailored, bespoke mental health services they need and deserve?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. We have a rebuild programme, whereby £4 billion is being put in to make sure we provide that state-of-the-art accommodation for our future defence capability. However, I agree with him that we need to do more to make sure we provide the type of housing that the recruits we want to bring in to the force deserve.
Mark Lancaster: Having achieved initial operating capability from land in December 2018, and with the successful completion of its first operation, the Lightning programme is now focused on delivering initial operational capability for carrier strike, which is planned for December 2020.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): Within four weeks of the Salisbury incident last year, Russia Today and Sputnik published 138 separate and contradictory narratives and 735 articles about the chemical weapons poisoning of the Skripals by Russian agents. There were dozens of different narratives on the rise of Novichok, its use, how it was not Russia’s fault and how Russia was the victim of a witch hunt. It is one of the examples that Russia is deploying in hybrid warfare. What plans does the Secretary of State have to announce the role of the cross-Government use of the Fusion doctrine? How able are the Government to expand the use of the 77 Brigade, if needed?

Mark Lancaster: I declare my interest as deputy commander of the 77 Brigade, which means this is a subject close to my heart. Hybrid threats present themselves in many domains, so we utilise a whole-of-Government approach to protecting the UK against such activity. The MOD works collaboratively with other Departments, in line with the Fusion doctrine, to support that approach.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Just a couple of weeks ago, we saw the RAF livery on the first of the UK’s new Poseidon P-8 aircraft. Will the Secretary of State come up to RAF Lossiemouth to see how the base is preparing for the new aircraft and for hundreds of additional personnel? She will also be able to see the work done by Boeing and local firm Robertson to construct the Poseidon facility.

Penny Mordaunt: I would be happy to visit Lossiemouth. This is a critical capability that is returning to us. The manufacture of the second aircraft is on delivery for January 2020.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State commit to spend more to protect UK intellectual property, which is the underpinning of our high-tech defence industry?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We had that extra £1.8 billion in the most recent Budget because this is the exactly the sort of area we will look at. I assure him that I have regular meetings with industry and with the forces to talk about those very issues.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I am sure my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State would agree that the reserve forces are a crucial component of our armed forces generally, so will she update the House on how retention and recruitment is going? Specifically, are we managing to get former regulars to rejoin as reserves and bring their expertise with them?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We continue to utilise reserves and now have a target to ensure that they are used on operations, which helps with retention. I am pleased to say that the size of our reserve forces continues to grow.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Defence Equipment and Support procures for the Ministry of Defence, but constituents who work there tell me that morale has plummeted since it became a bespoke trading entity, and it is now the joint worst-performing department in the civil service top people survey index. Will Ministers look into this?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Lady raises an important point. The staff survey results were frankly disappointing, but I assure her that a tremendous amount of work has been done with the workforce to improve the situation. We look forward to seeing improved results in the next survey.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I think I should call a shy and understated Member who requires encouragement: Mr Mark Francois.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The A400M is an emerging procurement disaster. We have paid £2.6 billion for an aircraft with appalling reliability, bad engines, a virtually broken gearbox, problem propellers, massive vibration problems and an inability to deliver paratroops. There was recently a NATO ministerial meeting of the partner nations to decide what to do about the disaster. What was the outcome of that meeting?

Stuart Andrew: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the issues with the A400M. I can assure him that I attended that ministerial meeting; it was an extremely robust meeting with industry. The performance has been totally unacceptable. We are now expecting EuroProp International, the engine manufacturer, to be more empowered to negotiate the support solutions that we need. Airbus Defence and Space has also been held to account, but, following the problems with the engines and gear boxes, those parts will be replaced on each of the aircraft by the middle of next year.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Coming back to the fleet support ships, will the Minister tell us whether the savings from tax and national insurance of workers building these ships will be one of the criteria used for a successful UK bid?

Stuart Andrew: As I have said on many occasions when answering these questions, we follow the Green Book rules with the Treasury, but we will continue to have those conversations with the Treasury about the wider prosperity agenda that our defence industry brings to the UK.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Rates of pay have an important role to play in retention and recruitment, particularly perhaps among the younger, newly recruited members. What consideration has my right hon. Friend given to introducing the concept of the living wage to our armed forces?
Penny Mordaunt: I think that that is what we should be doing. Our armed forces have been exempt from that, so I have said that we must do it. It would mean a pay increase of a couple of thousand pounds for the lowest paid soldiers, sailors, airmen and women, but I think that that is what we should be doing. That is certainly my policy.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Canadians and Australians are applying to build more Type 26 frigates than the United Kingdom now is. Part of the reason is that they have invested in world-class purpose-built new shipyards whereas the UK has not. Will the Secretary of State review our 2015 decision to cancel the purpose-built shipyard for Type 26 and ensure that we get the investment needed to make our industry world class?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Gentleman will know that that was a decision made by BAE Systems, and it is ultimately responsible for it. The fact is, as I said earlier, that we have 20 years of work at those shipyards. I cannot remember them having such significant orders under the previous Government.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): There does not seem to be any lack of applicants to join the armed forces, so can the Minister tell us what progress is being made to shorten the time between application and the start of basic training?

Mark Lancaster: I thank my hon. Friend for the question. May I also thank him for inviting me to Armed Forces Day in Stirling last weekend? He was a wonderful host.

There has been a project to try to reduce what we call the time of flight. I am delighted to say that that has had good results, with the time of flight now being halved, and we are looking to roll that out across the whole of the recruiting programme.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): If the future accommodation model is pushed through by the Government, which looks very likely, will the Minister guarantee that no member of the armed forces will be pushed into the private rented sector against their wishes?

Mr Ellwood: I do not need to do that, because we have had this question so many times that I have given the answer so many times.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP) rose—

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) rose—

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah, the three musketeers.

Drew Hendry: The number of service personnel in the highlands has fallen by 22% since 2012 and 10% over the past year alone. Is that a sign that the Government are starting the early rundown of Fort George?

Mark Lancaster: The announcement on Fort George under the better defence estate strategy remains as it is, but the hon. Gentleman will know of our commitment to our armed forces personnel in Scotland. I am sure that he is delighted that he will shortly have the whole of the submarine fleet based in Scotland.

Alan Brown: In a ministerial response to my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), the Minister stated a whole raft of subjects on which armed forces personnel need support and advice. Did he not make the case for a representative body for the armed forces?

Mr Ellwood: I do not need to do that, because we have had this question so many times that I have given the answer so many times.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Let me change the tone. A service is taking place in Tallinn today to commemorate the 107 members of the Royal Navy and the five members of the Royal Air Force who fought and died for the independence of Estonia and Latvia. I am sure that the Secretary of State wishes to come to the Dispatch Box to pay tribute to those who gave their lives and to reinforce the United Kingdom’s commitment to the Baltic states in their battles today.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to do exactly that. We owe those individuals a huge debt of gratitude. I was recently on board HMS Albion with the chiefs and Ministers of those nations and the other joint expeditionary force nations, discussing how we can take our partnership forward.
3.40 pm

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) (Urgent Question): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I know that many in the House, and no doubt—[Interruption.] Oh, sorry.

Mr Speaker: Blurt it out, man.

**Tom Tugendhat:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the leaks from the UK ambassador’s office in Washington.

Mr Speaker: Thankfully we will hear more from the hon. Gentleman ere long—hopefully very fully.

**The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):** Her Majesty’s Government utterly deplore the serious breach of classified information; it is totally unacceptable. As the Prime Minister has already said, we retain full confidence in the British ambassador to Washington, Sir Kim Darroch, for whom we have enormous respect as a distinguished and long-serving diplomat.

The Prime Minister and the British public expect our ambassadors to provide Ministers with an honest and unvarnished assessment of the politics in their country. We pay our ambassadors to be candid, just as the US ambassador here will send back his candid reading of Westminster politics and personalities. But it does not mean that this is the same as what the British Government think. A cross-Government investigation led by the Cabinet Office has been launched, which I can reassure the whole House will be thorough and wide-ranging.

**Tom Tugendhat:** I apologise for the slightly false start. I am extremely concerned, as I know many others in the House are, by the leaking of communications from the UK ambassador’s office in Washington that has been widely reported over the weekend. I fear that we are developing a culture of leaks, and that will be extremely detrimental to the UK because leaks damage our reputation, have an impact on our ability to function effectively and undermine our relationships with our allies.

Although I understand that the Foreign Office has opened an inquiry into this leak, I have today written to the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police to ask that she also opens a criminal investigation into the leak. I have asked her for reassurance that all necessary resources will be made available to ensure that the source of the leak is determined, as a priority. I have also today asked the Foreign Secretary for details of the leak inquiry: who commissioned it; whom it will report to; whether it will be published; whether serving Ministers, officials and their predecessors will be compelled to participate, and what happens if they do not.

This leak is not just a problem for the Foreign Office; it affects the entire Government. I have heard already today reports of senior serving military officers who are increasingly concerned that the reports that they write may also not be kept secret. I have written to the Prime Minister to share this view and to ask her to ensure that all relevant parts of the Government are asked to help to investigate the leak and to urge her to respond robustly to prevent similar incidents from occurring. I want confirmation from the Minister that this issue is being treated with the seriousness it requires, at the heart of government. He has already spoken powerfully to condemn it. I would like him to treat the issue with the seriousness with which he has already begun and to order a criminal inquiry. Does he agree that whichever parts of the Government can help to look into the source of this leak—including the security services—should be asked to assist with the matter urgently and that any actions short of these steps will send out a dangerous message that the UK is reckless with information and cavalier with the trust placed in it?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and supportive statements over the weekend. I share his deep concerns about this unacceptable leak for exactly the reasons that he has clearly set out, and I reassure him that it is being treated with the full seriousness that it deserves. There will be a cross-Government investigation, led by the Cabinet Office. Obviously, it is not for me to prejudge the inquiry, but I can assure him, and the House, that it will be comprehensive and that, as with all leak inquiries, it will endeavour to report its findings clearly—and if evidence of criminality is found, then yes, the police could be involved. The most important focus is to establish who is responsible for this despicable leak.

Again, I am grateful that my hon. Friend’s experience in the Army and in international affairs has been able to lend a voice of authority to the condemnation that we should all wish to express.

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I also thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for securing it. We have already heard powerful statements from him, from the Minister of State, and indeed from the Minister’s current boss—the Foreign Secretary—and the Prime Minister denouncing the leak and the damage that it will do to the confidence of our civil servants working abroad to honestly feed back their insights and opinions on the situations that they are best placed to assess.

Let us remember why this is so important. Forty years ago, the Iranian revolution reached its climax. The Shah’s army withdrew to barracks rather than fight their fellow citizens in the streets of Tehran and effectively ceded control of the country to Ayatollah Khomeini. It was an event that sent shockwaves through the Middle East and triggered deep soul searching at the Foreign Office: how had it failed to see this coming in a country that was regarded as such a close ally and such a vital trading partner? The concern was great enough that the Foreign Secretary, David Owen, commissioned an internal inquiry conducted by the late Sir Nicholas Browne into what had gone wrong.

The conclusions from Sir Nicholas became a cautionary tale for the entire diplomatic corps about the need for UK representatives abroad to keep making sound objective judgments about the country in which they are based, oblivious to political bias or strategic interests. Kim Darroch was working in the Foreign Office when that report was published. He learned the lessons from it,
and now he has been betrayed. He has been hung out to dry even though his only crime was to tell the truth. He told the truth about Donald Trump, and that was because it was his job.

I do not want to get into all the conspiracy theories as to where the leaks came from or whether personal ambitions or rivalries have driven them. Instead, I have a simple question for the Minister: as well as the leak inquiry that the Government are now undertaking, will he also commit to providing an update of Nicholas Browne’s recommendations to reassure all our diplomats abroad that when they feed back their reports they do not need to fear politically motivated leaks and they can—as, for the good of our country, they must—keep telling the truth?

Sir Alan Duncan: First, may I thank the right hon. Lady for her very measured response to this? I am very grateful, particularly as I know that she personally has some quite strong views about America and the current regime. She is absolutely right that the importance of candid advice is paramount. If that does not exist, our really wonderful diplomatic network is seriously diminished.

Indeed, I remember—I am just old enough—the Iranian revolution and the conclusion reached that the then ambassador, Sir Anthony Parsons, had painted too rosy a picture, in his telegrams, of the Shah’s regime. Therefore, frank reporting is absolutely crucial.

I can give the right hon. Lady the assurance she seeks that we, as Ministers in the Foreign Office, can always reassure ambassadors that, if they speak truth unto power, they will never be personally criticised for doing so. Indeed, sometimes the more awkward it is, the more we respect and praise them for their honesty and their perceptions.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that all our ambassadors are expected to report frankly and privately, especially on the substance of incoming Administrations in the country to which they are accredited? Will he confirm that Sir Kim Darroch, who was only doing his job, should not be pilloried for that? Should not my right hon. Friend also send a message from this House that Sir Kim has not only the confidence of Her Majesty’s Government but the confidence of Parliament?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think that the ambassador will be very heartened by the message that my right hon. Friend is asking the whole House to give him, and I hope that all in it share the view expressed by my right hon. Friend. Indeed, we do have full confidence in Sir Kim. He is expected to report, and it is unfair that little bits have been taken out of context, in some cases to sensationalise the contents of his dipetals—diplomatic telegrams. Over the two and a half years of this Administration, his telegrams have been extremely balanced, and if they were ever to be seen in their entirety, which they might be in 30 years’ time, the picture painted of what he has been saying would be very different.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for raising this issue and for the action that he has rightly taken. I also thank the Minister for making a strong statement; that is the correct thing to do. That said, there are Members in his own party for whom everyone else is collateral in this Brexit mess and the damaging infighting it has caused, which has nothing to do with the best interests of the citizens they are supposed to serve.

Officials, and especially ambassadors, must be able to provide frank advice to Ministers about foreign leaders. The Minister recognises the value of officials being open to Ministers without fear or favour, even if others in his party do not. Given the seriousness of this leak, what action does he feel should be taken? If an elected official is involved, does he feel that that person is worthy of ministerial office?

Furthermore, I have seen some reports that people think it is a good idea to have Mr Farage as the UK ambassador in Washington. He is leading his second party that has been overwhelmingly rejected both by the people of North East Fife and by Scotland as a whole, and it will be rejected again, should he stand. Does the Minister agree that Mr Farage, with his extreme views, is utterly unfit for the post of UK ambassador to the USA and should have no place in any Administration of which the Minister is a part?

Sir Alan Duncan: This is not about Brexit. This is about an utterly disgraceful leak, and whoever is responsible needs to be traced and punished. We would make no distinction between a Member of Parliament, a Minister, an official or anybody else in trying to trace and punish who has leaked these documents. In respect of the hon. Gentleman’s comments about Nigel Farage, fortunately, for the good of our diplomatic reputation, he has ruled himself out of wanting to be ambassador to Washington.

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Although Mr Farage has ruled himself out, the question still arises of what the effect would be if Sir Kim felt that his position had become untenable and, instead of retiring in a few months’ time as planned, he had to go earlier. One effect would surely be that an outgoing Prime Minister had a say in the replacement, rather than the new Prime Minister. Would it not be sensible for Sir Kim to be encouraged to stay in post, so that there is no temptation for an outgoing Prime Minister to appoint to a plum job one of her inner circle?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have no wish whatsoever to comment on the process by which any future ambassador to Washington will be chosen. All I will say is what I said earlier: we have full confidence in Sir Kim Darroch, and he retains the entire confidence of the Government and all of us who serve as Ministers in the Foreign Office.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): It is clear that whoever was responsible for this was not thinking of the national interest. The whole House supports Sir Kim Darroch in doing his job, which is to report home without fear or favour. Does the Minister think that the expression of support for the ambassador’s position from the Prime Minister and others has been slightly undermined by the Foreign Secretary saying that he did not agree with the ambassador’s assessment? It would be helpful if the House if the Minister could explain why that is the case, because it seems to many of us that Sir Kim was only reporting what lots of other people can see for themselves.
Sir Alan Duncan: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was making a distinction between what is analytical reporting and what is said to be the view of the Government. In that sense, he was absolutely right to try to draw that distinction and he, I and everybody else have full confidence in Sir Kim Darroch.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): These toxic and unjustified attacks on the President of the United States and his Administration are completely — [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Sir William Cash: They are regarded by many people as completely unjustified. As Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, I was more than well aware of Sir Kim’s own prejudices in relation to the EU. Surely it is not his so-called frankness that should be the issue, but his lack of judgment that disqualifies him from his post.

Sir Alan Duncan: I regret to have to say that I consider my hon. Friend’s intervention deeply unworthy. Sir Kim Darroch is a diplomat of calibre and of integrity. Nothing in his reporting from the embassy could ever be construed as an attack on the President of the United States. All of it was reporting of the highest quality, which we expect of our diplomats and diplomatic network.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): May I commend the Minister and indeed the Secretary of State for International Trade for defending our ambassador? Will the Minister take this opportunity to guarantee that our need — our desperate need — for a trade deal with the US will not stop our ambassador from speaking frankly, and will he also take this opportunity to dismiss the idea of the conspiracy theorists that this is some deep-state, anti-Brexit plot by the establishment?

Sir Alan Duncan: Rather, I would say that everything we are witnessing is a sign of a very deep and serious relationship between our two countries, in which so much between us is assumed, on so many layers in so many areas, on a basis of trust that nothing — incidents such as this could be listed among such things — will ever get between us in that way. So the relationship is solid and no conspiracies can be put forward to suggest that this is either a Brexit plot or a trade deal plot: this is straightforwardly a despicable leak and we will endeavour to find out who did it.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Inevitably, however, there will be aspects of the ambassador’s role that will now be much more difficult to carry out, won’t they?

Sir Alan Duncan: But as with so many diplomats, Sir Kim Darroch has the style and confidence that will make sure that he can.

Mr Speaker: Marvellous!

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): It is inconceivable that a leak intended to damage our serving ambassador in Washington came from a fellow civil servant, so will the Minister confirm that the telephone and email records of serving and former Ministers and special advisers in the Foreign Office will be part of the investigation? Given the close relationship between the journalist who received this leak and leading pro-Brexit politicians, what does he think was the motivation behind it?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that I have been rather puzzled over the weekend about what the motivation could be, because any kind of scenario I put into my head does not seem to add up. On his question, that will of course be for the inquiry. I would merely point out that one of the leaked documents was from two years ago and three were from about eight to 10 days ago.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my confidence that this episode is most unlikely to have any lasting effect on our relationship either with this Administration or with the United States in general? May I commend the Government for taking the right tack, which is to condemn the leaker and to back our diplomat?

Sir Alan Duncan: I certainly condemn the leaker, and I certainly back our ambassador and his entire team in what is an excellent embassy. I very much hope that this causes no upset. I imagine that some of the reports from the US embassy in London will be saying some quite interesting things about the state of our politics. That will not necessarily represent the view of the ambassador or the US Administration; it will be people reporting from post back to the capital about what they think is going on. That is what they are there to do.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Foreign Office simply cannot function or do its job properly on behalf of all of us unless a confidentiality guarantee is written into the whole fundamental system. In the 1930s, the British ambassador in Berlin regularly reported back in a way that sought to please the Prime Minister here, as well as the Führer in Germany. Is it not absolutely vital that all our ambassadors and high commissioners around the world are certain that their job is to tell the truth, not only about the country in which they are resident, but to Ministers here, whatever those Ministers may think?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who, of course, has experience as a Foreign Minister, so he knows this process very well. It is not the purpose of an ambassador to ingratiate themselves with anybody; they are there to tell the truth, and it benefits everybody when they do, but leaks of this sort make that more difficult. I very much hope that our ambassador to Washington will not in any way feel browbeaten by the media onslaught. He has the full support of every single person in this House of Commons.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): When the Minister for the Americas first saw these leaked dipdels, was there anything in them that surprised him?

Sir Alan Duncan: No, because obviously I had seen them before. I have had the benefit over two and a half years of seeing all reporting of this nature from Washington. I say again to the House that it is very balanced. Picking out a few little bits that can be construed as critical of what were, in fact, analyses at a critical time in Washington
politics is a distortion of the broad picture of support and understanding, of a very high quality, that has come from Washington over the past two and a half years.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): As the Minister has said, Sir Kim Darroch was doing his job, and the kinds of things that have been reported have been reflected in many other accounts of the White House, including in published books. What is more interesting is why this was leaked and what the consequences might be. We have already seen this morning a full, broad, nationalist, right-wing attack on the civil service as a result. What guarantee can we have that the new regime taking over government at the end of the month will not indulge in that kind of nationalist, right-wing attack on institutions such as the civil service and the judiciary, which are essential for a representative parliamentary democracy?

Sir Alan Duncan: The new regime, as the right hon. Gentleman calls it, will have to speak for itself when it has taken its place. There is something else that this House should condemn very strongly: the comments of Nigel Farage, who immediately jumped on the political bandwagon, as he saw it, and called for the ambassador to be sacked. For many people, what little respect they might have had for him will have evaporated even further when they heard that.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his reply to the extraordinary question from my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). Those of us who have had briefings from Sir Kim, both in his current role and when he was at UKRep, will know how balanced and professional they are, so I am very grateful to the Minister for the position he has taken. I also hope that a message will go out right across the diplomatic service, and to Ministers and potential future Ministers, that all the agencies resourced by our Government will be used in integrity and that those found to have done this will really regret having done so.

Sir Alan Duncan: My right hon. Friend serves on the Intelligence and Security Committee, and so is familiar with the organisations that I think he is suggesting should be deployed. The Cabinet Office will use all its means to delve into this matter and try to find the culprit. I wholly agree with him that if we succeed in finding who did this, they should regret that moment for the rest of their life.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Sir Kim Darroch has always given honest and frank reports, no matter which party he has represented. Whenever delegations go to the US, it is vital that the briefings they receive are honest and impartial, and they always have been. A positive thing happened this morning during my journey to the station: so many people I spoke to who had tuned into Radio 4 turned off the minute Nigel Farage was brought on to comment, because they felt his opinion on Sir Kim was so appalling.

Sir Alan Duncan: I would rather like to echo everything the hon. Lady has said. I also heard him on the radio, and after throwing something at it, I switched it off. The Washington embassy is a remarkable institution. The number of people who go through it every year is enormous, yet the staff and the diplomatic team cope marvellously—with style, dignity and a warm welcome—and make everybody feel they have been paid proper attention to. I commend them for everything they do; long may it continue.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Does the Minister agree that if the person leaking has signed a declaration on the Official Secrets Act, then the Act would appear to have been broken, and a breach of the law will have taken place? The police will have to be called, because the matter appears to be criminal.

Sir Alan Duncan: The inquiry will be thorough, and whatever the law says, it will be followed appropriately.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his responses to these questions. He is always very balanced. Does he not agree that the leak of this information is simply not good enough and that steps need to be taken to prevent such leaks? Will consideration be given to amending disciplinary proceedings for those in public service to underline the severity of the consequences for their personal career and the fact that they may have to answer a case in law?

Sir Alan Duncan: We have the Official Secrets Act so that people can answer in law. Ministers are bound by the ministerial code. Whether there should be any increase in the severity of punishments that might be applied is probably a longer-term question. In the meantime, it is important that the inquiry finds out who did it and absolutely nails them.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend see any link at all between the timing of this appalling leak, and the fact that just over a week ago it was announced in the media that Sir Mark Sedwill coveted the position of ambassador in Washington?

Sir Alan Duncan: Forgive me, but I find these conspiracy theories rather tiresome. They are a diversion from the focus we should have, which is to appreciate the severity of what has happened; find the culprit; and unite, across the House, in making sure that we all agree on the matter and support our ambassador to Washington.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Minister and I share something in common: we both throw things at the radio when Nigel Farage comes on. Why the BBC continues to persist with him as a commentator is completely beyond my comprehension. That leads me to my question. Can the Minister assure the House that this leak was not politically motivated and did not aim to ensure that senior members of his Government could place a political ambassador in our most important embassy in the world?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have to give the same answer I gave some moments ago, which is that that smacks a bit of a conspiracy theory. The motivation behind the leak is difficult to analyse and assess. What matters is the fact that there was a leak. That is what we have to focus on and address.
Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to stress the enduring links between the United States Administration and ours, but can I pick him up on one small point? He said in answer to a question that if it was found—as it clearly should be—that a criminal offence had taken place with this leak, there could be a prosecution. Surely there should be a prosecution.

Sir Alan Duncan: Any decision to prosecute, as my hon. Friend appreciates, is a matter for those authorities who assess the evidence and then make the decision, so it would be inappropriate for me to suggest that something is certain, although I accept that he was asking about what would happen, conditionally. However, I hope he will appreciate that our view is that the investigation should be deep, thorough and severe, and that we should follow the law if we find the culprit.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): We need to call this out for what it is: the individual or individuals responsible for this leak have betrayed this country, and those attempting to justify it and to attack our ambassador and our civil servants are guilty of deeply un-British and deeply unpatriotic behaviour. I have been on the receiving end of diptels, and I agree with the Minister about how balanced they are and how crucial they are to good decision making in government—not least after the Chilcot report and what that taught us about decision making. Will the Minister therefore tell us what steps are being taken to increase the security around the circulation and handling of diplomatic telegrams?

Sir Alan Duncan: On the preamble to the hon. Gentleman’s question, I say: well said, in every conceivable respect. I agree with what he said. A review of classifications and security decisions of this sort in our communications, and their distribution, will, I am sure, be looked at, but I hope that he appreciates that our first priority must be to investigate the leak.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): This is an extremely serious leak of not just one highly sensitive diplomatic cable, but a number of them over a relatively long period. I endorse the request from the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), and several other hon. Members that the police be called in and that a criminal investigation take place. However, until that happens, will the Minister confirm that the Cabinet Office inquiry, which he has announced today, will be led by the Cabinet Secretary personally, who, of course, has had experience of heading up sensitive inquiries in recent months?

Sir Alan Duncan: The Cabinet Office inquiry will be cross-Whitehall, and will report in the normal way up the line of seniority.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): There has been some speculation about how long Kim Darroch will remain in his post. Given his excellent record, and the fact that he is clearly talking truth, regardless of the possible implications for the relationships with the country concerned, would not the best answer to President Trump and some in this House be for the Minister to recommend that Sir Kim Darroch’s term be extended beyond the end of this year, so that he can continue to comment on the uniquely dysfunctional and inept Trump presidency?

Sir Alan Duncan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his extremely unhelpful ingenuity. Any decision about when Sir Kim finishes in Washington will not, I hope, in any way be influenced by the events over the weekend.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Whoever leaked these signals will have signed the Official Secrets Act, which means that they should not divulge anything “confidential”, “secret”, “top secret” or above. This is the act of a traitor, and whoever has done it, we should deploy everything that we have against that person under the Official Secrets Act.

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes; our Government, diplomacy, ministerial activity and the actions of civil servants all need to be underpinned by trust, and trust means that people have to be able to keep confidences, not leak inappropriately—or leak at all—and not divulge information that should not be leaked. This is a total and inexcusable breach of trust, and without that trust, Government cannot function. I hope that the investigation that has been started will be able to find out who did this.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Minister’s tone today is spot-on, and right and proper. Given that the leaks took place over two and a half years, will he examine how many people have had access to all that material? Will he also confirm that the United Kingdom Government, not the American Government, choose the ambassador to the United States?

Sir Alan Duncan: We of course appoint ambassadors as we see fit, in the interests of the country and the bilateral relationships they serve. As I understand it, the leaked emails are two years apart—one cluster is very recent and one is from two years ago—so it is not quite right to say they have been leaked consistently throughout that period, but we do not know if there are any others in the wrong hands that might subsequently be leaked. I say for the umpteenth time that I hope the investigation is successful and that we get to the bottom of this breach of trust.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Typically, how many named individuals would be on the circulation list for a diplomatic telegram from Washington—10, 50, 100, 1,000?

Sir Alan Duncan: Once the telegram has done all the rounds to all posts and various layers, I would guess the number is probably well in excess of 100. It will be quite a large number, but depending on the classification of a document, it will either be restricted or more widely distributed, so the numbers vary a lot.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): As my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) pointed out, the journalist behind these stories has close links to the Leave.EU campaign, and specifically to Arron Banks, who is being investigated by the National Crime Agency in relation to overseas donations in elections in this country. Given that backdrop, does the Minister agree that it is essential that we also look at the possible role of hostile powers in this leak?
Sir Alan Duncan: We do not at this stage see any evidence of third-party intervention of that sort. The first premise is that it is a leak from within, but we do not rule out any options, and that is what the investigation is there to study closely.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): This leak is both reprehensible and deeply unpatriotic. Once the investigation is concluded, will its outcomes be reported to the House, along with the lessons to be learned?

Sir Alan Duncan: I imagine that the results, whatever the outcomes, would definitely be made public—in what form, I am not in a position to say, but I am sure that if someone is found, the world will soon find out about it.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Cui bono? Given the untrustworthiness of the American Administration, and their filleting of their own Departments, such as the State Department, in a way that is ideologically driven, because they do not find them trustworthy, what assurance can the Minister give the House—I hope he is blunt, because I think I know the answer—that the future occupant of 10 Downing Street will not carry out the exact same type of ideological purge in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office at the end of the month?

Sir Alan Duncan: Appointments in any subsequent Administration will be a matter for that Administration. We will of course have to wait to see who is in it.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): In common with other right hon. and hon. Members, I have had meetings with Sir Kim Darroch in the past, and they have been both a pleasure and an honour. We have a convention in this place that we do not name officials, which is why today’s statement is all the more frustrating. Does the Minister share my concern that this is part of a trend? A clique within British politics is undermining the civil service, as was referenced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden). It has attacked Olly Robbins and called for him to be sacked; it has attacked Sir Mark Sedwill; and now it is deliberately seeking to undermine our ambassador to Washington. Is it not about time we put a stop to these people who are undermining how British politics works?

Sir Alan Duncan: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Standards of decency are slipping, and they need to be restored.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): This is an unprecedented leak, but is the Minister at least relieved that the incompetency and failure of the man who is likely to become the next Prime Minister of the United Kingdom is in the public domain, and he does not have to worry about the ambassadors of other nations doing a similar job?

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Gentleman is, of course, permitted to make whatever judgments he wishes to make.

It would appear that that was the last question. Let me say to the House, first, that I am very grateful for the cross-party support that has been displayed. It is a credit to the House that this exchange has been so dignified and purposeful. Secondly, let me reiterate once again our full support for Sir Kim Darroch as our ambassador. Thirdly, I hope that through your channels, Mr Speaker, we can also convey to the President of the United States our respect for him personally, for his office, and for the enduring relationship—which I hope will endure for ever—between the United Kingdom and the United States.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the Minister of State for the way in which he has handled this important set of exchanges, and I thank all colleagues for participating in the last 41 minutes of expressions of opinion and questioning of the Minister.

For my own part, let me say that this is an extremely serious matter. I last saw Sir Kim Darroch when I was in Washington in May and had an extremely good and informative meeting with him. He is not merely a highly capable but, frankly, an outstanding public servant. I simply want to express the hope, in the light of the rather venomous and misplaced personal attacks that have been lobbed in his direction today, that he will not in any way be cowed; rather, I hope and trust that he will be fortified by the expressions of opinion about that public service that we have heard this afternoon.
NHS Pensions: Taxation

4.21 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) Urgent Question: To ask the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to make a statement on the implications for patients of the taxation of NHS pensions.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): The Government keep public sector pay and pensions policy under constant review in the context of the wider public finances. For the majority of savers, pension contributions are tax-free. The annual allowance is a fiscal measure that operates across all registered pension schemes in both the public and private sectors, alongside the lifetime allowance. The measure is kept under review by the Government to ensure that the benefit of tax relief on pension schemes remains affordable.

Some senior clinicians face pension tax charges owing to the increase in the value of their pension accrual. I understand that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is currently engaged in discussions with senior representatives of the British Medical Association. The Government are taking this issue very seriously, and that is the right place for those discussions to be held. However, the House will recognise that the same tax rules must apply identically to everyone in the same situation, regardless of their employer. It is simply not possible for the tax rules applying to senior clinicians in the NHS to be different from those that apply everywhere else.

I understand that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is to publish a consultation on proposals for a new 50:50 scheme providing pension flexibility for clinicians in the NHS. The scheme will give senior clinicians in England and Wales more choice in respect of their pension accrual, and will thus control tax charges. Since last autumn, all members of the NHS scheme on the taper have been able to elect for the pension scheme to pay any tax charges now, and so avoid any impacts on take-home pay, in return for an actuarially fair reduction in their pensions.

I recognise the concerns that have been raised, and I assure the House that the Government will continue to monitor the impact of pensions policies on public service delivery.

Andrew Selous: The unforeseen consequences of recent pensions legislation, initially supported in all parts of the House, are now resulting in very worrying consequences for the NHS as hospital doctors who have regularly worked weekend overtime to get waiting lists down are understandably refusing to continue to do so because they are being made worse off as a result. Can we imagine a conversation between couples along the lines of, “So you are leaving me and the children again this weekend to go voluntarily to work to make our family worse off?” It is not going to happen, is it? The same applies for GPs, many of whom are now doing fewer sessions each week than they want to, and it is not surprising that they choose not to if they are being made worse off as a result. For example, in The Guardian this morning we learned of one senior anaesthetist who worked 27 Saturdays last year in order to reduce waiting lists and has now said he cannot afford to work any extra Saturday shifts this year because it would give him a large tax bill he cannot afford to pay.

Very few doctors have earnings that exceed the adjusted income threshold of £150,000, but due to the inclusion of hypothetical pension growth as income, doctors are being affected by tapering. This is different from what the Chancellor said in Treasury questions on 21 May when he said that someone who has to be earning over £150,000 a year before the tapered annual allowance affects them. Taxable income and adjusted income are very different as regards pensions taxation.

The Government should also be aware that members of the imposed 2015 pension scheme had no option but to become a member of multiple schemes including the GP CARE—career average revalued earnings—scheme and as a result incur significantly higher annual allowance tax bills than those members who are protected members in only the final salary scheme. This means that all full-time consultants who are a member of more than one NHS pension scheme will be affected by the tapered annual allowance and will need to reconsider how much work they do for the NHS to mitigate these tax charges. Furthermore, this punitive pensions tax penalty means that doctors are not just working less but are retiring earlier than they would like to in order to avoid significant additional tax charges. In a survey of more than 2,400 consultants, more than half cited pensions taxation as a reason for their decision to retire early.

I therefore have five questions for the Chief Secretary. As the 50:50 pensions accrual option proposed does not remove the unintended consequences that are forcing doctors to reduce the work they do, can this be included in the consultation so that this issue is raised? Once the scope of the consultation has been extended to cover this essential aspect, can it then be launched as quickly as possible? Can the consultation be brief as the issues are well-known and well-rehearsed, and can the Government then respond quickly to it and if necessary legislate given that there is likely to be cross-party support for these important measures to protect the NHS? Can timely pensions statements be provided to all NHS staff who are affected by these measures? Finally, can the Government confirm that they understand the urgency and importance of this issue and that they will act without delay to prevent a deteriorating situation from getting even more acute?

Elizabeth Truss: The answer to my hon. Friend’s first question is that the Health Secretary is currently in discussions with the British Medical Association and other health representatives about precisely what can be done, and of course the consultation will come out shortly. Some of the issues he mentioned in terms of legislation will clearly be a matter for the new Prime Minister and Administration, but the fact that my hon. Friend has raised this urgent question today will draw to people’s attention the urgency of this issue and one would expect it to be considered very early on by a new Administration. The point I was trying to make earlier is that there is a fundamental distinction between how we deal with the issues in the NHS, on which the Health Secretary is leading, and the broader issue of our pension system, which is there to encourage people to save. That has to be considered in a holistic manner so we cannot
just design it around one workforce. It has to be designed to work for everybody in both the public and private sectors. That takes time of course, and we are working through some of the conclusions of the reforms that took place a few years ago.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) for asking this urgent question. It follows a Westminster Hall debate two weeks ago on this issue, when Members from across the House raised concerns about the Government’s mismanagement of the interaction between their pensions relief policies and the NHS pension schemes.

The worst-case scenario that we all feared has become a reality. Hospital leaders are raising the alarm that waiting lists for routine surgery have risen by up to 50%. Unless this issue is dealt with, there is a risk that the approach of the end of the financial year will lead to even greater levels of working to rule after the summer.

The changes that have led to these issues relate to the interaction of the taper, which George Osborne introduced in the summer Budget of 2015, with other rules on tax reliefs and the three NHS pension schemes. Despite decisions being taken around these measures some time ago, there appears to have been next to no communication by the Government with representative groups about this issue until the crisis had already begun. That is very different from the “constant review” that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has just referred to.

It is fair that tax reliefs should be consistent with other core principles of taxation and that the pension allowance should decline progressively for those people who earn high incomes. However, at issue here is the interaction of that system with the NHS pension schemes, on which the representative organisations maintain they were not properly consulted. Many consultants are only now becoming aware of their liabilities. I asked two weeks ago, and I ask again, whether the Government believe that their communication with those affected has been sufficient. Furthermore, does the Chief Secretary to the Treasury believe it is acceptable that many of those affected have not even received pension statements in a timely manner, due to delays by Capita? Surely that is only exacerbating these problems.

The Government have maintained—the Chief Secretary to the Treasury did this again a moment ago—that this issue will be solved by the 50:50 pension option proposed in the NHS people plan released last month. However, a number of representative bodies have already expressed concerns about this option. So my third and last question to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury is: what discussions has her Department had with the Department of Health and with those representative bodies about the 50:50 scheme? It has been painfully clear from the Westminster Hall debate, and again this afternoon, that there has been an abject lack of co-ordination across Departments on this issue.

I am sure that many of us are concerned about the lasting impact of today’s crisis. NHS staff retention is already poor. This issue is one of many affecting dedicated senior staff, with large numbers raising concerns about levels of stress and a general lack of resource. A whole variety of Government failures is driving these retention problems. Today’s crisis is likely to add to this, with confusion over pension relief pushing many to retire earlier than they previously would have done, or encouraging some to opt to take on additional private work. I am concerned not only for those consultants but for their patients. There are currently 100,000 NHS staff vacancies; that is one in 11 of all NHS posts. This latest failure will see yet more delays for people in desperate need of care, unless the whole of this Government, working together, get a grip.

Elizabeth Truss: We acknowledge that there is an issue. That is why the Health Secretary is poised to launch the consultation—

Hon. Members: When?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Elizabeth Truss: That is also why the Secretary of State is meeting representatives of the medical profession today. The hon. Lady asks whether the 50:50 scheme is enough and whether more can be done. Those are precisely the issues that the Health Secretary is discussing with those representatives of the medical profession. Of course he is working hand in hand with the Treasury to find NHS-specific solutions to deal with the problems that we all acknowledge and that have been raised today by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous). We all acknowledge that.

The important thing to remember is that, while we need to look for NHS-specific solutions—which is precisely what the Health Secretary is working on—the broader issue of taxation cannot be looked at just for one profession. The broader issue of the pension system has to be looked at in the round and in the whole. I am not going to stand at the Dispatch Box today and announce an entirely new pensions policy. We are pragmatically dealing with the situation that has arisen in the NHS, and of course we continue to review our pensions system to ensure that it makes financial sense for those people contributing to it as well as for the Exchequer. We pay more than £50 billion-worth of pension tax relief and it is important that we get value for money for that—that is why the reforms were conducted earlier—but of course we continue to review the arrangements to ensure that they are providing value for money as well as the right incentives for people to save for their later age.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): In west Berkshire and Wokingham, we desperately need to recruit and retain more doctors and other senior medical personnel. Will the Treasury look at the 60% tax rate that kicks in at £100,000 for a band of income above that? A lot of important public service workers, not just in the NHS, are caught in that band and are paying higher marginal tax rates than people earning a lot more.

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend makes an interesting point. In general, I am in favour of lower taxes and a simpler tax system that always rewards those who go out to work.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Tapering lifetime allowances have already driven many senior doctors out of the NHS in their late 50s. The issue now is the tapering annual allowance, which is reduced by £1 for every extra £2 earned. This issue was raised...
in 2017; it has not just come to light. In May, the Chancellor talked about a threshold of £150,000, yet the problem kicks in at £110,000, and many senior consultants and GPs earn above that. The average extra bill is £18,500, but many have faced tax bills of almost £100,000. The British Medical Association survey shows that three quarters are citing this as a reason to retire. At the moment all income, including non-pensionable income, is included. That does not make sense, so can that be changed? It is not just earnings, but the growth of a pension, yet people might not live long enough for that to be income, so why is it counted? The BMA does not think that the 50:50 approach will solve the issue, so will the Treasury have open consultation and, because this is about interaction with the pension system, look at all the options? Otherwise, we will face a workforce meltdown.

Elizabeth Truss: As I said, the consultation will be launched fairly soon—the Health Secretary is looking at that—and people will of course be able to feed their views into it.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): It is welcome to see a Treasury Minister answering this question; it was a Health Minister in the Westminster Hall debate. As a former cancer Minister, I was incredibly proud of our Government’s 75% ambition, and I doubt whether there is a Member in this House who does not support that. The news from my trust is that this pension issue is hitting radiology, which is hitting cancer diagnoses. Theatre lists are being cancelled because we cannot get anaesthetic cover, as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) mentioned earlier, so may I stress to the Minister the urgency of the situation? We need to grip this and fast, because the longer this goes on and the further it falls, the harder it will be to retrieve. Urgency is the key word here.

Elizabeth Truss: I can assure my hon. Friend that I spoke with the Health Secretary earlier today. We are seeking to get the consultation out as soon as possible. The Government have been working on this now for a number of weeks.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): This matters first and foremost because of the impact on patient care, not only through increased waiting times in hospitals but in patient’s ability to see a general practitioner out of hours. May I stress the urgency of the situation, as others have? Patients cannot afford to wait for the extended process of finding a new leader of the Conservative party.

May I briefly flag up another issue? One of my constituents, who wrote to me recently to say that he had requested an update on his pension, was told that it would take three months. He was then informed that Primary Care Support England had not updated his pension records for three years and that he would have to wait a further three months once they had been updated. Will the Minister also look at the delays facing doctors trying to get an update on their situation?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I will raise that matter with the Health Secretary. It is for the NHS to make sure that its pensions are properly administrated. As I have said, we are dealing with this issue urgently. We are not waiting for the election of a new Conservative Prime Minister to do that. My point about a new Prime Minister was that general tax and pension reforms are not likely to be happening in the next two weeks.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. Will she confirm that this problem, as she said at the beginning, was created in 2016? Working hard for a few weeks now is probably necessary, but it ought to have been possible, by paying attention to the representatives of consultants and GPs and to those in these sorts of areas with similar earnings, to realise that this problem should not have been allowed to continue for quite so long. Will the Minister’s advisers look at the British Medical Association’s “Frequently asked questions”, which in February spelt out many of these issues? I ask, for the sake of those involved and the patients they wish to serve, that there should be a bit more speed—I almost gave it in Latin, but I might have sounded like a Tory leadership candidate. Get on with it, please.

Elizabeth Truss: I am strongly receiving the message in favour of urgency.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): My local hospital made it clear today that the 50:50 contribution proposal will not solve this problem because, as other Members have said, the problem is the taper. The problem is in the Treasury, not in the Department of Health and Social Care. How many more people have to wait longer for their operations before the Chief Secretary to the Treasury focuses on her day job and gets a solution to this problem?

Elizabeth Truss: The answers to the problems within the NHS lie within the Department of Health and Social Care, which is why the Department is launching a consultation. As I said earlier, we need to make sure that the pension tax system is designed around all employees. Of course NHS employees are extremely important, but we need to make sure the system works for all employees. That is a longer-term task, but we are specifically looking at the 50:50 idea in the consultation. No doubt the Health Secretary is talking about other ideas that could be introduced, and I am sure he is very interested in the right hon. Gentleman’s views, too.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): We have created the most unbelievably complicated tax system. If working additional time makes the pension pot larger, there could be a 55% tax charge when taking those surplus benefits, and restrictions on the annual allowance are resulting in these large tax bills.

It is not surprising that many health professionals are choosing not to do the extra work or are simply retiring earlier. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) makes a key point, because extra earnings would take many of these people into the slice above £100,000 to £125,000, where a 62% tax charge applies.

This is not just an NHS problem. My concern is that we are putting a brake on those entrepreneurs who want to create enterprise, jobs and the tax payments of the future. A simple step would be to get rid of the lifetime allowance.
Elizabeth Truss: I agree with my hon. Friend that we need a simpler tax system that has the right incentives throughout. It is a major task for the new Prime Minister to ensure that our tax system is simpler and has proper incentives. My hon. Friend can raise these issues during the consultation, but there is no doubt in my mind that the British tax system is too complex at present.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am taken aback by the Minister’s complacency. We all know that patients are suffering because of this policy. What can be done to ensure that doctors who want to do the right thing by taking extra work and doing extra shifts are not left out of pocket?

Elizabeth Truss: I disagree with the hon. Lady. We are taking steps to deal with this issue, and the Health Secretary is currently meeting representatives from the medical profession to discuss this in more detail. Wide-ranging reforms to the taxation and pension systems are not things to be wished overnight; they have to be properly worked through.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): May I add to the sense of urgency by speaking up on behalf of the chief executive of my local community hospital trust? This is affecting not only clinicians but senior staff too. They want to continue in many cases, but now they are leaving. These are highly valuable, experienced people whom we need to run these trusts. Please can we sort this out as soon as we can?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right about ensuring these people do not face very high marginal rates and an undue tax burden, which is precisely what the Opposition propose—they want to see taxes raised for higher earners.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Chief Secretary keeps saying this is a matter for the NHS, and certainly the problems it has created for waiting lists and operation times are a problem for the NHS, but does she not accept that this problem has been created by the Treasury? The Treasury needs to look at how to resolve the problem, and it needs to consider what is creating these problems within the NHS, rather than passing the buck to the Health Secretary.

Elizabeth Truss: There are specific issues affecting the NHS that the Health Secretary is rightly looking at and is about to conduct the consultation on. As I have said, the Treasury constantly reviews our tax system to make sure that it has the right incentives in it and that it is helping people to save for later years.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): In addition to the important points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), would it not be simpler and fairer to restrict pension relief to the basic rate and scrap all annual and lifetime allowances?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his policy suggestion. I am afraid that during this urgent question I will be unable to commit to it, but it is certainly an interesting idea.

Elizabeth Truss: I would be interested to hear precisely what the hon. Lady. Lady is suggesting the Treasury does. The Treasury has to look at the pension tax system for all professions and occupations, and it is right that the Health Secretary speaks specifically to those operating in the medical sphere and the Treasury looks at the broad overview.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): For the first time, I find myself in agreement with the contributions from the Front Benchers from the Opposition and the Scottish National party. This problem has been coming down the track for at least three years and nothing has been done to stop it. The last thing the NHS needs is senior doctors refusing to work overtime at the weekends and our waiting lists getting worse, not better. The Chief Secretary has bravely come out to bat for the Treasury today, but we must avoid this silo mentality between the Treasury and the Department of Health and Social Care. This is a problem for the whole of the Government, and she and the Health Secretary need to get it sorted out urgently.

Elizabeth Truss: We are working closely with the Health Secretary on this issue, and that is the right way to do things; it is right for the Health Secretary to deal with organisations such as the BMA and it is right for the Treasury to look at the overview. The Chancellor has looked at this over the past three years, and I am sure the representations my hon. Friend has made today will be taken very seriously by him.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is the responsibility of the Treasury to ensure that all public services are operating as efficiently as they can be, and that remit extends beyond NHS England; it extends across all parts of the NHS in the United Kingdom. Indeed, a friend who is a trainee surgeon in Glasgow was just telling me that the entire ear, nose and throat elective list was cancelled this weekend in Glasgow because of a shortage of anaesthetists. That arose because cover could not be found, owing to this perverse incentive we are discussing. Will the Chief Secretary therefore ensure that she writes not only to NHS England but to her counterpart in Scotland to ensure that this issue is effectively understood and the evidence is collated from all parts of the NHS in the UK?

Elizabeth Truss: I will certainly make sure that is the case.
Nie Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The workforce are the No. 1 priority in the NHS, along with delivering the NHS plan, but we seem to be dealing here with one of the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing. When the right hand of the NHS is rightly commissioning Baroness Dido Harding to do a workforce plan, the left hand of Treasury policy is undermining that. Will the Chief Secretary make sure that Baroness Dido Harding’s work is fully integrated into the work she is doing on this.

Elizabeth Truss: Yes.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Around six weeks ago, I raised this issue with the Prime Minister, who was sitting next to the Chancellor at the time, and I was told that they would come back to me. Since then, nothing has happened, and lots of my constituents—consultants and members of the public—are concerned about the deterioration in the situation at the hospitals. Surely the Chief Secretary or the Chancellor could sit down together with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and thrash this out.

Elizabeth Truss: I will make sure this is immediately drawn to the attention of the Prime Minister.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I place on record the fact that I am married to a GP, although she is unlikely to be affected by the changes.

I recently attended a briefing for Fife’s elected representatives at which Fife Health and Social Care Partnership confirmed that an inability to recruit GPs means that the out-of-hours GP service in Glenrothes will remain closed almost permanently. We were given an update on the worrying number of GP practices—more than one in five—that are having difficulty recruiting and retaining GPs. The director of the partnership told us in terms that the pensions issue is a real one for medical staff, not just for GPs. In that context, it is not acceptable for the Treasury or, indeed, the Home Office, under reserved powers, tolob ahand grenade into our health service and expect the four devolved health services to fix the problem. Will the Chief Secretary tell us what assessment was made of the impact of the changes on the health service? Will she undertake to publish that assessment in full?

Elizabeth Truss: This is a matter that took place before I was a Minister in the Treasury, but I commit to find the relevant paperwork and send it to the hon. Gentleman.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Chief Secretary accept that such changes to the pensions process make it seem not worth while for consultants to do overtime, as they are taxed at a high rate multiple times? Furthermore, this will have a detrimental effect on waiting lists and, more importantly, on people’s lives. Will she be prepared to rethink the changes to ensure that those whom we need to work overtime and go the extra mile are not horrifically penalised for doing so?

Elizabeth Truss: A number of issues have been raised in respect of the complexity of the tax system and the need for further tax reform. I am sure the Treasury will take that seriously.

Higher Technical Education Reform

4.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the consultation on higher technical education in England at levels 4 and 5, which we have launched today.

Over the past year, the Government have undertaken a comprehensive review of classroom-based higher technical education, which provides an alternative to apprenticeships at levels 4 and 5. Qualifications at this level sit between level 3 qualifications, such as A-levels and the new T-levels, and level 6 qualifications, such as bachelor’s degrees. As part of the review, we gathered evidence and listened to many further and higher education providers, awarding organisations, employers and others. The consultation launched today sets out our proposals to address the multiple related challenges and opportunities that we have identified through the review.

We want higher technical education to be a prestigious choice that delivers the skills that employers need, that encourages more students to continue to study after A-levels or T-levels and that attracts people of all ages who are looking to upskill and retrain. The proposals in the consultation are the next step in our programme to reform technical education. We want to build on the introduction of T-levels and our investment in apprenticeships as part of our modern industrial strategy to improve productivity and help people to progress in their work and in their lives.

The Government’s review of higher technical education found that there is growing employer demand for the skills provided by higher technical education, but we also found that the uptake of higher technical qualifications is low by international standards, has fallen over time, and is low by comparison with other levels of education. Some higher technical qualifications and courses are well recognised and valued by employers and students, but overall there is low awareness and varying quality, with the range of terminology, qualifications and provider types creating a complex picture that is hard for employers and students to navigate.

The starting point for our reforms is to raise the prestige of higher technical education more widely and strengthen its value to employers by putting their needs and quality first. Improving quality now—to demonstrate the value of higher technical qualifications—will lead to increased uptake of higher technical education in the future. To do this, we are proposing an approach to make it clearer which higher technical qualifications provide the skills that employers want. This will be delivered through the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, signalling which qualifications deliver the knowledge, skills and behaviours set out in employer-led national standards. As we want qualifications at this level to be understood and recognised as high quality by employers, their involvement in qualification design is crucial, so they will be at the centre of our reforms.

Alongside our proposals on qualifications, we also want to grow high-quality higher technical education provision, boost leadership and encourage greater specialisation and close collaboration so that providers can more effectively and efficiently respond to the local skills needs of employers. We will do that by working...
with the Office for Students to demonstrate the quality of providers, so that there is more high-quality provision delivered across higher and further education, including through our flagship employer-led national colleges and institutes of technology. The Office for Students will develop a set of technical ongoing registration conditions specifically for providers delivering courses leading to higher technical qualifications. These will align with the model used to assess the quality of applications for the institutes of technology programme and act as a precursor to access full public funding for approved higher technical qualification provision.

Finally, we want to make higher technical education a positive and more popular choice by raising awareness and understanding of the new suite of qualifications approved by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education in colleges and universities and among potential students and, of course, their employers. We will improve the information, advice and guidance available to potential students and boost employer knowledge of how these qualifications can address their skills needs. At the same time, we will improve the accessibility of higher technical education through flexible delivery and improve signposting of financial support, so that as many students as possible have the chance to get the qualifications that are right for them.

We know that change will not happen overnight. Higher technical education has been an area of relative neglect over decades, and we want to work with everyone who wants to improve higher technical education. I strongly encourage everyone with an interest to contribute to the debate so that we can build the world-class technical education system that our students deserve and our country needs. I commend this statement to the House.

4.58 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving me advance sight of his statement following on from the media coverage today.

Last year, the Secretary of State made a speech at Battersea power station, which foreshadowed the Government’s announcement of this review today. Since 2010, Labour has said repeatedly that vocational and technical education must be put on an equal footing with academic routes to get the high-skilled workforce that we need. That imperative, given Brexit, has now accelerated, so we welcome the Government’s statement, but while we welcome the words, a lot of the details are still lacking. Will this be an entirely new suite of qualifications, or a rebadging of existing ones? Will the Minister confirm whether the Government are unveiling a plan to rebrand the existing qualifications rather than actually delivering meaningful policy change, and where do degree apprenticeships fit in with this?

The Department’s own policy paper acknowledges that Britain’s departure from the EU and the end of free movement may also accelerate demands for higher technical skills, so does the Minister agree that the reckless no-deal policies advocated by both candidates for his party’s leadership would damage our economy and create even greater skill shortages? Julian Gravatt, deputy chief executive of the Association of Colleges, has said that

“we’re nervous that the focus on reforming qualifications ... could divert attention from the post-18 review recommendations”, which Mark Dawe at the Association of Employment and Learning Providers has echoed. Can the Minister tell the sector which of these recommendations his Department will implement?

All year, Members from across the House have been telling the Department that FE funding has fallen to critical levels. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found it was £3 billion down in real terms between 2010 and 2017-18. Will the Minister commit urgently to a funding uplift to ensure those world-class colleges and providers can produce the skilled workforce we need? Is the Department proposing a national approval of qualifications, and will those qualifications be given additional funding?

The Minister talks about the role of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education and of the Office for Students in his consultation, but with resources already stretched and concerns from the sector about delays in standard approvals and registration, how does the Minister envisage the IfA taking on this extra responsibility? What additional resources will be allocated to it? Will the IfA or the OfS be in the driving seat on delivery?

The Minister said that improving information, advice and guidance would be crucial to deliver the skills base we need, but how does the Department intend to do this with no extra resources available? This morning, the Secretary of State told The Guardian that he would be happy for his own son, aged nine, to take one of the new HTQs. Is it therefore not imperative that we start looking at and talking about information, advice and guidance in schools at a much earlier age—at just that sort of age—to spark inspiration and aspiration in technical careers?

What will be the status of the qualifications getting swept up in these changes? Will the Department ensure that qualifications are not just future-proofed but back-proofed? I ask because the Department tells us that mature students make up the majority of current higher technical students, and in 2015 over half of all HT students were studying on a part-time basis. Can we be clear that these qualifications will not be junked by the Government and employers if they have to retrain?

The Labour party has been developing our national education service and lifelong learning commission with the principle of progression at the heart of skills policy. To do that, we must have a proper feeder process for social mobility and social justice. This comes substantially through level 2 apprenticeships, but we have seen a 21% drop in them recently. How will the Department address that and get people to these higher-level qualifications? The Secretary of State says that students will move on from T-levels to a higher technical qualification, but can the Minister or the Secretary of State, who have failed so far to outline how students will transition from GCSEs to T-levels, tell us how students will move on from T-levels to HTQs?

A review of these qualifications is welcome, but given existing take-up failure with advanced learner loans, there is no guarantee it will be a game changer. How will the Government make it possible for institutions to get the staff they need to deliver more level 4 and level 5 qualifications? If T-levels are going to be a feeder into them, who is going to teach them: existing FE, school, college or training staff, recent providers, or perhaps graduates doing crash courses in T-level teaching?
This announcement will require a big infusion of money beyond the existing £500 million by 2022 and a whole new approach to prioritising continuous professional development for FE staff, which the Government have consistently ignored, will be needed. The Department’s policy paper says that providers struggle to recruit and retain staff, so when will the Department address the fact that FE lecturers and other staff have seen their pay fall by thousands of pounds a year in real terms since 2010 and are still being paid thousands of pounds less than their colleagues teaching in schools?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. He asked a number of questions. I will attempt to address most of them, and if I do not I will happily write to him after this statement. He asked whether there will continue to be one type of recognised qualification at this level. Of course, he will know that there are individual examples of high-quality qualifications that are well recognised by employers—pharmacy, for example. These qualifications cater for a diverse set of situations and students, including people from a range of backgrounds studying for various purposes and a large volume of adult learners. We propose to maintain this diverse and competitive market through an opt-in system that enables more than one qualification to be approved against a given occupational standard. We want all higher technical qualifications that provide the knowledge, skills and behaviours that employers need to get the recognition they deserve. This is in contrast to the position for T-levels, where, as recommended by the Independent Panel on Technical Education, only one qualification is approved per occupation or group of occupations.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the issue of wider funding to deliver reforms. Of course we recognise that financial arrangements, or incentives, are important in delivering these reforms. We want to ensure that public funding for the delivery of higher technical education is focused on providers that meet the Office for Students’ proposed technical ongoing registration conditions.

We will be considering funding proposals as part of the spending review. The hon. Gentleman has heard that from the Dispatch Box on many occasions, but it is an important consideration. We are also seeking views through the consultation on how we can support providers to develop their workforce and engage with employers through non-financial incentives. I remind the Opposition that the funding that is available for investment in apprenticeships will reach over £2.5 billion in 2019-20—double what it was in 2010-11. So more money is going into the system for these apprenticeships.

On the hon. Gentleman’s slightly frivolous point about the negotiations with the EU, we do need to deliver a Brexit by 31 October. I am surprised that the Opposition have changed their position on this considering how many of their heartlands in the north feel about that issue, but I will leave it there. We have made no-deal preparations in the Department and I feel confident that we will be ready if that is the position—not that we want it to be. We want a deal, of course.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement. I very much agree that we have to make sure that employers, families and those who might take these qualifications will understand that we are making the greatest advance perhaps not in the last 70 years—perhaps in the last 110 years, since people like William Garnett started getting technical colleges going all over the country.

I hope that we will avoid the mistakes that were made a few years ago in the recognition of training centres, where Worthing College and Northbrook College, which is now part of the Met, in my constituency were disqualified from recognition because some stupid question had a tick-box exercise where, if the right word was not included, the college was disqualified. In the same way, no college in Birmingham was approved. That had to be put right. We have to watch what the apparent invigilators are doing and make sure that they see common sense in all they do.

Lastly, my hon. Friend’s advisers ought to look at the words by Graham Hasting-Evans of the charity NOCN in FE Week today about the importance of making sure that the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education has the capacity to do the job it is being asked to do.

Nadhim Zahawi: I take on board my hon. Friend’s comments and advice that we make sure that this is not a tick-box exercise. I will certainly look at the words of Graham Hasting-Evans on the capacity of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. We obviously want to get this right through the consultation.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister acknowledged that take-up of higher technical qualifications is lower in this country compared with our international competitors. I commend him for the statement and its curriculum objectives, but would he acknowledge that the low take-up is not just a result of the curriculum but is about a deep-seated cultural resistance to young people going into technical education? It needs buy-in from parents, teachers and the careers service, and the capacity of further education to deliver. Will he undertake to ensure that those issues are addressed as well?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I know that he has been a passionate advocate for technical qualifications for many years, since before my time in this place. I served under him when he was Chairman of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, and he advocated a similar view then. He is right to talk about the aspirational value of technical qualifications. Part of the reason for the move towards degree apprenticeships was to begin to deliver that aspirational value to not only potential students but their parents. I take on board everything he says. He is right that, if we look at the take-up, something like one in 10 adults in this country holds these qualifications, versus one in five in countries such as Germany. Some will say that Germany has a very different economic model, but the evidence suggests that employers in our country have a real appetite for these qualifications and, therefore, it is only right that we do this, and do it well.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. John Ruskin said that the value of learning is not in what one gains from it, but what one becomes by it. But one becomes by it through practical accomplishments and skills, grow and add to the nation’s productivity. I simply say to the Minister these two things. First, the hon. Member for Blackpool
South (Gordon Marsden) is right about the pathway from entry-level practical skills through to higher-level qualifications. Secondly, good existing qualifications such as the HND and BTEC must be valued, because they are well understood by employers, learners and providers alike. I hope that, in this review, we will not end up throwing out the baby with the bathwater, and we will take account of all the good work that is done in our FE sector.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s comments. He is right to warn the House that we do not want to lose excellent qualifications that are clearly recognised. I hope that my comments in response to the hon. Member for Blackpool South reassured him.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I welcome the Government’s efforts on higher technical education and their attempt to provide different qualifications as alternatives to university education. Renaming this form of education is intended to assist employers to understand the qualification. However, it may cause greater confusion for employers, because naming them “technical” qualifications does not take into account the fact that some subjects studied at this level are in the creative arts and are not defined as technical. Has the Minister taken that into account?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Lady raises an important point—we must never forget what an important export and potential employer the creative arts are, and our position in the world in that sector. She is right to raise that, and it is something we have to be cognisant of.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I very much welcome the work that the Department is doing in this important area of education. Last Friday, I visited Midland Group Training Services—MGTS—in Redditch, which has just been awarded a contract from Morrisons to train all its food technology engineers across the country. That is a major coup for our area. Does the Minister agree that it is really important that technical education responds to digital and creative needs, which are ever changing? How will we meet that challenge in the future?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for her excellent question, and I congratulate MGTS on its contract. She rightly raises the ever faster moving nature of the economy and its changing shape, including some technological disruption. That is precisely why we want employers to co-create these technical qualifications. I do not think that the Government are able, on their own, to move to where the markets are. Businesses understand that better than anyone else, which is why we want them to be at the heart of this.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Following on from the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) about how we encourage more people to participate in technical education and obtain the qualifications, what specifically does the Minister think we need to do about the fact that we still do not have enough girls and women taking up technical subjects? We are missing a huge pool of very good people who could make a career in technical subjects.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. I spent a year as David Cameron’s apprenticeship champion, looking at the introduction of the levy and making sure that we would deliver that well, which I think we did. She is quite right to say that we need to encourage more young females to think about technical qualifications and of course STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—which is dear to my heart as a chemical engineer. I certainly think that the best way forward is to have more female role models engaging with schools, making sure that children are exposed to the potential for a career from technical education.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Technical qualifications are absolutely vital, and I welcome the Government’s move down this road. In South Dorset, or Dorset as a whole, we need a centre of excellence in which these technical qualifications can be taught. Weymouth College, on which all the young in South Dorset and around rely, simply does not have the facilities. What we would like, please, is a new centre, and that costs £18 million.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his rather opportunist question. I shall make sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, who has responsibility for further education, is cognisant of the fact that South Dorset needs an upgrade of its college, or a new college altogether. I suspect that will be above her pay grade as well, but I think I will leave it there.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): May I draw the Minister’s attention to the final question asked by the shadow Minister, my fellow Fylde coast MP, which was about the challenges in the FE sector in recruiting and retaining staff? I know from my recent visit to Lancaster & Morecambe College that FE colleges are really struggling to compete with other potential employers, which are not just schools in our area, but higher education institutions. What will the Minister do about that, and how can he address these concerns of the FE sector, in which pay has been held back since 2010?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. I visit FE colleges because of my portfolio—they do brilliant work on supported internships for students with special educational needs and disabilities—and I have to say that I hear a similar story about the financial challenges, which is where all this sits. I hope that from my earlier comments, and what she will have heard from my right hon. Friend the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, who has responsibility for further education, she will see that we are very much cognisant of the fact that more investment needs to go into FE. We have a spending review coming up, and my right hon. Friend will be putting her best foot forward in that negotiation. This is obviously to do with the challenge of finance in the FE sector.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): My hon. Friend will have seen the announcement last week by Jaguar Land Rover of a massive new investment in the Castle Bromwich branch near my constituency. It is a real vote of confidence in our nation, despite Brexit. However, JLR needs an enhanced skills base. Does he agree that raising awareness
of any new qualifications is key, so that they are not just alphabet soup, and so that we break down barriers of prejudice about non-degree qualifications? No more targets—let us respect, as a society, technical qualifications.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. Of course, the JLR announcement was equally welcome in Stratford-on-Avon, because many of my constituents work at the head office in Gaydon, where, as JLR recognised in its announcement, a lot of its engineering know-how and innovation are based. He is right to remind the House that if we obsess over a target for 50% of young people to go to university, we end up neglecting the FE sector, and that is something we in this Government will not do.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I welcome the Minister’s clarification that there is no desire to throw the baby out with the bathwater and that high-quality qualifications such as BTECs and HNDs, which have served generations of students well, have nothing to fear from this review; indeed, they may well do well from it. How will the Government ensure that this review builds on the good work that the Augar review did in recognising the need to make sure that those non-levy paying businesses can feel confident in participating and in taking apprenticeships are vital for GE. Will my hon. Friend confirm whether this is a change of approach from the Government? In future, will they always, in timetabling, treat Northern Ireland business as urgent and give it extra time, or is this a one-off for other reasons?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. He is right to focus his concern on the non-levy paying business community. We dropped the contribution from 10% to 5% to make sure that those SMEs can feel confident in participating and in taking apprenticeships. We continue to monitor their progress.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): This morning, I was at General Electric’s transformer factory in Stafford. It is the only manufacturer of large-scale transformers in the UK, and clearly higher technical education and apprenticeships are vital for G.E. Will my hon. Friend update the House on the situation for companies do not pay the apprenticeship levy because they are below the threshold? Those small and medium-sized enterprises are absolutely vital to our economy. Since the introduction of the levy, has there been greater uptake of apprenticeships among such companies?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Friend for his question. He is right to focus his concern on the non-levy paying business community. We dropped the contribution from 10% to 5% to make sure that those SMEs can feel confident in participating and in taking apprenticeships. We continue to monitor their progress.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): May I thank the Leader of the House for providing an extra day to debate the very important issue of Northern Ireland? As he is amending the business for this week, will he consider allowing a debate on the message from the Lords on setting up a Joint Committee? It has to report by 30 September, so could he further amend the business?

Mel Stride: First, may I thank the hon. Lady for her thanks—let us keep the thanks going—for the additional time for the Northern Ireland Bill? This important issue was raised during Thursday’s business statement, both by the hon. Lady and by the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), and I am pleased that we have managed to come to an arrangement for extra time. I take on board the hon. Lady’s comments about the message from the Lords in respect of the Joint Committee, and I will give that further thought.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for the second day. Will he confirm whether this is a change of approach from the Government? In future, will they always, in timetabling, treat Northern Ireland business as urgent and give it extra time, or is this a one-off for other reasons?

Mel Stride: As to whether this is a one-off, we will continue to listen to the House and make sure that appropriate time is available for the business of this place.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): May I also thank the Leader of the House for the very short business statement? It seems like business is being organised on the hoof again. That was a feature of this Government’s handling of business a few weeks ago, and when any significant business seemed to fall or be hastily rearranged by a business statement like today’s. Can we please just get back to business as usual? There is no reason why the Leader of the House could not have announced the extra day during last Thursday’s business statement. I do not understand why the business has had to be hastily reorganised.
The changes might not bother the Leader of the House and his colleagues, who will get to spend a full seven weeks with their children during the school holidays, but we are right in the middle of the Scottish school holidays; we have to make arrangements, and change our plans to be here. I know he could not care less, and all previous Leaders of the House have seemed to care very little, about our childcare arrangements. Even my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), our spokesperson for Northern Ireland, has childcare issues this week.

Can we please get back to organising business properly? There is nothing wrong with announcing business two weeks in advance and sticking to it, like we used to do. Let us have no more business that has been hastily arranged on the hoof. Let us get back to something resembling normal in this place.

Mel Stride: I feel that we cannot win. On the one hand, when I bring the business to the House on a Thursday, right hon. and hon. Members ask me questions and press me to make changes; on the other, when we come to the House with a change, we are criticised for apparently making up the Order Paper on the hoof. I would say it is a matter of listening to the House. The hon. Gentleman has, understandably, raised this issue of school holidays, I think in the context of recess dates, in the past. I have said to him, and I say to him again now, that if he wishes to meet to speak about Scottish school holidays in the context of the business in this place, I am very happy to do that.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who speaks for the Scottish National party on business of the House, about the ordering of business. I am a member of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which met in Luxembourg from last Wednesday to today. Getting information about what was going on in the House this week was really quite difficult. I do not understand why, when there is so little business in the House, we cannot have notice two weeks in advance, as we have had for many years, so that we can plan our diaries, make arrangements and table amendments in good time.

Mel Stride: As I have already stated, while I fully accept the benefits and value of having advance notice of, and certainty about, the business of the House, the reality is that we should maintain the ability to be flexible, sometimes at short notice. Points were made to me on Thursday, including by the shadow Leader of the House and the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), about the time allocated for this business. I am pleased that on this occasion we have been able to respond.

NORTHERN IRELAND (EXECUTIVE FORMATION) BILL: BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill:

Timetable

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken in two days in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be completed at today’s sitting and shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) at the moment of interruption.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken on the second day and:

(i) shall be taken as shown in the first column of the following Table, and in the order so shown, and

(ii) shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the times specified in the second column of the Table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proceedings</th>
<th>Time for conclusion of proceedings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Clauses, new Schedules in Committee of the whole House relating to abortion, marriage or civil partnership, historical institutional abuse, or pensions of the kind mentioned in paragraph 28 of the Stormont House Agreement (victims’ pensions).</td>
<td>Four hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remaining proceedings in Committee of the whole House; any proceedings on Consideration; proceedings up to and including Third Reading.</td>
<td>Six hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) If, following proceedings in Committee of the whole House and any proceedings on Consideration of the Bill, a legislative grand committee withholds consent to the Bill or any Clause or Schedule of the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill, the House shall proceed to Reconsideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(5) If, following Reconsideration of the Bill:

(a) a legislative grand committee withholds consent to any Clause or Schedule of the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill (but does not withhold consent to the whole Bill and, accordingly, the Bill is amended in accordance with Standing Order No. 83N(6)), and

(b) a Minister of the Crown indicates his or her intention to move a minor or technical amendment to the Bill, the House shall proceed to consequential Consideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(6) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;
(c) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;
(d) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;
(e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded; and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (17)(a) of this Order.

(7) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chairman or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(8) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (6)(d) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chairman or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(9) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (6)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chairman shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(10) (a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (11) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of this Order.

Subsequent stages

(12) (a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(13) Paragraphs (2) to (9) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (12) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(14) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(15) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply so far as necessary for the purposes of this Order.

(16) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(17) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(18) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(19) No debate shall be held in accordance with Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) at today’s sitting after this Order has been agreed.

(20) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(21) No private business may be considered at today’s sitting after this Order has been agreed.—(Jeremy Quin.)
Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill

Second Reading

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has not certified the Bill for the purposes of the Standing Orders relating to territorial application and devolved legislative competence.

5.27 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): I beg to move that the Bill be now read a Second time.

As the House will be aware, at the end of April, following the appalling killing of Lyra McKee, the Government announced a new set of political talks to restore all the political institutions established by the 1998 Belfast agreement. With the support of the Irish Government, and in accordance with the well-established three-strand approach, we established five working groups involving all five main Northern Ireland parties. Each of the groups has been led by independent facilitators who are all respected current and former senior Northern Ireland civil servants. Over the past nine weeks, over 150 meetings in a range of formats, including roundtable meetings with all five main parties, as well as the UK Government and the Irish Government, and bilateral meetings, have taken place. I want, in particular, to thank the five working group leads for their efforts in supporting this process and the parties for their constructive engagement to date.

There have been signs of an emerging consensus between parties on the programme for Government; the use of the petition of concern; and transparency. On the issues of identity and languages, and on the sustainability of the institutions, the parties have engaged actively. Here, too, there has been some agreement, but no overall consensus on these issues has yet been found. The two largest parties have, over recent days, been considering how an accommodation can be reached on the remaining and contentious issues. From the outset, the Northern Ireland parties have been clear that they want to see the institutions restored, but after nearly 10 weeks the people of Northern Ireland expect to see results. No one should be in any doubt that the fact that this has not yet happened is a huge disappointment.

While I continue to believe that an agreement is achievable, I also have a responsibility to prepare for all scenarios. Provisions allowing limited decision making to ensure the effective delivery of public services to continue in the absence of an Executive expire on 25 August. After that, the Northern Ireland civil service will revert to the restrictions applied to decision making by civil servants following the Buick High Court judgment, leaving Northern Ireland without sufficient powers to ensure good governance from 26 August, continuing indefinitely.

In a few weeks, Parliament will rise for the summer recess and there will be no further opportunity to legislate before the existing provisions expire. The Bill will extend the period for devolved government to be restored by two months, from 26 August to 21 October, with provisions that allow for a further extension of the Bill from 21 October to 13 January next year. A new deadline of 21 October creates the time and space that parties need to reach an agreement, and there is provision for a short extension with the consent of both Houses.

During this period, civil servants in Northern Ireland can continue to take decisions to protect public services, where they are satisfied that it is in the public interest to do so and with regard to the guidance that I issued in November last year. The Bill will also place a duty on me, as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, to publish a report to Parliament on or before 21 October, setting out what progress has been made towards the formation of an Executive—if that Executive has not already been formed. That will allow Parliament to have continued oversight in the steps that the Government are taking to restore devolved government in Northern Ireland.

Let me be clear: this legislation is only, and can only ever be, a contingency plan. Today, I mark 18 months in my role as Secretary of State and, in that time, I have stood here on numerous occasions to make clear my commitment to restoring devolution. The Bill does not change that and it does not—and cannot—remove the imperative for a restored Executive. Even with the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018, numerous decisions are going unmade—important decisions that are needed to improve the delivery of hospital care, reform the education system and improve major transport and infrastructure links. We need to see the Executive back in place—not next month, not next week, not next month, not in October, but now. I will continue to work intensively with all five main Northern Ireland parties to make that ambition a reality and will continue to offer all the support that I can.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I absolutely echo the Secretary of State's sentiment that we would like to see the Executive restored now, but if we are going to put this right and ensure that we do not have a repeat in future of what we have had over the past two years and more, that requires reform and a commitment to ensure that never again can one single party hold the entire population of Northern Ireland to ransom and leave them without a Government for such a lengthy period. We need to put that right.

Karen Bradley: I want to make sure that we not only restore the institutions, but do so in a sustainable way, because the people of Northern Ireland deserve to see government. Not only is it 18 months since I took this job, but tomorrow, it will be two and a half years since the Executive collapsed. We can never again be allowed to go for that period of time without government in Northern Ireland. I know the commitment that the right hon. Gentleman's party has made to this, and the commitment of other parties, but let us be clear: the issues that caused the Executive to collapse and which have meant that we have not had an Executive for two and a half years remain, and we need to find a way to bridge that gap. I am bringing this Bill in with the utmost reluctance, but I am doing it to ensure that we have continuity of good governance arrangements in Northern Ireland. However, this is not and can never be a replacement for effective, devolved, power-sharing, where locally elected politicians make decisions on behalf of the people who elected them. I know that the right hon. Gentleman agrees with that point—we have discussed it on a number of occasions—as does everyone in this House.

That is why it is clear that ultimately, agreement cannot be imposed by the UK Government, the Irish Government or anyone else. It requires the consent of
Northern Ireland’s elected representatives. Twenty-one years after the Belfast/Good Friday agreement was reached, the need for all the institutions that it established to be fully functioning is there for all to see today in Northern Ireland.

We need to see the same spirit from Northern Ireland’s political leaders today that drove those who made that historic agreement 21 years ago, but while the parties continue to work towards securing an accommodation, the people of Northern Ireland should not have their services put at risk. Responsible government is about making provision for all scenarios, just in case those contingency plans are needed. I hope therefore that the House will support the Bill and will join me in urging all parties to come together.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): How does the Secretary of State assess her duty to propose a date for an election? In the absence of these measures, would she have had to call an election in the very near future, or would she have had the power to name a date at some point in the future, rather than perhaps six or seven weeks after the existing powers had lapsed?

Karen Bradley: The role and duty of the Secretary of State to call an election is as set out in the St Andrews agreement and legislated for in this House. It is very clear that the Secretary of State has a duty to call an election, and there are timeframes set out for that. The Bill removes that duty, but it does not remove the discretion to call an election, if it is felt that it is the right thing to do.

I hope the Bill does not receive Royal Assent. That is a slightly odd thing for a Secretary of State to say, but I hope that the Executive will be restored before Royal Assent so that we have government in Northern Ireland and there is no need for the Bill. The Bill will ensure that all contingencies are covered. It does not preclude the Secretary of State from calling an election should they wish to, but it does mean we have the flexibility and discretion to give the talks the best chance of success. Ultimately, that is what the people of Northern Ireland want, and that is why we want an accommodation reached as soon as possible that restores the Executive immediately. On that basis, I commend the Bill to the House.

5.36 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I am also bound to remind the Secretary of State that it is 909 days today since Northern Ireland had proper governance. When the Secretary of State brought the original Bill before the House, 652 days had elapsed. I need to remind the House that this is not simply an absence of institutions; there is a vacuum of both politics and decision making that is unprecedented since the signing of the Good Friday agreement. It is unprecedented and very dangerous. It is serious decisions were not made because of Buick. It is that really matter are not being made by the Northern Ireland civil service, and not simply because of Buick. It is the case long before Buick that they did not have the capacity to make those decisions without political cover. The Bill is not about good governance; it is about a very partial way of keeping things ticking over.

The precedent in the past was very clear. The law is very clear. Where talks and elections have been unable to resolve a situation, succeeding Secretaries of State have brought in direct rule. This Secretary of State and her predecessor were not prepared to do that. I say to the Secretary of State, as she is entitled to say herself, that there has been a failure by the five parties—perhaps, more fairly, of the two parties, the DUP and Sinn Féin—to get round the table and make power sharing work over those 909 days, but she cannot absolve herself from her own responsibilities. Until the law was changed last October, there had been 651 days of drift, during which time decisions were not being made and there was simply no ambition to bring through that decision-making process. Serious decisions were not made because the Secretary of State and others shied away from the controversial decision-making process it involved.

The Secretary of State’s critics would say to her—and I do understand this—that one of the issues is the Prime Minister’s reliance on the votes of the Democratic Unionist party in the Chamber. A brutal and harsh reality is that if one of the parties in Northern Ireland has a very different status from the rest, that tips the balance. Another reality, however, is that this is not good legislation.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that the only party in Northern Ireland that is out of step and, indeed, tips the balance in these circumstances is Sinn Féin, which has consistently refused to go back into Stormont although all the other parties would have gone back yesterday?

Tony Lloyd: I am afraid not. Inevitably, it takes different parties to come together to form an agreement. While I understand the political imperative of the finger-pointing that takes place between the DUP and Sinn Féin, the reality is that neither party, in the end, was prepared to reach a position in which matters could be brought to a conclusion—although I should remind the right hon. Gentleman that in the spring of last year Northern Ireland was very close to an agreement, which was then frustrated. We can look back in the history books—and I shall read the right hon. Gentleman’s autobiography with great interest—to see how the blame is allocated, but what is certainly true is that people were very close to a deal at that time. So it does take more than one party to reach an agreement.

Let me now make a point about the adequacy of the Bill. What it certainly does is protect the Secretary of State from being subject to judicial review for being in breach of the duty to call an election if there is no legislative change or no Stormont Assembly, which was a real threat at one time, but I must disagree with the right hon. Lady’s observation that the Bill is about good governance. It is not about good governance; it is about a very marginal protection for Northern Ireland civil servants so that they can make decisions for the people of Northern Ireland. However, most of the decisions that really matter are not being made by the Northern Ireland civil service, and not simply because of Buick. It was the case long before Buick that they did not have the capacity to make those decisions without political cover. The Bill is not about good governance; it is about a very partial way of keeping things ticking over.
One of the odd aspects of this situation is the fact that the backdrop to the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive has been a period in which Brexit has been the biggest issue in United Kingdom politics, not simply in terms of the relationship between the UK and the European Union but, in particular, in terms of the relationship between the United Kingdom and Ireland. During that period of the Brexit conversation, there has been no voice for the Northern Ireland Executive, no voice for the non-Westminster parties in Northern Ireland, and no voice for the people of Northern Ireland, who voted overwhelmingly—let me rephrase that; they voted significantly—in favour of remain. There has been no voice for the business community, no voice for agriculture, and no voice for the many people who have spoken to me, and to the Secretary of State, about the need for a Brexit settlement that will not be damaging and dangerous for the people and the economy of Northern Ireland.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): The Secretary of State has spoken about an extension until 21 October, and the hon. Gentleman has been talking about Brexit. During that period, the House might well be very preoccupied with the dangers of a no-deal Brexit, and debating the possibility of our crashing off the cliff. Is this timetable sensible for the consideration of complex issues in Northern Ireland?

Tony Lloyd: The hon. Gentleman—my hon. Friend—has raised a very interesting point, and it is exactly the point that I was about to make myself. The two candidates for the leadership of the Conservative party—one of whom will, we assume, be the next Prime Minister of this country—are currently vying with each other to be the most no-deal Brexit candidate. That is very dangerous for Northern Ireland, and we know it would be disastrous for the whole United Kingdom economy. Those who read the article by Carolyn Fairbairn, the director general of the CBI, this morning will have seen a very well argued case for why the whole United Kingdom would suffer, but because she knows Northern Ireland she also makes the point that a no-deal Brexit would be massively dangerous for Northern Ireland.

The simple reality is that we know the following from many different sources. As the outgoing Chief Constable of the PSNI warned, the hard border across the island of Ireland would still mean there is a border. Some involve a degree of state surveillance that, frankly, I think would not be acceptable to the people of Northern Ireland. We have a very real situation here: a crash-out Brexit is massively threatening to the people of Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland more generally.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman has expressed the view today and on many other occasions that a crash-out Brexit would be against the terms of the Belfast or Good Friday agreement and this would cause many problems for the people of Northern Ireland. Does he equally believe that any attempt to legislate individually or separately for matters that should be within the ambit only of the Northern Ireland Assembly would also be outside the spirit of the Good Friday agreement?

Tony Lloyd: I do not accept that. In the end, Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. In the absence of governance for Northern Ireland, it is inevitable that there will be consideration here in Westminster of what that means for the people and the institutions of Northern Ireland.

Sammy Wilson: If that is what the shadow Secretary of State really does believe and he is not just being selective for his own interests, would he not then agree that, in the absence of devolved government in Northern Ireland and given that there are important decisions to be made about infrastructure, schools and hospitals, he should be calling on the Secretary of State to introduce direct rule?

Tony Lloyd: I shall come on to exactly that point, but let me continue with this question of a hard border across the island of Ireland and the question of crashing out. The reality is that we know as well that there is not simply a threat around terrorism with that hard border, but there is also a massive threat to the economy of Northern Ireland and the movement of goods, including agricultural goods and manufactured goods, which is why the business community and the farmers union in Northern Ireland are both absolutely consistent in their view that that would be massively damaging to the Northern Ireland economy.

But there is a separate issue that the Good Friday agreement involves, and it is very different in the Northern Ireland context from anywhere else in the United Kingdom: the whole question of identity. Identity matters in the Northern Irish context: identity and respect for people’s different identities is the heart and soul of the Good Friday agreement, and we simply cannot allow that to be damaged by crashing out of the European Union—a crash-out Brexit.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): We have heard so often in this House about a hard border; who is going to implement a hard border?

Tony Lloyd: That is not a difficult question to answer. The European Union would insist on a border across the island of Ireland. There is no doubt about that. There can be no question of Northern Ireland acting as some kind of back door for smugglers. I am old enough to remember the days when gates were left open on the border and cattle would wander across, by morning and night. Those days have not entirely gone, and we know that smuggling still takes place between Ireland and Northern Ireland, but the European Union would not allow the institutionalisation of any facility that made the smugglers’ lives easier.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): My question is along similar lines. Let me just probe a little further. I once asked the Prime Minister this question nine times in a seven-minute session without getting a satisfactory answer. If there were to be this dreaded hard border,
who would actually construct it? The British would not construct it, and the Irish Republic would not construct it. The shadow Secretary of State says that the EU would insist on it, so would the EU construct it? If so, how would it do so?

Tony Lloyd: The construction industry would itself suffer from a hard Brexit. The border would be constructed, and there is absolutely no doubt that there would have to be controls to prevent smuggling. This is a simple phenomenon.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. He says that he can remember the time when gates were left open and animals wandered across the border. He suggests that we would have to avoid that. I am intrigued by this. For the life of me, I cannot understand how he believes that the EU Commission, with all its powers, is going to be able to instruct cows not to wander across the border and not to find holes in hedges, gates that have been left open or lanes that have been left unpatrolled. Could he please tell us how this will work, because I am intrigued?

Tony Lloyd: I am always very generous to the right hon. Gentleman, because his questions are always interesting, if erroneous. The integration of the economies of the UK—particularly Northern Ireland—and the Irish Republic is massively more sophisticated today than it was all those years back. Creating a smugglers charter would be very dangerous. We know—I say this advisedly—that there are already criminal gangs in Northern Ireland who make their money and control other people on the back of the capacity for the illegal transport of goods, services and people. We should treat this with great care.

I will now try to bring my remarks to a conclusion. I say to the Secretary of State, to the Democratic Unionist party, to Sinn Féin and to the other parties that the cost of no Assembly would be enormous in the event of a no-deal Brexit. Indeed, the cost of no Assembly has already been enormous for individuals in Northern Ireland. In particular, it has been big for the victims of historical institutional abuse, at least 30 of whom have died since Lord Justice Hart produced his report. Some of those victims will be in Westminster on Wednesday, and they deserve resolution of those issues. Those who are already deceased will never see that justice. Because of the dysfunctional education system Northern Ireland, we know that schoolchildren are being denied the quality of education that they need. That cannot be given back to them. But perhaps it is health that we ought to look at most closely.

In Northern Ireland questions last week, the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) rightly raised the issue of growing cancer waiting lists. There is a simple equation with cancer: early detection means an increased chance of cure; late detection means an increased chance of death. The lack of reform in health is costing lives. The lack of decision making as a result of no Assembly—that the Government would not move towards an insistence that the Executive should re-form, or towards direct rule—will now be costing lives.

That is exactly what we are debating here tonight. We will support this piece of legislation because it will be necessary to get us through the summer and to give the new Prime Minister, and possibly a new Northern Ireland Secretary, the chance to resolve the way forward. We can support this until October, but to go beyond October would be very dangerous.

Lady Hermon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. This gives me an opportunity to apologise to the House for being slightly late for the beginning of the debate. We are here today because the talks process has unfortunately not brought forward a functioning Assembly. As we have not had any Members of the Legislative Assembly working in a functioning Assembly for two and half years, will he please join me in calling on the Secretary of State to exercise her powers to cut the salaries of the MLAs? It is absolutely outrageous to the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland that, even though they do not have a functioning Assembly, it is still costing the taxpayer an absolute fortune.

Tony Lloyd: I am bound to have sympathy with the hon. Lady’s comments. We know that the Secretary of State took those powers, but we are still waiting for them to be seen, and, as in other areas, we need to see action.

We will support the Bill tonight, but the Secretary of State told us in October last year that this was a temporary and undesirable measure that would be needed just once, possibly with an extension, and she has to recognise, as we come here again several months on to refill the bucket at the same well, that we are now running out of patience. The Government are running out of credibility and we do not believe that they have a strategy to move Northern Ireland onwards. We have to do better.

5.57 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. If you will allow me this brief indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, this is an opportunity for me to thank Members from across the House for electing me to chair the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and to pay tribute and give thanks to my hon. Friends the Members for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) and for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) for making it a contest. It is lovely to see my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes in her place today. I want to commend and put on record my thanks to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). I also want to pay tribute to two hon. Members from the Opposition Benches: the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey)—a distinguished member of the Committee—and the terrier-like member of the shadow team, the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), both of whom have announced in recent days that they will not be seeking re-election to this House at the next general election. No one can doubt their affection for Northern Ireland or their determination to progress these issues.

This Bill comes at a pressing time for two reasons, and the speeches from the Dispatch Boxes on both sides of the House illustrated them clearly. It would be remiss of me not to put on record what I am sure would be the uniform view of the Select Committee—namely, that it is unfortunate that we have to have another piece of emergency Northern Irish legislation. If we are to seek to deal with Northern Ireland and its politics as we deal with any other part of the United Kingdom, we need to try to remove the otherness of how we deliver the politics of Northern Ireland through emergency legislation.
That will be of particular pertinence as we move through the progress of the Bill and deal with the amendments, about which I will have a word or two to say.

The thrust of what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said about the raison d’être underpinning the Bill is clear and compelling. It was welcome to hear what the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) said about the Opposition supporting the Bill because, at the end of the day, politics can intervene in all these debates and issues.

This Bill comes about by dint of necessity and is informed by two pressing issues. The first is clearly the lack of a functioning devolved Assembly serving the people of Northern Ireland. As has been made clear in interventions and from both Front Benches, that 909-day absence should be a badge of shame and despondency for everybody involved, but it should not be an excuse to give up hope. As we know, it took the taking of the life of a young woman—a young journalist with her future in front of her—to kick-start the talks and to provide the imperative to get them back up and running.

The talks usually collapse at the end of week nine, or the start of week 10. I believe we are now in week 10. They cannot be allowed to collapse. If there is one thing that has heartened me over the last few weeks in my conversations with representatives of most of the parties involved in the process, and on both sides of the border, it is a clear and tangible determination to see those talks bear fruit. I do not detect that anybody is merely paying lip service to them or playing nice.

To respond further to the hon. Gentleman, this weekend—I shall be in Belfast for some of the weekend with the PSNI—should be a good opportunity for Unionists to demonstrate their passionate belief in the Union, and to do so in a responsible, peaceful way, acting as a beacon of what it is to be an engaged citizen in Northern Ireland. I hope that is an opportunity—I am fairly confident it will be—that those organising and taking part will take.

That is one of the backdrops against which this legislation has been introduced: the absence of devolution. The second, as highlighted by the shadow spokesman, is the timetabling of the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union. For those of us who are concerned about that and who have listened to and taken part in discussions with a variety of opinion—which for me ranges from the Justice Minister of the Republic to representatives of the National Farmers Union, with whom I was speaking this afternoon at an NFU summer reception that I sponsored—it is abundantly clear that it is in the interests of Northern Ireland and of the economy, peace and success of the island of Ireland for the UK to leave with a deal.

Some of the language has not, I suggest, given anybody who has an interest in, and affection for, Northern Ireland a vast amount of confidence. When my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) suggests that we should operate the border as we do between Westminster and Camden, it shows to me a rather woeful understanding of the history and the pressing problems. When the United States of America effectively says to the Taoiseach, “Go ahead and build your wall. I’m building one in Mexico and it’s gonna be great”—that word that the President always uses—that shows a worrying trend on this issue.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the language is very important. Does he agree that it is equally important for all of us, both in Northern Ireland and across the UK, to understand that this mythical concept of a hard border is not going to come about, not just because none of us wants it in the Republic, Northern Ireland, the UK or the EU, but because it would be physically impossible for anyone to build it?

Simon Hoare: I want to deal with that point, because it was raised by the hon. Gentleman. gentleman’s deputy leader, the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), with the shadow Secretary of State. While I wish that what the hon. Gentleman has said were true, I do not have his confidence. We neglect two things at our peril. For the first time—they would argue—in 800 years, the Republic of Ireland is part, and will continue to be part, of the big team that is the European Union. By dint of its membership, the Republic has, perfectly properly, subcontracted—for want of a better phrase—to the Commission the negotiations of the withdrawal agreement with the United Kingdom Parliament. Therefore, any notion that representatives of the UK and Irish Governments would get together, come up with a plan, take it off to the Commission and say, “As far as we are concerned, this works,” is, I would suggest, for the birds. The Irish are just not going to play that game.

Because the Republic wishes to be an active, positive, proud member of the European Union, I do not think it is eccentric to suggest that, whatever it is that the...
European Union demands of the Republic to police, protect and patrol the only land border between their single market, of which we will no longer be a part, and ours, that would not be in an eccentric proposition. Is it an easy proposition to deliver? Of course not. It would be damn difficult. But as we know, where there is a will, there is a way, and frankly some of the proposals that we are hearing for alternative arrangements are for the birds.

Dr Julian Lewis: My hon. Friend is tremendously courteous. May I congratulate him on doing what the Prime Minister and the shadow Secretary of State did not do? He seems to have got very close to giving a straight answer to the question. The straight answer appears to be that, if the European Union decided that a hard, impermeable, fenced border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic needed to be built, the Irish Republic would accept its orders from Brussels and construct it. That seems to be the answer, does it not?

Simon Hoare: I will not go into the materials and whether it needs to be a physical gated fence but, in essence, my right hon. Friend is correct in his interpretation of what I said. The Republic will remain part of the European Union, and support for membership of the European Union is going up in the Republic. As has been pointed out by innumerable Republic politicians, favourable opinion polls rarely go down when an Irish politician sets their face against the will of an English or a British politician, and we need to be cognisant of that history.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Gentleman’s belief that the Irish Government would give in to any demand from the EU that disadvantages their own country is not founded on any fact. The EU has been trying to get the Irish Government to change their corporation tax for a long time, and they have refused to do it.

If the EU were to decide to put a fence along the border, and if the Irish Government were to accept the EU’s decision, does the hon. Gentleman think the EU would be able to find the 50,000 troops to police that border? It took 50,000 troops and policemen to police the border during the troubles, and we still had the smuggling of guns, animals, cigarettes, alcohol and fuel—the lot. If they are going to seal our border, they need to think very carefully about how they do it.

Simon Hoare: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely on the money, and I do not think anybody in this House should in any way undervalue the difficulties and challenges of sealing the border. By the same token, we have never quite appreciated, in this House or in this country, the very deep and passionate belief in the merits of the single market and the communautaire spirit that exists within the European Union. I am convinced that the Republic will do everything it believes to be necessary to maintain its credentials as an active and proud member of the European Union and to preserve the integrity of the Republic of Ireland. It is, as I say, not an easy task to deliver but, if pushed, it is a huge risk to presuppose that the cards will all fall in our favour at the witching hour, and I do not think we should be doing it at this time.

Lady Hermon: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his election as Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

The Republic of Ireland has never indicated that it has any intention of sealing the border, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Despite the fun being poked at the suggestion, any hardening of the border will do two things: it will embolden Sinn Féin to campaign even harder for a border poll to change the constitutional status of Northern Ireland from being part of the United Kingdom to being part of a united Ireland; and, dangerously, it will embolden dissident republicans, whom the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned. If there is any hardening of the border, any additional cameras or whatever, they will be emboldened to increase their violence, which is already unacceptable. It is lethal, and we do not want it to be renewed or encouraged in any way.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Lady is right on both counts, and I say this as a fellow Celt—as a Welshman—of a Unionist tradition.

Dr Julian Lewis: Hear, hear.

Simon Hoare: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. He is from Swansea—I am a Cardiff boy—but nobody is perfect.

The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is right, because we will play with fire if a policy is pursued that adds an accelerant to the demand for a border poll. It saddens me to say it, but I am not convinced that we, as Unionists, would win that poll.

Mr Gregory Campbell: We are.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Gentleman may very well be convinced.

I am also certain that, even if we were to prevail and that precious Union were to be maintained, it would open up again, and one could not refuse it, a request for a second independence referendum in Scotland. I am saddened to say it, but I do not want to wake up to find myself a subject of the United Kingdom of England and Wales.

David Simpson: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that if this mythical hard border were put in place, the Republic of Ireland would be the biggest loser? The leadership of the Republic of Ireland knows that its economy would go down the tubes.

Simon Hoare: What I accept is that the biggest losers would be Northern Irish farmers, which is something we have to avoid at all costs.

Sammy Wilson: I am sure the hon. Gentleman did not intend it, but does he realise that the comment he just made about a border poll and the likelihood of winning it is exactly the kind of language Sinn Féin want to hear? Of course, the trigger for a border poll in the Belfast agreement is a belief that the people of Northern Ireland have changed their mind on wishing to remain part of the United Kingdom. Is he saying that, in his short time as Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, he has detected such a change, despite the fact that election results show a vast majority of people still believe that the Union is the right option?
There have been developments in the situation in Northern Ireland, both positive and tragic, since the last time we debated this extension, meaning that I have not simply dusted down my last contribution on the subject, although elements will remain familiar. The positive developments have of course, sadly, been driven by the shocking terrorist murder of Lyra McKee, whose loss is still felt deeply across Northern Ireland, but it would be remiss of me not to welcome the talks that have been ongoing since May. In wishing all parties involved well, I urge all of them to be open-minded and open to concession in order to bring about the restoration of not only the Assembly and devolved government, but democracy itself to the people of Northern Ireland, and to do that as quickly as humanly possible.

Nevertheless, I have to reiterate once again that we are extremely disappointed that it has come to this. We, of course, accept that in the circumstances, amid the ongoing legislative vacuum in Northern Ireland, this Bill is again necessary. On the subject of developments, we welcome the Government response, published on Friday, to the submissions to the legacy consultation. Dealing with the legacy of the conflict and meeting the needs of victims and survivors has remained one of the pieces missing from the peace process. It is vital that this issue be dealt with in a comprehensive and inclusive fashion; all sides and all victims must feel that their specific hurt has been addressed and that their needs have been met. There have been a number of consultations over the past decade, but what has been missing is the political will to implement the recommendations that have come from these various reports. The SNP has certainly supported the implementation of the legacy institutions that were agreed by the Governments and the Northern Irish parties in the Stormont House agreement in December 2014.

The SNP believes it is essential that devolved government finally returns to Northern Ireland. In the face of the threat of a no-deal Brexit, the political vacuum cannot be allowed to continue. The murder of Lyra McKee was a terrible reminder of the dangers that a political vacuum can cause in Northern Ireland. Politics must be seen to be working again...

The SNP also welcomes the continued attempts by the two Governments and the political parties to secure a return to local government in Northern Ireland, but it is important that the passing of this Bill is not seen as a sign that the ongoing talks can be delayed until the autumn. To be fair, the Secretary of State said that in her opening remarks. Put simply, the people of Northern Ireland have been waiting too long without a Government. Public services, already facing severe financial strain, have been doubly impacted by the absence of vital political decision making and direction. The Northern Ireland civil service must be commended for its efforts over the past two and a half years, but the limited powers afforded to departmental leads is no substitute for a functioning Government.

Particularly amid ongoing austerity, the absence of decision making is straining Northern Irish public services. Decisions are urgently required to provide direction and funding to those services. As we have heard time and again in this place, current conditions are placing particular pressures on health and education. Let me give one example. Figures released in June showed that some
87,500 patients were waiting to be admitted to hospitals in Northern Ireland, which is an increase of 8.5% on the figure for the same period last year. The Prime Minister can have been made? Will the SNP and its Members to justify that situation; it is for the parties in Northern Ireland to get back to work and justify their salary. It is not for the MLAs and the parties in Northern Ireland to do that.

The confidence and supply deal has also undermined the devolved settlement by breaching the Barnett formula, and so denying the Scottish people a total of £3.4 billion thus far. If a new confidence and supply deal is struck with a new Prime Minister in the coming weeks, there simply must be a guarantee that any financial package will be subject to Barnett, and that Scotland will receive its fair share of central Government spending.

On the importance of restoring Stormont, I turn back to Brexit, which is wreaking havoc on every aspect of politics on these islands. Indeed, it has cost the Prime Minister her job and looks likely to lumber us with the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). Despite the Conservatives’ hustings over in Northern Ireland, the complete ignorance shown by the would-be Prime Ministers has been shocking, as the hon. Member for North Dorset illustrated. No doubt that has been frustrating, to say the least, for the Secretary of State, particularly at this sensitive time.

The broader instability caused by Brexit is a central reason why it has proven so difficult to restore the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland. There are many reasons why the Executive and the Assembly collapsed, but Brexit has prolonged the impasse. The fate of Brexit is in many ways tied to the process in Northern Ireland, so it is vital that Northern Ireland’s voice be heard. As Members may have heard said from these Benches on the odd occasion, Scotland voted by 62% to remain in the EU, but it also bears repeating that 56% of voters in Northern Ireland voted to remain. Such massive economic damage would cost the Northern Irish economy by 9%. Business leaders have warned that that will bring. As we all know, Northern Ireland will be hit hardest by a disastrous no-deal scenario. All sectors state that that must be avoided at all costs. According to the Government’s own figures, crashing out would shrink the Northern Irish economy by 9%. Business leaders have warned that that would be the equivalent of another financial crisis. All this despite the fact that the people of Northern Ireland voted to remain. Such massive economic damage could easily be avoided if the UK decided to revoke article 50 and keep the best possible deal for all parties, which is full EU membership. It is, of course, also open to the UK to pursue a policy of staying in the European single market and customs union; there would then be no need for new economic land or sea borders, and trade and relationships—business and personal—would continue to flourish between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and beyond.

To conclude, we will not oppose the Bill for all the reasons I have outlined. On the various amendments tabled by the Labour Front-Bench team and others for Committee tomorrow, it is a long-held principle that we were to reflect on the fact that MLAs have received well over £12 million in salary since the Assembly collapsed in January 2017.

Gavin Newlands: I hear what the hon. Lady says, and she is obviously and understandably passionate about the issue, but it is for the parties in Northern Ireland to get back to work and justify their salary. It is not for the SNP and its Members to justify that situation; it is for the MLAs and the parties in Northern Ireland to do that.

Lady Hermon: I listened carefully to what the hon. Gentleman said in the earlier part of his speech. He mentioned the pressure on finances for hospitals and for our health and education services in Northern Ireland. Will he reflect on what he has just said? I would be more convinced that he was worried about those issues if he
on the SNP Benches do not vote on matters devolved to other parts of the UK that solely affect that country. We are not blind to the circumstances in Northern Ireland, but we intend to stick to that principle.

I have spoken to campaigners on the issues concerned, and have been open and honest with them. Whether or not we as individual Members of Parliament are sympathetic to their cause, we fundamentally believe that legislation must be made with the agreement of the people or their representatives. I recognise that that position may displease some, but these issues and many others highlight the real and urgent necessity for the talks to succeed quickly. We sincerely hope this is the last time that a Secretary of State has to come to the House to succeed quickly. We have heard about the Buick ruling. Every day, the civil service there is making difficult decisions that they could be challenged on in court. These civil servants did not go into their jobs to have to make political decisions in the absence of Ministers. With the can kicking we see with this legislation, we are enabling parties such as Sinn Féin to keep going round in circles and not to get back seriously to the table.

I fully agree with the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) about MLAs’ salaries. It was £9 million and it is now £12 million that has been spent on their salaries, although the Secretary of State has reduced their salaries quite significantly. They say they are doing constituency work, but while they are being paid a decent salary—probably more than the average man and woman in Northern Ireland—they have no incentive to get back round the table. There are MEPs in Northern Ireland who can do that constituency casework, and there are now MEPs in Northern Ireland who can do that constituency casework. Until MLAs’ salaries are reduced significantly, if not completely, they have no incentive to get back round the table.

We are now starting to see cross-community marches throughout Northern Ireland. We had the “We deserve better” marches: 14 organised protests with thousands of people joining rallies to demand that their elected representatives get back to work and get back to running Northern Ireland. The people of Northern Ireland absolutely deserve better.

In this place, we need to show leadership. We need to take hold of the situation and look at the various issues. For me, there are three options on the table for us here. I am not in favour of direct rule in any shape or form, but we have to look at some of the significant issues and, in the absence of an Assembly, ask the people of Northern Ireland which issues that matter to them they want legislation to be passed on first.

We passed some small-scale legislation on the renewable heat incentive, but because we had to do that in such a rushed, emergency way, we did not make a very good fist of it. We now see farmers in Northern Ireland being paid significantly less for their tariffs compared with competitors in the UK and southern Ireland.

On institutional abuse, David Sterling has begged for this place to pass legislation because, as we have heard, more than 30 people who were affected and abused have died waiting for compensation. People want justice and they want compensation.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise the issue of historical institutional abuse. Does it concern her that there are people in this Chamber who are perhaps more concerned about other issues that divide people in Northern Ireland than about something like historical institutional abuse, which unites all the political parties? It is something that we could be doing together, united, rather than some of the issues in tomorrow’s amendments that are going to divide people very much.
Maria Caulfield: I fully support what the hon. Lady says, because issues such as historical institutional abuse have cross-party support in Northern Ireland and in this place and would be quick and easy to deal with. That would bring justice to those people who suffered at the hands of institutions over many years.

Ian Paisley: I wholeheartedly agree with the point made by the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey). Other issues include the contaminated blood scandal, which is another issue on which there is cross-party support. It would not be controversial and could be done, but it is not being done; instead, people seem to want to pick at a particular crisis point that causes great anxiety and, indeed, great opposition across parties and across the community in Northern Ireland. Does the hon. Lady agree that some of the proposals and some of the amendments would result in really bad legislation on issues that people care passionately about?

Maria Caulfield: I absolutely agree that it is important. We know from the emergency legislation on the renewable heat incentive that we passed in this place a few weeks ago that, when we rush through legislation and attach it to other pieces of legislation, it does not work out well. There is absolutely no scrutiny of what is happening in Northern Ireland. It is only the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee that is doing any scrutiny at the moment, so this is a case not just of who is passing the legislation, but of what scrutiny is happening to ensure that that legislation is effective.

Although from my perspective—as someone who comes from an Irish nationalist Catholic community in the south of Ireland—it would break my heart to see direct rule imposed on Northern Ireland, we cannot in all honesty let the current situation go on. The history books tell us about the civil rights movements in Northern Ireland in the ’60s when Catholic Irish communities fought for one man, one vote. We celebrated 100 years of women getting the vote, but the Catholic communities in Northern Ireland have only had a vote since the ’60s. They have one man, one vote, but no representation in this place and now no representation in Stormont. I would prefer that we were passing legislation in this place on issues that unite people, such as those related to contaminated blood and historical abuse—issues that make a real difference and that have a real impact on people’s lives.

I have already touched on the suicide strategy. Death rates from suicides have doubled in the 20 years since the Good Friday agreement was signed. Establishing a strategy would make a real difference and save lives. There is no mental capacity legislation in Northern Ireland, and yet, a few months ago, we replaced the existing mental capacity legislation here with updated legislation to protect healthcare professionals, who make difficult decisions for people who have lost the ability to make decisions, and to protect the most vulnerable patients who no longer have the capacity to make decisions for themselves. In Northern Ireland, if a person lacks capacity, there is no legislation to protect them or their loved one, and there is no legislation to protect the healthcare professionals looking after them.

Then there is the issue of public sector funding. Time and again, we hear about health funding and about education. Teachers had to fight tooth and nail and almost had to go on strike because no one could make a decision about giving them a pay rise. We hear about the PSNI from the chief constable, who, from one month to the next, does not know if he has the budget to pay the wages of the staff. Two and a half years on, that is no way to be running a country. We must show some leadership here. We cannot keep kicking the can down the road when we know that parties such as Sinn Féin are using this as an opportunity to score political points. They have no intention of getting back round the table.

Apart from this legislation, I have three options for the Minister. The first is that we start to pass laws in this place that have cross-party support in Northern Ireland and in this place that can make a real difference to people’s lives. The second option would be to have an election. The longer that we leave the situation as it is, the closer we get to when the natural elections would be held. It is now two and a half years—three years in January. If an Assembly suddenly got up and running, they would have only a year and a bit to make any policies and to come to any decisions, so let us look at that as an option. The third option, and we have touched on it before in this place, is the Assembly of the willing. There are parties across the community that are willing to get back round the table in Stormont, form an Assembly and an Executive and start running the country.

We seem to manage fairly well in this place without members of Sinn Féin taking their seats. I am pretty sure that the same would be true in Stormont. When there are MLAs from across the community and from parties such as the Alliance party willing to take their seats and willing to make those decisions, we should get them working. The only people suffering at the moment are not those of us here in this place, but the people of Northern Ireland. Whether we are talking about abortion, on which everyone here knows my views, equal marriage, the renewable heat incentive or air passenger duty, it is the ordinary people in Northern Ireland who are suffering every day that ticks by without an Assembly.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The hon. Lady talks about Sinn Féin. Does she agree that, although its members do not take their seats here, we seem to do fairly well without them? The door is open for them to come in. In the absence of their doing so, when there has been much talk about, and reference to, other politicians who do not carry out their full range of duties and who are getting paid, we should remember that this House has a decision to make about the members of Sinn Féin who do not attend here and who claim hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayers’ money. That does not seem to be raised half as much as other issues.

Maria Caulfield: I do not want to attack any political party, but we do have to call out those Members, particularly when communities who fought civil rights movements in the ’60s to get representation do not have representation in this place or in Stormont. We should call them out. If anyone else was not turning up at work, their wages would be stopped pretty quickly. If people want to make points of principle, fine, but do not take the money that goes with the job.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): My very good and hon. Friend is talking absolute sense. It is about time that we imposed option one, which means, despite our not having direct rule, making some laws that will help
the people in Northern Ireland. We should also impose option three, which is creating a Stormont of the willing and getting on with it. We have mucked around for two and a half years. That is a disgrace, and it is time that we showed some leadership. It is also about time that the Government showed some leadership on that, too.

Maria Caulfield: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention.

I do feel quite strongly on this matter. I would bet a lot of money—not that I am a betting person—that we will be back here in October, looking to extend things further, and then again in January. There are other political reasons why some parties do not want to get round the table, and their focus is not necessarily on the Assembly. My hon. Friend is quite right: we need to show leadership in this place for the good people of Northern Ireland. We are a United Kingdom, and it cannot be right that, week after week, we see in the Select Committee that Northern Ireland has been left further and further behind, whether it is in health, education, police and many other issues that we will be debating tomorrow.

I am starting to feel uncomfortable about voting for more can kicking and about allowing this process to go on much longer. The people from all communities of Northern Ireland deserve much, much better than this. If the politicians and the MLAs will not get round that table, we either start an Assembly of the willing with those who will do so, or we need to start making some decisions in this place.

6.47 pm

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield). Her final statement, outlining the choices facing the Government, which was very pertinent and important. As she said, we cannot continue to remain in this situation, which I have described as limbo, where we have no decisions at all being made in part of the United Kingdom. In western Europe, we are the only part of a modern advanced democracy where people who are entirely unelected and unaccountable wield enormous power. And that power is mainly used to do nothing, to stop things—they say that they can't, that they won't and that they have no remit, which is an appalling state of affairs in a modern democracy. The only people I suppose who have more power than the permanent secretaries in Northern Ireland are people like European Commissioners, probably equally unaccountable to many people as well. We are leaving the European Union to restore accountability, but in Northern Ireland we are passing legislation to increase and prolong the rule of permanent secretaries in Northern Ireland—with a few exceptions, of course.

There have been certain times when the Government have brought forward legislation to intervene—the Budget is the biggest example, but there are others. We remember that, as part of the Stormont House agreement, Sinn Féin members actually supported and were willing to have direct rule on the issue of welfare payments, because they did not want to put up their hands for welfare reform, changes and cuts in the Northern Ireland Assembly; and were quite happy to see it transferred to Westminster. We talk about their opposition, but to those Members who think that direct rule is such a terrible thing in Northern Ireland that nationalism would be outraged, I say that they should just remember that Sinn Féin actually encouraged it and wanted it to happen when it came to difficult decisions in Northern Ireland. Sometimes people actually find it very convenient to allow Westminster to take these decisions when it suits them, but, of course, it is an absolute constitutional outrage when it is a different type of decision to be made, and then all sorts of terrible consequences can emerge.

Bob Stewart: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, who is a good friend, for giving way. Is it not ironic that if Stormont was to be reconstituted without Sinn Féin and we started passing a few laws, Sinn Féin MLAs might suddenly want to come to the table and be part of it, because their electorates might say, “Get in there and speak for us, because you're not speaking for us at the moment and that should happen.”? In a way, doing something like this might actually encourage change.

Nigel Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. There is some merit in incentivising people to get in, take responsibility and get devolved government up and running, whether that is by a coalition of the willing, as it has been put in Northern Ireland, or by saying, “We're going to get on and make some decisions here.” It might actually encourage people who are reluctant to get into the Assembly, and who claim that they are interested in equality, rights, health, education and all of that, but do not make it a priority. They do not even make Brexit a priority; they say that there are other issues that are more important to them. If those decisions were made, it might incentivise them to get in there and take their place round the Executive table.

It needs to be said—Members of my party have already said this—that the Democratic Unionist party and the other parties, apart from Sinn Féin, would form the Executive tomorrow without any preconditions. The position we find ourselves in is the direct result of conditions being imposed by one party. Of course we have to try to find an agreement to get the Executive up and running, and we are fully committed to the talks process currently under way in Northern Ireland. There are grounds for belief that we need to continue to work at that and to work our way through the issues, although we have also said that it would be far, far better to talk about the issues that are of concern to Sinn Féin, which are not by any means the big issues that there were in the past—they certainly do not compare with the outstanding challenges we face in health and education, jobs and investment, infrastructure, and all the issues that the hon. Member for Lewes mentioned, on which there is a large degree of consensus.

We are suggesting that we should get the Executive up and running to deal with all those issues and have the talks in parallel, alongside dealing with the issues that matter to all the people of Northern Ireland. That is the sensible way forward. Sadly, when that was suggested about a year and a half ago by our party leader, it was rejected within 20 minutes by Sinn Féin. That is an incredible position to adopt. If they really cared about equality and rights, health and education, and our children and older people, they would want to take the powers to deal with those issues. Instead, we are told that there are other issues that take precedence. I go around to the doors and talk to people. Our party has a
good record of engagement with people on the doorsteps and out there among the communities. That is why, alone of the four major parties in Northern Ireland, our vote went up in both the council and the European elections, which is unique in this House—apart from for the Liberal Democrats, maybe, who sadly are not present for this debate. The fact of the matter is that our record was vindicated in those recent elections, although we want to see an Executive that is inclusive of everyone.

Sammy Wilson: My right hon. Friend has given us a long list of issues that need to be addressed and that could be addressed if an Assembly was up and running. Despite the fact that the shadow Secretary of State has today tried to make excuses for Sinn Féin, does my right hon. Friend accept that their excuses are becoming increasingly thin and threadbare? Last week, they could not even turn up to talks because they were preparing for 12 July, strangely enough. Here is a party that claims to be nationalist and republican, yet they could not turn up for talks in the preparation for 12 July.

Nigel Dodds: I suppose it is a sign of the success of Orangefest that it is now so inclusive that even Sinn Féin is now taking time off to prepare for it. I do not think there is any reason why the talks should not continue over the summer—even, if necessary, in a different form. I do think there is any need to say that the talks should cease.

With the indulgence of the House, I want to mention a couple of issues that have been raised during the debate, one of which is Brexit. I am not going to dwell on it, because there will be plenty of opportunities to talk about Brexit in the coming days, but I accept that it is to our detriment that we do not have the Executive up and running. Indeed, we have made that point to Sinn Féin: if they are concerned about Brexit, which is such a major issue, why do they boycott the Executive, the Assembly and, indeed, the Parliament of the United Kingdom, to which they are elected? Those people say that they have no voice, but they have stripped themselves of their voice, although they are heard by the Government, who meet them and everybody else. But if they voluntarily say, “I’m not going to turn up and I am going to boycott things,” they can hardly blame everybody else.

We have heard that an Irish hard border is now inevitable in the event of no deal. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) on his elevation to the chairmanship of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, and I wish him well. We look forward to continuing our conversations and working with him. But I thought that his speech was somewhat depressing and that it placed more emphasis on the pessimistic side of Unionism, instead of talking it up and so on. I am not as pessimistic as he is on the outcome of a border poll, nor regarding the conditions in which a border poll would be called. I think that people have a better understanding of Northern Ireland than they did of Czechoslovakia in 1938, given the number of debates we have, the view of the Conservative and Unionist party and our work with the Conservative party on these issues.

One issue that the Irish Government are now having to face up to, and one that they are not terribly comfortable about addressing, is the question put to them increasingly and very recently by the German and French Governments—that is, “In the event that there is no deal, what will you do in Dublin to police or protect the single market?”

Given that the Irish Government have been very clear that they will not impose any hard border—checks, controls and all the rest of it—in the island of Ireland, there is only one inevitable outcome: and there is a precedent for it, isn’t there? Nobody in the Brexit debate ever mentions the issue that has now actually been solved in the question of Brexit: the free movement of people.

We talk a lot about the free movement of animals, goods and services, but one of the biggest issues that people forecast might be a problem was the free movement of people on the island of Ireland. In fact, a lot of the documentaries and various TV programmes concentrated on how, years ago, people used to be stopped at checkpoints, were not allowed to come over the border to work, socialise and all the rest of it. But nobody is going to interfere with the common travel area. The common travel area—which, of course, predates European Union membership—works so successfully because there are no checks between the Irish Republic and the United Kingdom, but the checks are done at all points of entry into the Irish Republic and the United Kingdom.

The Irish Republic is, as the hon. Member for North Dorset has said, a modern and very Europhilic country, which is part of the EU—and it is absolutely proper that it should be if that is what it wishes to be—but it has voluntarily agreed not to sign up to all the Schengen arrangements to protect the free movement of people on the island of Ireland. And yet we are told that, to protect the single market in terms of goods, services and all the rest of it, there will have to be a hard border in Ireland. Of course there does not have to be. As Members of my party have said over and over again, there is no desire or political will on the part of any party in the Irish Republic, here or in Europe to impose such a border, nor would it be physically possible. It cannot be done—so let us dismiss some of the notions out there.

Lady Hermon: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Nigel Dodds: I am sure that the hon. Lady will have the opportunity to make her points in her speech, when I look forward to being able to interrogate her on some of them.

Somebody has said that this would be a smugglers charter—as if we do not have differential rates of VAT now. We have differential rates of excise duty and different immigration systems. This House may be surprised to know that, believe it or not, the Garda Síochána—the Irish police force—and the PSNI, the Northern Ireland police force, do stop cars and public transport either side of the border and check the occupants’ passports. They do carry out checks on the island of Ireland and have done so for many years. We recently passed laws in relation to countering terrorism that gave them more powers at the border. We have traffic cameras on the border. When travelling from Belfast to Dublin, there are police cameras and security cameras. So the idea that somehow the world is going to end in these circumstances is complete and utter nonsense.

Lady Hermon: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?
Nigel Dodds: No. I have already indicated my position to the hon. Lady. I look forward to hearing her speech—I am sure she will make one on a matter of such importance to the House.

Another issue that was raised was what might happen now in terms of elections. One of the options that the hon. Member for Lewes mentioned was that we could have an election. Under the law, that is the default position in due course. Of course, as I said, we have no concerns about another election in Northern Ireland.

The position of the Democratic Unionist party is that we are not particularly convinced that that will actually advance things terribly. I do not think the results would be all that different. I was rather surprised by the Electoral Commission saying how outrageous it is that we are being denied the opportunity to have an election in Northern Ireland, since if we were to have an election when this legislation runs out, it would be the third Northern Ireland Assembly election in three years—and we have already had five elections since 2016. We had the Assembly election in 2016, another Assembly election in 2017, the UK-wide referendum in 2016, the general election in 2017, and the local government elections and European elections in 2019. It is not as though the people of Northern Ireland have not had the opportunity to express their views. During that time, the issues have been well explored and well debated, and people have had their say. We do not worry about an election—I am just wondering what on earth it would actually accomplish.

The way forward is to get the Assembly up and running or, as the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), seemed to indicate, to get on with taking decisions here. He talked about the position of the Northern Ireland parties, but it is sad, on this Bill, to see a breakdown in the normal cross-party, bipartisan approach on Northern Ireland. Labour has tabled amendments on a series of matters that are devolved in Northern Ireland, that are the preserve of the Assembly and the devolved space. We have the long list of issues that the hon. Member for Lewes raised, including historical institutional abuse, contaminated blood, justice, schools, health and the mental health and suicide strategy, but all that is left to one side.

Of the issues that it is now proposed to legislate on, I am quite easy about some of them in terms of their substance. However, Labour Members have been told, and understand, that this not only breaches the principle of devolution but is deeply unhelpful to the current talks process in Northern Ireland. That has the real danger—they are well aware of this but have proceeded nevertheless—of setting back the prospects of getting an agreement over the coming weeks. When the shadow Secretary of State is dishing out criticism to others and talking about failures of others, they really need to look at themselves and examine whether this is actually the most sensible approach, given that the purpose of this legislation is just to keep a stand-still position for another couple of months. Even though we believe that that is an entirely unsatisfactory position, at least it is better than having no powers at all and nothing happening in Northern Ireland.

On the issue of MLAs' pay, I am all for docking the pay of those who do not want to work. Of course, those who do want to work are being held back by those who do not. I would like to see a bit more concentration and attention on the millions—tens of millions—of pounds that have been given to Sinn Féin without any accountability. Without having to put in any receipts or being subject to the same parliamentary procedures as the rest of us, it is getting the equivalent of Short money to spend on political campaigning. There is not a word about that. It is as though it does not matter. The reality is that these people take their seats and get their money but do not do their job in this Chamber. On the issues about elected representatives not turning up and not being able to do the job, these people do it voluntarily. Most MLAs are prevented from doing their work by the actions of Sinn Féin ironically. So we need to have a little bit of balance in all this.

I say to the House that we will support this Bill as it goes forward. We do not believe that it is right to introduce amendments that interfere with the devolved space. We are looking at amendments that would apply UK-wide and would bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the United Kingdom. Very, very soon the Government will have to recognise that they cannot go on with this current position. It has been described as kicking the can down the road. We can call it what we like, but we have to get decision making back into a proper shape for whatever happens over Brexit. We have to do it for the sake of our health service and getting the waiting lists under control, for our schools, which are suffering a resources crisis, for people with mental health problems, for the suicide strategy and the Bengoa report—all these massive issues. We need to give the police the proper powers that they have in the rest of the United Kingdom to tackle unexplained wealth—and gangs. We in Northern Ireland need the power to do that more, perhaps, than other parts of the United Kingdom, given the continued existence of paramilitaries and their insidious influence in communities.

We are probably now nearing the end game in relation to this limbo land. If we do have direct rule, it will then of course be open to Members of this House to legislate across the board, but what I object to is the selective choosing of areas on which to legislate while ignoring the vast range of issues about which people are so concerned.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds)—we agree on so many subjects. In my brief contribution, I will pick up on one particular theme that he raised.

I am sure that all hon. Members will regret that we are here today to debate this Bill, which extends, yet again, the time for forming an Executive in Northern Ireland. We had all hoped, when we debated a similar Bill last autumn, that the Executive and Assembly would be back in place by now. I hope that the Secretary of State will therefore give us an update on, as she said last year, the "clear goal of restoring the devolved power-sharing Executive and Assembly."—[Official Report, 6 September 2018; Vol. 646, c. 347.]

As that has not happened, this Bill is being brought forward with the stated—and limited—intent of safeguarding the continued delivery of public services, achieved by clarifying the powers of the Northern Ireland civil service to take certain decisions in the absence of Ministers.
Like last year, numerous amendments have been tabled to the Bill to raise important points about policy in the Province. The wide-ranging scope of the amendments reinforces the need for the Assembly to be back up and running as soon as possible, but as I said last year, this short Bill should not be about deciding on key devolved policy issues, which are more properly decided by the people of Northern Ireland and their elected accountable representatives. This Bill is very narrow in scope and that narrow scope should be respected. It is not a Bill that should be used to upset the devolution position. Will the Minister comment on that when he concludes? As the House of Commons explanatory notes say, “It is simply a series of measures to continue to manage the current period without Northern Ireland Ministers.”

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I am afraid that I have to adopt a somewhat more negative tone when talking about the Government’s approach to this business. I commend the Leader of the House for making good on his promise that we would get more time to debate these issues, but quite frankly, as they say in my erstwhile part of the world—South Armagh—the Government were trying to pull a stroke, and they got caught. They were trying to force this legislation through the House in a matter of hours, to avoid any debate or discussion on the numerous issues listed by the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), and particularly to avoid the possibility of amendments on what Democratic Unionist party Members understandably say are more contentious issues, but which none the less are being debated and discussed widely among the community in Northern Ireland.

Ian Paisley: Is the hon. Lady aware of the briefing passed out this evening by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, which indicates that the amendments tabled to the Bill are about usurping the powers placed in Northern Ireland and bringing them back here? It goes on to say that one amendment would force an oral statement to be made in the House of Commons that would normally be made in the Assembly.

Fiona Bruce: I shall comment briefly on that and, if necessary, in more detail in Committee.

This House has agreed that many areas of law and policy should be devolved to the different countries that make up the United Kingdom. Devolution means we accept that we have differing policies in different jurisdictions, and how money is spent can differ between them. There are amendments tabled to the Bill that seek to allow Westminster to materially alter some sensitive areas of the law. I hope the Government will continue to argue that those are matters for Northern Ireland, as has consistently been the Government’s line to date. Will the Minister confirm that? In the debate in the other place on last year’s Bill, the former Lord Chancellor, Lord Mackay of Clashfern, said:

“the only statutory authority with authority to alter the statutes and statutory instruments is the Legislative Assembly of Northern Ireland and Ministers of that Assembly. There is no power whatsoever in the United Kingdom Parliament to interfere with that while it is devolved.”

That is the position we should uphold.

I am especially concerned about the amendments tabled to the Bill that seek to change the law on abortion in Northern Ireland. I will speak further to those amendments should they be selected for debate in Committee, although I sincerely hope they will not be, as they are out of scope. As Lord Mackay also said in that debate,

“The position is that abortion has been made a devolved subject.” —[Official Report, House of Lords, 30 October 2018; Vol. 793, c. 1233.]

I hope that the Members who tabled those amendments will consider withdrawing them before Committee tomorrow.

7.12 pm

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my neighbour from the north-west of England, the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). I do not intend to detain the House for long, not because I do not have a lot to say, but because I hope that I will get the chance to say it tomorrow if my amendment is selected and I am lucky enough to catch the Chair’s eye.

Today, two friends and colleagues—my hon. Friends the Members for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) and for Ealing North (Stephen Pound)—announced that they will not be standing at the next election. I hope we have the chance to pay further tributes to them, but given that we are discussing Northern Ireland business, I will do so now. For many years, they have both shown passion for and commitment to Northern Ireland and raised issues about it consistently in the House. On a personal level, ever since my very early years of political activism in the Labour party, they have both strongly supported me and given me very wise counsel—often conflicting counsel, but wise none the less. I have retained a letter from my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North rejecting me for a job in his office as his parliamentary assistant, but he was kind enough to say that it was because I was over-qualified for the job.

I am afraid that I have to adopt a somewhat more negative tone when talking about the Government’s approach to this business. I commend the Leader of the House for making good on his promise that we would get more time to debate these issues, but quite frankly, as they say in my erstwhile part of the world—South Armagh—the Government were trying to pull a stroke, and they got caught. They were trying to force this legislation through the House in a matter of hours, to avoid any debate or discussion on the numerous issues listed by the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), and particularly to avoid the possibility of amendments on what Democratic Unionist party Members understandably say are more contentious issues, but which none the less are being debated and discussed widely among the community in Northern Ireland.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene. I have received dozens and dozens of emails from constituents and those who are not constituents urging the House to respect the devolution settlement. Since it was the Labour party, led by Tony Blair as Prime Minister, which led to the successful conclusion of the Good Friday/Belfast agreement and put in place the devolution settlement, how do the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues feel that this House is showing respect for the devolution settlement in Northern Ireland by tabling their amendments?

Conor McGinn: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. If she will allow me, I will come back to that later in my remarks.

I want to, perhaps unusually, issue a defence of politicians in Northern Ireland. In particular, we should recognise the commitment that has been shown by Members in this place—I know that the hon. Members for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) and the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) have been involved in the talks—to meet their responsibilities here, but also to be intensively involved in negotiations in Belfast.

I know lots of politicians in Northern Ireland who represent the many different political parties there. I am yet to meet one who does not want to do a good job. I am yet to meet one who does not care about the people they represent. When people say, “They should just get on with it and come to an agreement,” it reminds me of people in my constituency who say to me, “We should
just get on with Brexit.” Actually, what they want is for us to get on with their version of Brexit, and that is similar to the negotiations in Northern Ireland.

I understand that people are frustrated; that is one reason why I tabled the amendment. But to say, “Just get on with it” does not take into account the fact that what politicians in Northern Ireland are trying to find agreement and a common way forward on are issues that have been intrinsic to the terrible conflict we had and, indeed, over many centuries of Irish history. They are not easy to resolve. Of course, compromise will need to be found, but 20 years on from the Good Friday agreement, these are essentially the most difficult issues that we are left to deal with.

I want to be clear about my interpretation of the Bill’s scope. I hope that this is not an arbitrary change of date. The Secretary of State presumably has given some thought to the period of extension and why it is needed. The Bill is not just about standing still. It gives the Government the power to introduce regulations by statutory instrument. It is an acknowledgment and an admission of failure by both Governments and the political parties to find an agreement. However difficult it might be to do that, as I have acknowledged, there has not been much sign of progress since the Assembly collapsed in January 2017. There is a huge democratic deficit in the representation of people in Northern Ireland in what was their devolved legislative making body, because quite simply, laws are not being made. We have heard about the myriad issues affected by that.

I have tabled an amendment on the extension of equal marriage to Northern Ireland, to bring it into line with the rest of the United Kingdom and, indeed, the rest of the island of Ireland. People in my constituency who love each other and who happen to be of the same sex can get married. If people in Cardiff, Edinburgh, London, Dublin, Cork and Galway can do so, why should people not be able to in Belfast? It is a simple contention, and one that the Secretary of State knows I have made many times before.

I hope that the Government will acknowledge that I try to be circumspect in my interventions in Northern Ireland and the degree to which I speak on it and make my views known because I have always been clear that I am an MP from Northern Ireland, but not an MP for Northern Ireland. I am not a proxy for any person there and I cannot claim to have a mandate to represent any person there. However, I hope that the House accepts that I do care deeply about the place I still call home and that, when making interventions or pronouncements on issues affecting it, I do so because I want to be as helpful as possible.

That is why I am disappointed at the attitude of the Government on this particular issue. I and the Love Equality campaign have tried to be generous and patient, and we have not received an awful lot of reciprocity. There is no tangible progress to which we can point. We also need to say very clearly when we are talking about devolution and respect for the devolution settlement that the Assembly has not met since January 2017. The Government have not functioned since 2017, so when we are talking about devolution in Northern Ireland, are we talking about a concept, rather than a reality?

The fundamental point about my amendment, to answer specifically the point made by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), is that it does several things. First, it respects the ongoing talks process. It invokes, in fact, the date set by the Secretary of State as the next deadline for progress on restoring the Assembly as the date by which to have taken some action on this issue. So it is a challenge to politicians in Northern Ireland—whether they are passionate about being the ones to introduce same-sex marriage themselves or equally passionate about opposing the introduction of same-sex marriage—to get the Assembly back up and running. That is the first thing.

The second thing is that we would then legislate for same-sex marriage here if the Assembly is not back up and running by October 2019 because, as I have contended and challenged, LGBT people in Northern Ireland should not have to wait any longer for their rights, and this is an issue about rights. However, were the devolved institutions to be restored, which is something I know we all want to see, the power would revert to the Assembly, so if it so chose, it could simply change the law. I hope this would not be an interim step—in truth, I think it would be inconceivable that the Assembly would seek to overturn it if it were introduced here. None the less, that is the fundamental point. So it is my strong view that the amendment is respectful of devolution and that it is in scope of the provisions of the Bill, which are directly about the formation of the Executive.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend has my wholehearted support on this Bill, not least as a proud devolutionist. I represent Wales and I am proud of our devolution settlement. We all want to see the devolved Administration functioning again in Northern Ireland. The very patient, calm and constructive way in which he has constructed the amendment and the way he has set it out is exactly the way to go forward. Does he agree that, fundamentally, this is about listening to those people whose rights are currently being denied in Northern Ireland? They have spoken to many of us, and I speak to many of them on a regular basis. They have seen the Assembly actually vote in favour of equal marriage and, indeed, all the polls show that they want to see this happen, so we need to have that deadline and we need to see progress for them.

Conor McGinn: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. As he says, he is a proud devolutionist, and I think that colleagues from Scotland and Wales would find it inconceivable in the event that the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly did not sit or their respective Governments were not taking decisions, that we would not discuss or debate these things in Westminster.

Sammy Wilson: Regardless of how the hon. Gentleman tries to twist and turn on the issue, the one thing he cannot deny is that the amendment and the path he has taken actually does impinge on the devolution settlement because it interferes with an issue that is the prerogative of the Northern Ireland Assembly, whether or not it is sitting. But if he has decided that it is justifiable to do this, can he tell us why it is not justifiable to overturn the devolution settlement and account for schools, hospitals, transport, infrastructure—that affect far more people than the issue he is talking about? If he is prepared to interfere with the devolution settlement,
why is he not prepared to interfere with it to help the majority of people—huge numbers of people—across Northern Ireland by having intervention by the Government?

Conor McGinn: The first point is that this is an issue about rights, not about policy. The second point is that I think, and hope, I have made it clear that I certainly do not want to impinge on the devolution settlement because the power will be retained by Stormont when an Executive and Assembly are functioning. I think there is quite a significant distinction between an Assembly and Executive that exist in the ether or as a concept, and an Executive and Assembly that are meeting, taking decisions and doing work on an issue that affects quite a lot of people in Northern Ireland. There is overwhelming public support for addressing the issue.

Having said that I was not going to speak for long, I realise that I have now spoken for longer than I intended. I just wanted to be clear about my motivation for tabling the amendment and the thought that has been given to it so that it respects the devolved settlement. It also respects the need for decisions to be made about important issues in Northern Ireland. Most of all, however, what my amendment does is respect equal rights for all people in the UK and Ireland.

7.26 pm

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn). We have possibly set a precedent in the House, in that he and I are both from south Armagh: I moved to Belfast South, the constituency I represent, when I was 18. I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman on many things, but we do agree on some. I have been contacted by many scores of people from across my constituency who feel as strongly as he does on these matters.

Like the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), I have been contacted by hundreds of people, by email and letter, who have said very clearly that they want these matters to be dealt with in the devolved Assembly. I was elected to this House just two years ago, and it is a matter of considerable sorrow to me that throughout those two years, we have not had a Northern Ireland Assembly. Like some other hon. Members from across the House who have spoken, I am a strong devolutionist; I believe firmly that the laws and policies that impact most on people’s lives should be made as close as possible to the people, and that means that decisions on the many issues that are devolved should be made by the Northern Ireland Assembly.

We have been two and a half years with no Government in Northern Ireland. I have stood up many times in this House and indicated my sorrow at that. I welcome such speeches from the hon. Member for St Helens North, and I want to thank him for his work in this area.

The Secretary of State outlined the process that is under way. For some listening to this debate, it may have sounded a little as though the Bill has guillotined the process—as though this was the end of the process, and as though there is now a further extension until October. I do not believe that to be the case. The DUP has entered into the talks process in good faith, and we will continue to work hard, because we want to get Stormont back up and working. That is the objective with which we entered into these talks, and that is our aim.

I say to everybody across the House that we are very clear that whatever agreement comes out of the process must be fair and sensible. When we look back over the decades in Northern Ireland, we see that the only type of agreement that has ever worked is one that has commanded broad consensus and agreement across the communities. That is what we are trying to achieve. One thing we will not accept is a bad deal for the people of Northern Ireland.

It is not the case—I challenge the shadow Secretary of State on this—that everybody is to blame. Almost all parties in Northern Ireland are willing to go back to work, to form an Executive, to govern and to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. One thing is stopping that: Sinn Féin collapsed the Assembly and refuses to go back until it gets a stand-alone Irish language Act. That is the barrier, and one party put it up; we need to be very clear about that. That is not sustainable, and we are working incredibly hard in the talks process to address the issues of sustainability. It is completely unfair for any single party to be able to throw a tantrum over a particular issue and say, “I’m not going back into the Government. Nobody in Northern Ireland will have things decided on health, education, childcare, infrastructure or the economy until we get exactly what we want.” That cannot be allowed to continue. Sinn Féin needs to stop the silliness and get back into government.

Sammy Wilson: If, for the convenience of the people of Northern Ireland, we were to give in, does my hon. Friend accept that in future months, when another impasse was reached, or when Sinn Féin wanted something else, it could use exactly the same tactic and bring the Assembly down? The Assembly would continually be held to ransom by people who have no conscience when it comes to hurting the population.

Emma Little Pengelly: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. I absolutely agree. I have worked very closely with government over the past 10 years and more of devolution—since 2007—and we have had to get through some very difficult and challenging issues, including bad behaviour by a number of parties, one of which was Sinn Féin, and what it was implicated in. We tried to keep the show on the road and the institutions going. It was not the DUP that collapsed those institutions. We were, and still are, prepared to sit down and talk.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) has outlined our reasonable proposition, which is, “Get back into government now and we will set the parameters to ensure that you have confidence that we will genuinely and in good faith engage with the issues that you want to talk about. If you feel that we are not doing that, we are prepared to put in place, at this stage, a mechanism that would allow you to collapse the Assembly.” There are no risks for them in getting back into the Assembly under that arrangement. My party leader had barely sat down after making his speech before Sinn Féin issued a press release rejecting
that completely. If it wants change, there is a way to get that that actually delivers for the people of Northern Ireland. People are angry and frustrated, because they want basic services to be delivered by the people they elected to deliver them.

During these types of debates, a small number of issues are repeatedly discussed that I know are incredibly important to people. Day in, day out, a number of issues are continually raised in my constituency surgery, and I know it is the same for my right hon. and hon. Friends. Before I touch on them, I want to make it absolutely clear that we need to be realistic. I hear people across Northern Ireland saying all the time, “If only there was an Assembly, I wouldn’t be sitting on this waiting list,” and “If only there was an Assembly, I would have this or that, and the Government would be doing this or that.” I am not naive. I do not believe that all those issues will suddenly disappear if the Northern Ireland Assembly is restored in the morning; of course Governments will still have constraints.

We need to be very careful about the expectation we give people. However, if the Assembly is restored, people will be there to make the decisions; the people of Northern Ireland can approach their elected representatives and make their case; policies can be scrutinised by the Northern Ireland Assembly and its Committees; and we can develop policy. Importantly, this Bill does not provide the capability to make a range of required legislative proposals; it does not allow civil servants to do that.

Before I go into a little detail about some of those policy areas, I want to pay tribute to the many civil servants operating under incredibly difficult circumstances. I say that with a little bit of a smile because my husband is a senior civil servant in one of the most challenging departments, the Department of Health. It is fair to say that I would not like to be in that situation. It is a very difficult set of circumstances. The Department of Health is in a slightly better situation—ironically, it may seem—because the Northern Ireland Assembly agreed the Bengoa recommendations and a transformation plan prior to the collapse of the Assembly, so my husband has been able to make decisions under the terms of that policy. He has been able to carry out consultations, some of which are controversial, and the findings will have to be considered. However, there are many things that he cannot do, and it is the same right across our civil service. I pay tribute to the incredible work that civil servants have done in very difficult circumstances that they should never have found themselves in.

I want to touch briefly on education. Recently, I started special autism clinics and surgeries right across my constituency, because so many people who come through my door face challenges on special educational needs and autism in particular—everything from trying to get their child statemented, to being on the school waiting list for up to a year or two before they can get their child seen. Parents know the help that their child needs, but they cannot get it at the moment. We need a fundamental review of special educational needs and autism services across our education system. The system is not just creaking; it is breaking, and it is children who are suffering.

I challenge the hon. Member for St Helens North: what about the human rights of a child who is waiting for an autism assessment, but cannot get it for years because there is no Government to carry out the fundamental review? Those are rights, too.

Maria Caulfield: Children in Northern Ireland still have statements, whereas children in the rest of the United Kingdom have education, health and care plans. The hon. Lady is quite right to say that the system is not working for children in Northern Ireland with special educational needs.

Emma Little Pengelly: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. That issue is under discussion. In the talks process, we are talking about a whole range of policies that could go into a programme for government, and one of those must be the reform of educational provision, particularly for those with special educational needs. I have been fighting very hard for that, and I think there is consensus across all the parties, but we need the Northern Ireland Assembly back to get that in place.

I speak to many teachers and, in particular, headteachers. Their budgets are under incredible pressure. I know that the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs has taken evidence on the issue, but it needs to be resolved. Schools are crying out for financial help. That is the type of issue that DUP Members of the Legislative Assembly, and MLAs right across Northern Ireland, want to talk about.

Often in Northern Ireland, particularly at this time of year, politicians get criticised for talking about flags and bonfires. I and the vast majority of people I know agree that those issues need to be addressed, but what we want to talk about and focus on is education, public services, affordable childcare and tackling health issues. At the moment, we are prevented from doing so meaningfully, because those issues are, on the whole, devolved and there is no Northern Ireland Assembly.

We do not have 30 hours’ free childcare in Northern Ireland. Just before the collapse of the Assembly, work was under way to introduce a comprehensive affordable childcare programme, but that does not help parents in Northern Ireland at the moment who cannot access the same support, tailored for Northern Ireland, that people get across the rest of the United Kingdom. These urgent issues are impacting on hard-working families, whose household budgets are really feeling the pressure.

On health, we have a GP crisis. I was not feeling that well last week and phoned up my GP. I was told that the waiting time for an appointment was two weeks. Frankly, I felt that by then I would hopefully be feeling okay. There is a GP crisis across Northern Ireland; we do not have enough of them, practices are under huge pressure, and waiting lists are growing. It is the same across the entire health service. We need decisions made on the budget, and health transformation that will fundamentally tackle our huge waiting lists. People come to my constituency surgeries and my constituency office with letters saying that it will be two or three years before they can access a pain clinic and get some help.

I want to challenge the idea that those issues do not relate to rights. These are fundamental rights. What about the person on a cancer waiting list? What about their fundamental right to life when, because there is no Northern Ireland Assembly, they are sitting on a waiting
list and could well die before they get the intervention they require? This is rights denied—rights to basic public services. That is wrong, and it must be addressed. There is a party denying rights in Northern Ireland across health, education and fundamental support for ordinary human beings, and that party is Sinn Féin.

**Bob Stewart:** The hon. Lady is making a really good speech. What pressure is building up in Sinn Féin? What is happening in Sinn Féin constituencies? Is there any evidence of what is happening in Sinn Féin constituencies areas? All the problems she outlines must be replicated there, so what pressure are Sinn Féin MLAs facing from their own constituents? It must be just as powerful as what is happening in South Belfast.

**Emma Little Pengelly:** I thank the hon. Member for that contribution. I do not see what happens in Sinn Féin constituency offices, but I can only imagine that the issues of health, education, poverty and the need for basic public services are the same right across the community. It does not matter if you are Protestant, Catholic, nationalist, Unionist, new incoming or ethnic minority—the needs are the same. Everybody is suffering from Sinn Féin’s decision to continue to refuse to allow the Northern Ireland Assembly to be restored. I hope that they are hearing the message loud and clear: come to the table, come to a sensible and fair agreement, and get Stormont back up and working for the people of Northern Ireland.

There are a couple of other issues I want to touch on. I do not want to speak for too long, so I will go through them very quickly. There are some key pressure points. All political parties have heard representations in relation to the social security mitigation package. We put in place a number of mitigations in terms of welfare reform. The Northern Ireland Assembly agreed that the NIA budget would pay for that. If a decision is not made, upwards of 40,000 people will have bills coming through their doors or much-needed help withdrawn. The package requires legislation, and so, under the terms of the Bill, cannot be implemented by the permanent secretaries. If the legislation is not passed by September, 40,000-plus people will be considerably worse off. This is a real issue that will impact on real people in need.

I was very much involved in setting up the Historical Institutional Abuse inquiry. I sat on the project board, along with Sinn Féin, when we worked on the legislation. I sat on the project board with Sinn Féin whenever we looked at implementation. We looked at inquiries across the world and one of the things we decided to do was put a date in the legislation for the inquiry to report. We did that because we did not want the inquiry to roll forward for years and years. We built in flexibility so that the chair of the inquiry could come back and request more time, but we knew, right from the passing of the initial legislation, the date the inquiry was due to report. I sat on the project board with Sinn Féin while we liaised throughout the duration of that inquiry. I think it was about two weeks before the report was due—the chair of the inquiry had made it clear to all members of the project board, including Sinn Féin, that the report was on time—when Sinn Féin chose to collapse the Assembly.

There were two big outstanding issues: the budget for Northern Ireland and the HIA report. Before Sinn Féin collapsed the Assembly, I made an issue to Sinn Féin. I said to the then Finance Minister, “Look, there are these two issues. You can choose to collapse the Assembly, we can’t stop you from doing that, but what is the necessity about time? We can take these two weeks and pass a budget to support public services. We can wait for the HIA inquiry to report.” It decided not to.

We have now moved on. This is not about the politics; we want and need those victims to get support. This issue requires legislation and that is being held up because there is no Northern Ireland Assembly.

**Sammy Wilson:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point about Sinn Féin refusing to bring forward a budget before collapsing the Assembly. The reason for that was that it could not face up to the hard decisions required to bring forward a budget. Is that not another reason why Sinn Féin is resisting going into the Assembly at the moment? It does not want to bring forward a budget. It would much prefer somebody else to do the hard lifting, rather than take the hard decisions that politicians have to take.

**Emma Little Pengelly:** I believe that the last Sinn Féin Finance Minister—I think it was perhaps the first Sinn Féin Finance Minister of our devolved Government—has the rather dubious title of being the Finance Minister who did not bring forward a budget, which was his core duty. Yes, of course there are difficult decisions to be made in a budget. There are serious questions to ask as to why he did not hit the deadline and did not bring forward those proposals.

There are many other issues I could reference. We do not have the high street fund in Northern Ireland. That money comes into our budget as what is referred to as a non-ring-fenced or unhypothecated Barnett consequential. We cannot force permanent secretaries to dedicate the money for that cause or for other projects for our economy such as the Streets Ahead programme.

I want briefly to mention the victims’ pension issue, which is associated with legacy. Over the course of the past week, I met the Victims’ Commissioner and many victims who were horrendously injured during the troubles. Those victims are now getting older and have particular issues with their finances. They do not have work-related pensions, because they did not have access to the workplace. They need this help and support. Again, that requires legislation and it has not been brought forward. There are many, many victims across Northern Ireland who require additional support.

I want to pay tribute to Bea Wharton, who was buried today. She was the last remaining mother of the Kingsmills victims. She was an incredibly strong and passionate woman who fought right up until her last breath to try to get justice for her son and the other victims of that terrible, terrible sectarian atrocity. I want to pay tribute to her and her family at this very difficult time. She was in her early 90s when she passed away. She fought every day of her life for justice, but justice was denied. Victims and survivors need that support.

The DUP cares passionately about Northern Ireland and the future of Northern Ireland. We want Northern Ireland to thrive. We want our young people to have an incredible future, with good jobs and a strong economy where people are happy and healthy. The best way to do that is to get back to work. Sinn Féin can do that tomorrow morning. Drop the silliness, get back to work and let us talk about these issues, while we deliver basic public services for the people of Northern Ireland. That is what the people of Northern Ireland want. That is what the people of Northern Ireland deserve.
Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): I have spoken only on rare occasions about Northern Ireland since ceasing to be shadow Secretary of State in 2015. That is not because I do not care or feel indifferent to a place and people that I grew to have a great deal of affection for. It is partially because I believe that it is right to allow one’s successors the space to shape their positions, but if I am honest, it is also because of my sheer exasperation with the failure of Northern Ireland’s politicians to show leadership.

The silent majority of people across the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland have had enough of the blame game and name-calling. They want their politicians to do the job that they are elected to do and are paid for: to reconstitute the Executive and the Assembly. That would be the responsible thing for politicians to do in any democracy, but in a society emerging from conflict, the stakes are perpetually higher. In a vacuum, the extremists, rejectionists and terrorists exploit instability at every opportunity. I did not use the term “post-conflict”, because that is not appropriate in a society that is not only still nursing the traumatic wounds of its past, but held back by a decade of austerity.

So why are we here again seeking neither to reconstitute the Executive and Assembly nor to impose direct rule? Frankly, it is because neither of the two largest parties are willing to make the compromises that are so essential in any power-sharing system—a commitment to brave and uncomfortable compromises, which existed not so long ago on all sides, to deliver an end to bloody conflict and create a peace process that, for all its imperfections, has stood the test of time.

Brexit is inevitably a major obstacle to progress when Sinn Féin and the DUP hold such polar opposite views. As an ardent campaigner to remain, I believe that the result of the referendum must be respected and implemented. I also believe that leaving with no deal would be a massive risk to the economy of the United Kingdom, but I believe, too, that—as some hon. Members have said—the south of Ireland would be the biggest loser from such an outcome. I say gently to some of my friends in the DUP that the people of Northern Ireland in no way gave them a mandate to become fully paid-up members of the European Research Group.

If we are to see progress, it is also important to recognise that other issues that pre-date Brexit are salient to the current stalemate. Brexit is not the only reason why we have this stalemate. As hon. Members have said, and I know this from first-hand experience, Sinn Féin is unwilling to make any of the difficult budgetary decisions required of all political leaders in any society dealing with finite resources. It wants to be purist and free to pursue its political ambitions in the south. This means opposing all cuts. If it was part of the leadership in Northern Ireland, it would have to make difficult choices. This could be used against it in the south. Nobody should underestimate the power of that reason in terms of Sinn Féin’s current position.

I am sad to say that the DUP, despite its domination of the Unionist vote, is unwilling to make compromises on some issues that would undoubtedly upset its base.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I know that when the hon. Gentleman was the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, he earnestly engaged with and sincerely considered the views of all parties in Northern Ireland, and he dealt with us all very honourably. However, if he has been listening to the course of this debate, does he not recognise that in August 2017, we did compromise? We said then, “Set up the institutions and we will legislate for the Irish language,” yet it was rebuffed in 26 minutes. I am disappointed to hear that he has not factored that into his speech, but he cannot claim that we were not prepared to compromise, nor are we still today.

Mr Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman, for whom I have a great deal of respect, for his very kind remarks about my period as shadow Secretary of State. Of course, I accept that during this long journey of stalemate, there has been a willingness to make some compromises, but it really does not ring true to say that the reason that we are in this position today is exclusively the responsibility of one party or the other. That is simply factually untrue. If he allows me to continue with my speech, I will cite some other reasons why we have been unable to make progress.

This is a crucial message to the DUP: good leadership may be the ability to motivate core supporters, but there is a difference between good and great leadership. Great leadership is a willingness to sometimes say difficult things to one’s own supporters. That is the case throughout history, and in fact, the DUP and other political parties in Northern Ireland in the past have been willing to do so.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman will remember very well his visit to my constituency and particularly to the community groups in Newtownards. He will also recall that they were very much opposed to the Irish language becoming a political tool in the process. When it comes to reflecting that public opinion in Strangford and elsewhere, I do so every day because that is what my constituents tell me. We should not ignore our constituents or try to push them in a way that they do not want to go.

Mr Lewis: I have massive respect for the hon. Gentleman—we agree on so many things—but there are occasions when politicians and leaders need to say to their followers and their base, “Actually, we need to do things differently in the pursuit of a bigger cause.” I accept that if the gap grows to such an extent between a politician and the people who support them, it will inevitably lead to the demise of that politician, so it is a difficult calibration to achieve in any dynamic in terms of political relationships. However, all the great changes that have been made through political history have required, at one time or another, politicians to say difficult things to their supporters, particularly in cases of conflict, war, terrorism and a lack of stability. I do not think that the Irish language Act even featured in the conversations I had when I visited the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, because, as others have said, that is not the burning issue of the day for any section of the population in Northern Ireland, to be frank. The issues are jobs, education, health or opportunities. It is wrong to say that the Irish language Act is the be-all and end-all for the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, let alone the other community.

Jim Shannon: We have be honest about the position in Northern Ireland and look at the facts. Nationalist people and nationalist parties do want the Irish language Act. The Unionist people we represent do not see it as...
the burning issue. The hon. Gentleman is right: health, education, roads and jobs are the key issues, but the nationalist parties see that as their key issue and their No. 1 priority.

Mr Lewis: I do not personally believe that that is a burning issue compared with other issues in the nationalist community either, if we are honest about the discussions that we have with them. I was not going to mention this in my speech, but I will say it to the hon. Gentleman: when I was the shadow Secretary of State, I was very proud to have commissioned the Heenan-Anderson commission. Deirdre Heenan and Colin Anderson did a serious piece of work on tackling social injustice and inequality in Northern Ireland—the breeding ground of sectarianism and division. If Northern Ireland does not tackle the lack of social justice and the lack of equality, it will be the breeding ground for the alienated and disenfranchised younger generation. This was not a party political or ideological document. It is sad that no political party has seized on that document—which did not just identify the scale of the problem, but came up with some very practical, tangible solutions—and sought to engage with Deirdre Heenan, Colin Anderson and all the stakeholders in business and civil society who participated in that process to see whether some of its recommendations can be implemented.

Let me move on with my speech—I was recounting some of the factors that have caused the current stalemate. One that I do not think is mentioned often enough is the fact that the UK and Irish Governments have struggled to fulfil their honest broker role since 2010. Tory-led Governments in the UK have needed DUP support to govern, informally in the coalition period and subsequently openly in the form of a confidence and supply arrangement. This has had an impact not just on Brexit but on the willingness of the Westminster Government to apply any serious pressure on the DUP to compromise.

By the way, this is a very important point: I do not condemn the Government or the DUP for the relationship that they have developed. How could I, because this is not just about politics or ideology. It is about the fact that a Secretary of State level, unwilling to exercise the political pressure for compromise that was exercised in the past. That is just a statement of fact. The progress in Northern Ireland was largely a consequence of the honest broker role that the Government in the south and the Government in Westminster played during that period, and the change in that dynamic here has undoubtedly had an impact.

A change in dynamic has made a difference in the south as well. In the south, Sinn Féin is now a serious political challenger to the two leading parties. This inevitably changes the nature of the relationship and inhibits the trust between the Government in the south and Sinn Féin that has been so important to progress in the past. It is not credible to deny that those massive changes in political dynamic have had an impact on the ability to get the parties to compromise.

David Simpson: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned Sinn Féin. Would he accept that Sinn Féin’s results at the last election in the Republic were nothing short of disastrous?

Mr Lewis: I have enough problems expressing opinions on the state of politics in the UK without intruding on private grief in the south of Ireland. I am not really qualified to judge. I would say this to the hon. Gentleman: there is no doubt that a massive factor in Sinn Féin’s unwillingness to participate in government in Northern Ireland is its unwillingness to make tough and difficult decisions because in the south of Ireland it wants to give the impression that such decisions are not required. If it participated in government in the north of Ireland, it would have to be part of making such difficult decisions.

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Gentleman is making some excellent points. Does he agree that with the prospect of a general election looming in southern Ireland, Sinn Féin will not get back round the Assembly table until after that election, because it would affect its electoral chances? We are making concessions for it here and holding out hope of it getting back round the table, but the southern Ireland scenario is affecting its behaviour.

Mr Lewis: The hon. Lady is probably absolutely right. It is realpolitik. If Sinn Féin is consistent in how it has behaved over several years now, it will not make any move to help reconstitute the Executive and the Assembly until the election in the south of Ireland is done and dusted. The hon. Lady makes a fair point.

I want to raise a final factor that I think has changed the dynamic. It will be uncomfortable for some, and some will not agree, but it is a factor that should not
be underestimated. I had the benefit of working with some of the individuals concerned. Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness, however people might have disagreed with them, in their roles as First and Deputy First Ministers were leaders of calibre and pragmatism. I do not believe that such leadership exists at the present time.

I now want to turn to issues that are inevitably divisive and that other Members have touched upon.

Gavin Robinson: Unlike the rest of your speech!

Mr Lewis: They cannot be put on hold forever. Equal marriage and abortion generate strong feelings in all societies, but this is especially the case where religion has played such a central role in a sectarian divide. I do not support those in the House who want to use the current political stalemate to impose solutions from Westminster, but courageous leadership from the Government would mean using this period to allow the people of Northern Ireland to make their voices heard on these issues. The Government should bring forward legislation to hold one referendum covering abortion and equal marriage, and they should be consistent. As with Brexit, they should commit to introducing the necessary legislation if the people of Northern Ireland chose to vote for change.

I understand those who argue that these issues are about fundamental human rights and therefore should not be subject to a referendum, and I also understand why people may be a little cautious about referendums on anything in the present climate, but there is currently no other credible way forward or one that can achieve a solution in the foreseeable future on these issues, which are so divisive. I believe in universal human rights, including the right to religious freedom, but I also believe—this is very important—that societies scarred by conflict require very delicate handling. Wading into these issues as though Northern Ireland is simply like anywhere else misses an important point about societies emerging from conflict.

Conor McGinn: Sure, what would I know about it?

Mr Lewis: The hon. Gentleman is entitled to his position. Other people who know as much as he does have an entirely different opinion.

Conor McGinn: I would make two points. First, the hon. Gentleman’s constituents in Bury and mine in St Helens who are gay did not have to win a referendum to be able to marry the person they love. Secondly, I gave a lot of thought to my amendment on same-sex marriage and to the sensitivities in Northern Ireland. I do not claim to be an expert in any way, shape or form, but I have considered the matter very carefully.

Mr Lewis: I do not dispute the fact that the hon. Gentleman, in every intervention he has made on Northern Ireland over a very long period—it is his home, not mine—has sought to be sensitive. A referendum is not the ideal solution, but to those who believe in gay marriage and believe that the rules on abortion need to be changed and brought into line with those in the rest of the UK, I would say that that will not be achieved by these amendments, given the parliamentary arithmetic.

My solution provides an opportunity to achieve a breakthrough that cannot be achieved otherwise, given this perpetual debate and stalemate around the Executive and Assembly and given the parliamentary maths.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I do not necessarily agree with the hon. Gentleman’s position, but in his defence a referendum would at least refer the issue back to the people of Northern Ireland. It would be perceived as immensely arrogant were the House to dictate to the people of Northern Ireland on subjects that we have already acknowledged across the House are extremely sensitive.

Mr Lewis: I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. This should constitutionally be a matter for the people of Northern Ireland. We should not disregard the history of Northern Ireland or the nature of the sensitivities and the fragility that prevail. Too many people refer to Northern Ireland as a post-conflict society. That means ticking boxes saying, “It’s resolved, it’s all sorted, Northern Ireland has moved on.” Anybody who lives in Northern Ireland or cares about it knows that that is not the case. The hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) understands that better than anyone. When we consider these issues, we have to take account of those realities.

I understand that my solution will not be supported by many. Campaigners will say, “We believe in universal human rights, and anything other than that is a dilution of our principles.” However, in the current climate, given the parliamentary maths and the stalemate over the Assembly and the Executive, there will no gay marriage or changes in the abortion law in Northern Ireland. That is a fact. We can table as many amendments as we want in this place, but that is the reality, as is the position of the current Government. I therefore suggest that the Government take a brave and courageous step, and, in respect of these sensitive issues, give serious consideration to the option of a referendum. As part of that, they would have to commit themselves to legislation to enact the outcome of the referendum, if it required legislative change.

I will support the Government tonight because I believe this to be the least worst solution, but there needs to be a wake-up call for the leading parties in Northern Ireland. They think that the regrettable failure of leadership can go on for ever because they dominate the vote in their respective communities—that is the political reality of Northern Ireland—but around the world, the certainties of elites and establishments are being shattered. We are seeing Brexit in our own country, and we saw Donald Trump defeat Hillary Clinton. Those are two examples of the crumbling of elites and establishments who thought that they were in the ascendancy.

If the current leaders continue to fail in their duty to run Northern Ireland, they may wake up one morning to find that the silent majority of Unionists and nationalists has been raised in support of credible alternatives. That may be hard to believe, but never say never in the context of the current turbulence around the world. Northern Ireland should and can have a great future, but its people are being let down by its leaders. Victims of violence and institutional abuse are being given neither justice nor closure, and too many young people are being left behind because austerity means that too many of the promises of the peace process have not been delivered.
Let me point out to the Secretary of State that as a consequence of austerity, the investment that Northern Ireland should have had following the peace process has not been delivered to the level at which it should have been delivered, despite some of the deals that have been done with, specifically, the Democratic Unionist party. Overall, the people running Northern Ireland have not received the peace dividend that they were promised because of austerity, and that needs to be taken into account in future budgetary decisions about Northern Ireland.

It is sad that politics is sharpening the sectarian divide when it should be healing and weakening the divides of the past. The silent majority in Northern Ireland deserve better. It is time that politicians on all sides did their duty, and put the people of Northern Ireland first.

8.12 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis). When I intervened on him, I reflected on his tenure as shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and spoke warmly about him and, despite his speech, I meant it. I have to say, however, that a number of contributions this evening have been jaundiced and negative about the political situation in Northern Ireland, have been warped politically, have not taken account of contributions in the House, have not taken account of commitments made publicly, and have not taken account of the rational, sincere and at times politically difficult and contentious positions that we adopt to resolve issues at home in Northern Ireland.

In her excellent speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) referred to times throughout the last 10 years when we did everything to sustain government in Northern Ireland. I had been in the House for about three months when the IRA shot dead a constituent of mine, Kevin McGuigan, who lived in Short Strand. He was killed by an organisation that had been, to that day, living in Short Strand. He was killed by an organisation to which we refer—and I am referring to Sinn Féin. We stand up to those who sell drugs in our communities and destroy our communities.

There was a huge crisis in Northern Ireland, and the Ulster Unionist party walked out of government having decided that enough was enough. However, we knew that, should we do the same thing and should the Assembly fall, it would be incredibly difficult to put it together again, so we stood our ground. We went through a very unifying process of rolling resignations to keep the institutions alive, while at the same time seeking from, and gaining from, the Chief Constable security assessments that gave us the courage and faith to continue.

We could easily have walked away. We could easily have thrown up our constituents, and the entire society of Northern Ireland, into an abyss. But we did not do it because we believe in devolution, we believe in power sharing and we believe that, no matter how difficult it may become and how diametrically opposed we may be to our neighbours in Northern Ireland, there is value in the existence of democratically electable institutions in Northern Ireland and huge merit in the existence of an engaged political class—a forum in which people can present their issues and seek resolutions.

We all recognise that, in politics, we must turn up here day after day. We do not get everything that we want, but we must try, we must present positive arguments and we must champion causes in our communities. That is why I found it depressing to hear the hon. Member for Bury South say that there was a failure of leadership. There are politicians in this place who are not prepared to tell their own people what they need to hear, but my colleagues and I put ourselves in difficult situations every day doing just that, and I have to say that representatives of the other side of the community put themselves in dangerous situations every day doing just that. From a position of leadership, we are saying what is right—recognising the political parameters in which we work and recognising the positions that we hold, but doing just that.

When 1,800 tyres were removed from a bonfire yesterday in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South, we could easily have hidden from those who thought that it was a good idea to burn tyres and pollute our community. We could easily have stood back and said, “These are all very difficult issues and we cannot resolve them.” But we do not do that in these circumstances because it is important not to. We stand up to those who threaten violence in our communities against our communities. We stand up to those who sell drugs in our communities and destroy our communities.

We are not afraid to take positions of leadership when that is required. And—as I mentioned in an intervention that was quickly dismissed—we are not afraid of compromise either. That is not a dirty word. It is not wrong to recognise that other people have an aspiration that is different from one’s own.

However, we cannot set aside competing aspirations either. We should not be here this evening, but the thrust of this debate and the reason for the Bill is the fact that we are faced with a political situation in which one party, whether we in this Chamber like it or not, has decided that if it does not get what it wants, it will pick up the ball and walk off the pitch.

It was encouraging to hear the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) talk about a coalition of the willing. One of the key strands of the talks in which we have been engaging is the sustainability of the institutions. She mentioned that there was some muttering of “That is not power sharing” from the Benches in front of me. Who says that it is not power sharing? Why can we not have a coalition of the willing across the community divide—across the sectarian divide—which recognises that people come from different traditions, but want to share things?

We do not have power sharing at the moment. We have a refusal to share power and, when one party does it, the entire society of Northern Ireland suffers. That is not right. That is not sustainable government. That is not a basis for progress. I have to say that if, over the forthcoming days, weeks or months, we end up with a talks process that has not produced a change in the way in which the system operates, and has not told the public at large that this cannot happen again and never again can institutions be brought down at the behest of one party because it does not get what it wants, that talks process will have failed.

Similarly, I am not going to spend a lot of time talking about amendments that may or may not be selected tomorrow, but, just as I would be critical of the
contribution by the hon. Member for Bury South—he is not alone in this—I also have critical comments to make of the shadow Secretary of State. I am sorry to say that. I am sorry to reflect this evening that, over the course of 21 years of a peace process in this country, the Government and the loyal Opposition have always stepped in tune, have always walked together, have recognised sometimes that decisions are being made that do not suit or are not quite palatable, but recognised that that is in the best interests of society in Northern Ireland, yet over the course of this Bill what we see are amendments that are purely partisan.

If this was about rights, there are more than one or two issues. If it was about progress, there are other issues to be progressed. But I do find it a little rich when we are engaged in trying to restore devolution in Northern Ireland that we have politicians in this Chamber who think it is their duty to cherry-pick, to virtue-signal and to pluck out a couple of issues here and there that they wish to progress, to the exclusion of all others. It does not need to be repeated ad nauseam because my colleagues have mentioned the litany of issues that we need to see progressed in Northern Ireland, yet they do not feature. If it is about coercion, which is what the hon. Member for Bury South was getting to, to encourage us to get back into talks, I think it is counterproductive. If it is about changing the rationale of other parties in Northern Ireland, those who tabled these amendments should not have been so selective. Is there one amendment being proposed by that side of the Opposition Benches that is going to cause difficulty for Sinn Féin or nationalism? There is not one. This is partisan and regressive. It turns back the tide of 21 years of constructive contributions from both Government and Her Majesty’s Opposition.

I do not suggest that Northern Ireland politics are easy or that everyone should agree with my view. I started my speech in that vein but, if we respect devolution and if we want to see the institutions up and running and take decisions on the issues that we can, the only people who are preventing progress on the issue of same-sex marriage are Sinn Féin. They could have the Stormont Assembly restored tomorrow. They could have its first plenary session—not to put anyone under pressure during their holidays—on 1 September and the first thing they could pass is a motion on same-sex marriage. But they are not facilitating, agreeing or permitting a restoration of those institutions. They say it is a political request that they are preventing progress on the issue of same-sex marriage. But they are not doing the things that I think are important, from a position of leadership, yet I still think it is the right thing to do. The same is true of my constituent Sarah Ewart, who I am sure will get mentioned. She is the most lovely lady who has had a most horrendous time. She is seeking a political answer to an issue that has dogged her personally for the last number of years, with no success. I think that she believes and hopes that she will get an answer through the courts in September. I think she believes that it is appropriate that such issues are dealt with locally. But I am not going to frustrate the political aspirations of others. They can put them forward but, if they respect devolution, if they believe that what I and my colleagues are engaged in in the talks has a purpose, and if they want to put us to the test, let us do it. But do not cherry-pick on a partisan basis.

I want to make just two brief points. I should not be here discussing this this evening. I should be in my constituency—although knowing we have parliamentary duties—dealing with some of the contentious issues that are being raised around bonfires and community tension. I mentioned the removal of tyres from a bonfire last night in Belfast South. I was pleased to see voluntary action this evening by some of the bonfires in east Belfast to remove tyres and pollutants from our community. These are sensitive issues. At the same time, I will have people criticising me and wanting to drag me through the streets to say I do not stand up for the right to have a most lovely lady who has had a most horrendous time. Ewart, who I am sure will get mentioned. She is the most lovely lady who has had a most horrendous time.

Conor McGinn: The hon. Gentleman knows I have a great deal of respect and affection for him. I am sure he would want to clarify that he is not suggesting for a moment that any of the amendments proposed by me or colleagues on the Opposition Front Bench are at the behest of Sinn Féin. On same-sex marriage, I have worked very closely with the Love Equality coalition and with representatives from all political parties, including, I might add, his own.

Gavin Robinson: For the avoidance of doubt, let me assuage the hon. Gentleman’s concerns—although in the context of this exchange, I am not sure “affection” was the appropriate word, but I will take it in the spirit in which it was offered. I know the hon. Gentleman’s sincerity on the amendment he is putting forward and I also know the sincerity of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) on the issue that she put forward. I did not mention either of them when I was making my remarks. It was the Front Bench that I was focusing on and its amendments. I am not going to frustrate anybody’s ability to table an amendment in this place. It is not my position to do so.

I engage with Love Equality. I got castigated for accepting a petition from them. They know my position and I know their position. I see no difficulty whatsoever in engaging positively and constructively. I get criticised for doing the things that I think are important, from a position of leadership, yet I still think it is the right thing to do. The same is true of my constituent Sarah Ewart, who I am sure will get mentioned. She is the most lovely lady who has had a most horrendous time. She is seeking a political answer to an issue that has dogged her personally for the last number of years, with no success. I think that she believes and hopes that she will get an answer through the courts in September. I think she believes that it is appropriate that such issues are dealt with locally. But I am not going to frustrate the political aspirations of others. They can put them forward but, if they respect devolution, if they believe that what I and my colleagues are engaged in in the talks has a purpose, and if they want to put us to the test, let us do it. But do not cherry-pick on a partisan basis.

Lady Hermon: It is awkwardly kind of the hon. Gentleman to give way; I am extremely grateful to him. May I take him back to his constituent Sarah Ewart, who is a most remarkable and very courageous lady? What will happen when the Supreme Court rules in the autumn? It has already indicated and Lord Kerr, a former Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland, made obiter remarks last year in the case taken by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission that the abortion legislation in Northern Ireland is deeply unsatisfactory. If the Supreme Court rules in favour of Sarah Ewart, will not the United Kingdom Government and this House have an obligation to bring our legislation in Northern Ireland into line with our human rights obligations?

Gavin Robinson: Of course, if there is a finding of incompatibility, a declaration will be issued to that effect and the requirement will lie on the United Kingdom Government to consider that declaration of incompatibility; that is a statement of fact.
I, like the four speakers before me, stood up and said I was not going to speak for long and I have no intention of speaking for much longer because there are contributions to be made tomorrow on the specifics of whatever amendments are selected. But I want to draw the Minister’s mind back to the engagements that we had during the passage of the rates and budget Bill and to raise an issue that will not feature; it is not politically sexy or attractive. It is not an issue that people spend a lot of time thinking of. But I have raised it continually: the re-designation of housing associations and co-ownership.

One small, discrete issue that has a huge, meaningful impact on communities in Northern Ireland is that, because of the lack of Stormont, we have not reclassified our housing associations and the co-ownership scheme in Northern Ireland cannot avail itself of financial transaction capital. It cannot avail itself of the funds necessary to continue. The Minister made a commitment that the Government would legislate to rectify this small anomaly but, if that does not happen prior to the recess, 11% of all first-time purchasers who could avail of themselves of co-ownership support will be unable to do so, and those who are starting life or at the lower end of the social spectrum will not have access to the finance required for their own home, unlike in the past when we have had £127 million of property purchases. I ask the Minister to give some assurance that a resolution will be found on this small but discrete issue. It is something that would not ordinarily trouble Parliament.

It should have been resolved long ago and it will come to a head in the next number of weeks. The commitment was there. I would like to see progress on this.

8.29 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) in paying tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) and for Ealing North (Stephen Pound); the latter is sitting on the Front Bench. I have known him a very long time. I shall always be incredibly grateful for his support and enthusiasm in teaching me the power of the woggle, the necker and small children to effect great change in this country. He will be missed by many in this House, because he is a great friend of scouting.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Members for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) for setting out so clearly and emotively the passion that people feel at this time and for talking about it from a constituency perspective. Sometimes in this place people forget just how powerfully we feel, because of how we spend our lives. I hate it when people talk about politicians being out of touch, because we do nothing but be in touch, whatever political party we represent. We live, breathe and feel the frustrations of our constituents, and we are all here tonight because we feel their frustration that this piece of legislation was put forward six months ago as a temporary stopgap in the hope that progress could somehow be made. It was suggested that it was a necessary evil.

I am pleased that the Government have recognised that they should not try to suggest that this new piece of legislation is just a narrow, small change in the date, when what it is doing is extending those quite substantial powers to make legislation and change the law in Northern Ireland that were given six months ago on what was presumed to be a temporary basis. The Bill requires scrutiny; I particularly contest its powers around statutory instruments, which we know have been controversial in other areas of policy. Indeed, many of us have already sat on Statutory Instrument Committees about making direct change in Northern Ireland. We need to scrutinise not just the date, but the use of those statutory instrument powers. I am also conscious that the civil servants have said that they feel uncomfortable about the position they have been put in and about the fact that this legislation has been pushed through Parliament as an emergency measure, when, as people have said, we are now looking at three years without any change in the situation in Stormont.

I have been working on the Back Benches with colleagues in every other party—except the DUP at the moment—on these issues because we recognise that there are two sides of the coin. This relates particularly to the amendments that I want to support tomorrow. The human rights issues that they raise go to section 26 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which charged this place with the responsibility to uphold our international obligations, even when there was an Assembly in Northern Ireland.

It is important for those of us who are proud of devolution, of being able to give power to people and of ensuring that they can exercise it, that we recognise the check and balance that this place provides in that process. Section 26 speaks precisely to that when it comes to human rights.

There is a specific definition of human rights. It is not about a single policy area; it is about a set of rules and obligations that we as the United Kingdom have signed up to for generations, and now find that we particularly need to uphold. This relates to a woman’s right to choose what happens to her body and to a person’s right to choose to marry who they love and have that recognised. Human rights speak to basic freedoms—not the freedom to do what we want, but the freedom to be who we are without feeling that that makes us second-class citizens. These are core freedoms that each of us has come into this place to uphold. They are issues on which we need to work together.

Ian Paisley: I understand the hon. Lady’s position, although it is very different from mine. Does she recognise that there is not a right to terminate an unborn life under the European convention on human rights?

Stella Creasy: I recognise that the hon. Gentleman and I are on different sides of this, but if he will forgive me, I will come to the international obligations that we as a country have signed up to that I believe are relevant in considering this Bill. This Bill allows for action in the absence of an Assembly, but it does not absolve us of our responsibility to comply with international obligations.

Sir John Hayes: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Stella Creasy: If the right hon. Gentleman will allow me, I will make a little progress and then happily take an intervention from him.

For me, there is a simple point. This weekend, many of us will have proudly celebrated Pride. We will have seen the rainbow flag and talked about the importance of standing up for the rights of gays, lesbians and transgender people across the world. We have seen persecution in...
Chechnya and in Europe under the Orbán legislation, and we have stood up and said that we as a nation want to be a beacon. We have even said that we should kick countries out of the Commonwealth that do not uphold gay rights. There was an outcry in this country when people saw legislation introduced in Alabama under which doctors are prosecuted for performing abortions, while Georgia is saying that no woman can have an abortion later than six weeks, by which time most women do not even realise that they might be pregnant.

There is a simple rule for those of us who have been consistent—as I hope that the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) would recognise that many of us have been—whether we have fought the global gag rule, or stood up for the importance of international development investment in maternity healthcare. We cannot argue that we are beacons of human rights around the world if we do not get our own house in order. We are told consistently by the international agencies that we have signed up to that we have introduced proposals to try to address the gap, so women in Northern Ireland—the right to have a safe, legal and local abortion later than six weeks, by which time most women do not even realise that they might be pregnant.

I was at the Council of Europe two weeks ago, when the Government were boasting about being about to ratify the Istanbul convention on violence against women, but the legislation that the Government have introduced to try to do that will not even cover Northern Ireland. The Bill before us will not deal with the gap, so women in Northern Ireland will not have protection from stalking. They do not have coercive control legislation, and will not get the support of the domestic violence commissioners, yet the Istanbul convention is a piece of international legislation that we have signed up to and committed to. We have said that it speaks to our support for human rights.

On abortion in Northern Ireland, in the years since we had an Assembly, we have been directly criticised by the United Nations. The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has explicitly said that the UK cannot invoke its internal arrangements to justify its failure to revise the Northern Ireland laws that violate the convention by denying women in Northern Ireland the same rights as women in my constituency of Walthamstow or the Minister’s constituency: the right to have a safe, legal and local abortion.

Sir John Hayes: Now that the hon. Lady has made progress, let me deal with the two points that she has raised that I want to contradict. First, as the hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) said, it is highly debatable whether abortion falls into the category of rights that she has described. Indeed, people such as Professor Mark Hill, QC, contradict that view. Secondly, in any case, as she will know, the legislation that underpinned devolution in 1998 largely devolves matters of international obligation to the Northern Ireland people, so if even she thinks this is a right, it is a right that should be decided upon by the people to whom we have devolved power, else devolution means nothing.

Stella Creasy: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I gently suggest that he goes back and reads section 26 of the 1998 Act, which explicitly does not do what he says it does. It explicitly says—[Interruption.]

With respect, I listened to him; I hope he will listen to me, because this is the debate that we need to have about this legislation. I have listened to him—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Lady has the right to respond to the intervention.

Stella Creasy: The 1998 Act explicitly says that the Westminster Parliament retains responsibility for upholding those international obligations.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked about the concept of abortion as a human right. I understand that he has quoted a QC, but again I would point him to those international bodies, including the Vienna convention, that say that we cannot absolve ourselves of those international obligations through our internal arrangements, and the UN Committee against Torture, which just this month said that the situation in Northern Ireland was “likely to result in severe pain and suffering, such as when the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, when the life or health of the pregnant person is at risk and in cases of fatal fetal impairment.”

We are being explicitly challenged on human rights, and there are grounds in the Istanbul convention—[Interruption.] The right hon. Gentleman shakes his head. Above all else, this Bill is about how we help to ensure that people in Northern Ireland do not have the current gap. We need to say that those international obligations are equally our responsibility.

The right hon. Gentleman might disagree about those obligations, but he cannot deny that, right now, there is a gap on this very issue. That is why it is right that we have introduced proposals to try to address the gap, so that people in Northern Ireland are not put at a disadvantage. He shakes his head again. Perhaps he will listen to our Supreme Court, which has found that the situation in Northern Ireland is incompatible with article 8 of the European convention on human rights with respect to fatal foetal abnormalities and to women who become pregnant due to rape or incest. It said the law in Northern Ireland is “untenable” and needs “radical reconsideration”, as it treats women like “vehicles.”

The courts are looking to this Parliament, because the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 was passed by Westminster, so it needs to be dealt with by Westminster, which would need to enable the people of Northern Ireland, if the Assembly were back up and running, to craft their own laws on this issue. The right hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways. Either we take responsibility for the impact of UK-wide legislation crafted in this place and for the international human rights obligations that we as a Parliament have sworn to protect, or we say that it is okay to treat some of our people as second-class citizens and not give them the services we give to others.

Emma Little Pengelly: I think I raised this point in our previous debate. There is no barrier to the law changing in Northern Ireland. There has been some confusion on the idea that the law needs to change here to enable that to happen. It does not. Criminal law is fully devolved, so that can happen in Northern Ireland.
Stella Creasy: Let us be very clear. The reason why a woman in Northern Ireland who is raped, becomes pregnant and then seeks a termination faces a longer prison sentence than her attacker is because of the 1861 Act. It is because of that Act that, in November 2018, a mother faced a jail sentence because she sought abortion pills online to try to help her 15-year-old daughter, who was in an abusive relationship. This legislation is affecting the lives of UK citizens.

When these issues are not being dealt with due to the lack of an Assembly, and when the Government, who have sworn to fulfil these international obligations, are saying that we will just have a big exclusionary gap when it comes to Northern Ireland, what do we do as parliamentarians? We all swore to uphold the Good Friday agreement and joint equivalency.

Ian Paisley: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Stella Creasy: Thousands of citizens in Northern Ireland have emailed their MPs in support of change. Thousands of citizens in Northern Ireland have said, “Please don’t make us wait anymore,” just as thousands have said they want the right to love whom they love, to marry them and to have that recognised. We know people want change, and we know that, in 2016, 70% of people in Northern Ireland said that no woman should ever go to prison for having an abortion, but that is the situation we are in. We know that 65% of adults in Northern Ireland—

Ian Paisley: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Emma Little Pengelly: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Stella Creasy: I have listened, and I want to meet my obligation to not make a long speech—an obligation that we have all been trying to uphold this evening. I promise that I am coming to an end, and I have taken interventions.

Ian Paisley: We have until 10 o’clock.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Lady has indicated that she is coming to the end of her speech, so do not continually ask her to give way; she is clearly not going to, and she is quite right to say so. Although there is quite a lot of time, we do have other speakers to fit in.

Stella Creasy: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We also know that 66% of the public in Northern Ireland think that Westminster should reform the law in the absence of a devolved Government. This Bill deals with that absence and the unlikelihood of our ever getting an Assembly set up in the current situation. DUP Members have very clearly set out many of the frustrations that might be preventing that, but above all, that does not mean that the voices and rights—particularly human rights—of the people of Northern Ireland should play second fiddle to political frustrations.

If we have learned anything in this place, it is that when we put politics ahead of people, we all lose out. I am also talking about our ability to listen to the voices of women such as Sarah Ewart, who are looking for change—women who tell us that they could not go through another pregnancy because their last one nearly killed them in childbirth. We ask that every woman has the choice to not be forced to continue with an unwanted pregnancy. Women do not want to face prosecution because they stood up for their children.

Last year, 1,000 women travelled to England and Wales to get an abortion, but many more cannot travel; they might be in abusive relationships, they might have childcare issues or they might not be able to afford it. We have to remember that there is no right at all here, not even in instances of rape or fatal foetal abnormality. Current laws force women in Northern Ireland to carry a baby they know will not live. That cannot be a human right. That is torture, and we cannot keep waiting for the Assembly to deal with it. We do not expect citizens in England and Wales to go through a referendum on this; we cannot put that extra layer on the people of Northern Ireland in order for them to get their human rights.

If we take this course on the right not to be forced to continue an unwanted pregnancy, or the right to love whom we love, what other human rights will we sacrifice for political expediency? The right to life and liberty? The right to be free from slavery and torture? Freedom of opinion and expression? It is a slippery slope to start saying that the human rights obligations that we have signed up to do not matter when we write legislation. The amendments tomorrow and the ruse of those statutory instruments are crucial, and that is because of the words of Lyra McKee’s partner, Sara Canning, who said to the Prime Minister at Lyra’s funeral:

“I wanted her to know that Lyra and I had a right to be treated as equal citizens in our own country. Surely that’s not too much to ask?”

We can pass legislation about the powers of politics and the powers of this place, but fundamentally the power of this place cannot be to deny the basic human rights of our citizens. The people who live in Northern Ireland deserve the same human rights as the people who live in England and Wales. Either we are champions of human rights or we do not deserve to call ourselves parliamentarians.

8.47 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I promise to be brief, as a number of Members have done, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I hope we can get some points across. I am very disappointed that the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), for whom I have a great deal of respect, even though we disagree passionately on this issue, did not want to give way and engage in a debate on some issues, because there are important facts that need to be put on the record. First, it is important to say that no woman has gone to jail in Northern Ireland on the issue that the hon. Lady so passionately raised—it has not happened. It does not happen. Lots of things are on the statute but do not happen. Women are not regularly taken off to jail and imprisoned on these issues in Northern Ireland. It might happen in other parts of the world but it has not happened in Northern Ireland.

The last time the Assembly debated the important and sensitive matter of abortion and abortion rights was in 2016, when 59 of the Members present—an overwhelming majority—did not want to change the legislation in the way that the hon. Lady has argued for
and 40 Members did. A considerable difference in opinion existed but a clear majority were against the points that the hon. Lady passionately made and is rightly entitled to hold. Those points are not, however, supported across the community in Northern Ireland.

The one point I did raise with the hon. Lady, directly, in an intervention, was: is the right to terminate an unborn life a European convention right? Terminating the life of an unborn child is not a right, according to the European convention on human rights. People can wave other conventions, decrees and subsections of meetings that have occurred around the world involving other conventions and other groups, but the totem—the one we are all signed up to and the one that will stay in place after we leave the EU—the European convention on human rights, does not uphold this “right” or see the termination of the unborn life as a right.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Gentleman will know that our Supreme Court has determined that there is no general right to abortion, and in international law states are given considerable leeway about how they treat such matters. I could not reconcile any of that with a speech from the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). I appreciate her passion, but passion is no substitute for sense.

Ian Paisley: The other point I wish to make is about what my constituents in Northern Ireland want. What do the people of Northern Ireland want? It is right and proper to say that the Labour party fought valiantly up to 2003 to get in place an agreement to ensure that the Northern Ireland Assembly would take crucial, key and tough decisions. I must say, there were times when we disagreed with how the Labour party went about it, but ultimately Labour signed off on agreements that allowed for that to happen. I am disappointed that those on the Labour Front Bench have now decided that on certain issues they can have a pick-and-mix approach to what the Assembly should or should not do.

Labour party Front Benchers should be steadfast, at one with and—if it is not too pointed to say this week, as we go into the marching season—in step with the Conservative party and the Government of the day when it comes to making sure that we do not break the established convention, which is that on these issues there is agreement that the Assembly in Northern Ireland should take decisions. The Labour party should not encourage otherwise or diverge from that by saying, “Well, on certain things that are contentious, or that we really like, or on which we are under pressure from our Back Benchers, we will support the notion that Parliament should legislate separately.”

There is a long list of priorities—it has been read out by other Members—many of which would be higher up list for the ordinary folk of Northern Ireland than some of the matters that people will raise tonight and tomorrow. We have to make sure that we have a consistent approach. We could say that we are going to have devolution and put all the energy and passion into that. The hon. Member for Walthamstow should put the same passion she has shown on this issue into encouraging the parties in Northern Ireland to get around the table, to get on with making that agreement and to bring governance back to the Assembly in Northern Ireland, because were that to happen, perhaps some of the pithy matters that have been put on the agenda in this House would be properly discussed and debated, and laws would be either upheld or altered and changed as the case may be—as the Assembly would want.

Let me go back to the question of what my constituents want. In a recent ComRes survey, 64% of the general population of Northern Ireland agreed that changing the law on abortion in Northern Ireland is an issue that should be reserved to the Assembly in Northern Ireland. That 64% is an overwhelming number of people who want the Assembly to take decisions on that matter. That is why I say again that the imperative should be that we encourage the parties, including my own party, to get on with resolving the outstanding issues.

Sixty-six per cent. of women in Northern Ireland, irrespective of social, cultural or political background, want the Assembly to make laws on these issues. They do not want this place to make those laws. More importantly, as other Members have remarked, they do not want this place to rush into making legislative decisions on Northern Ireland on a hop, skip and a prayer approach, which results in really bad law. They want really good decisions to be made and good law to be put in place. They do not want decisions that are rushed and that leave us with bad law, especially on the sensitive issue of the termination of human life.

Lady Hermon: What happens if, with a fair wind, good leadership and courageous decision making, we actually get the Assembly up and running again? The hon. Gentleman has given the statistics for those in Northern Ireland who are in favour of allowing the Assembly to deal with sensitive issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. Will he explain to the House—it would be very interesting, particularly in advance of tomorrow’s debate—that the DUP’s policy will be on re-forming abortion legislation in Northern Ireland to make sure that the 1,000 women who are being forced to leave their own home country to go to England or Scotland for an abortion will have some of their rights delivered in Northern Ireland? What is the DUP’s policy on that if the Assembly is up and running?

Ian Paisley: As my cousin knows, I will always give way to her on other matters in these important debates, but seeing the look of consternation on the face of Mr Deputy Speaker, I fear that if I were to go into a separate analysis of our policy and how we would implement it and put in place a common assembly sometime in the future, he may call me to order. I would happily debate that point with the hon. Lady if she were to raise it at a later stage. I would do so even if she were to bring forward an Adjournment debate on the subject. I look forward to debating that issue.

The point that I did leave out in the hope that my colleague, the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), was going to intervene on me was this issue of bad law. I know that no one in this House—whether it is the hon. Member for Walthamstow or any other Member—wants to put in place bad laws, but sometimes the consequences of actions that we take lead to very bad laws. It may not be the intention, but it can ultimately be the impact. Certainly, the intention of some of the amendments that have been tabled would, in my view, really compromise matters relating to the sensitive issue of abortion rights. For example, they could lead to sex
selection abortions in Northern Ireland, and they could lead to a massive increase in the number of abortions of disabled life. We could see problems arise where there is no proper management or scrutiny of where abortions take place. All these issues have been flagged up by a number of groups that have been looking at the problems that would arise if a quick solution were found, which does not exist, to a very difficult set of circumstances that pertain in Northern Ireland. We need to tread cautiously on this issue and not just think about brushing away some pieces of law and some protections that we have, because suddenly everything will be open to change, and that could be very detrimental indeed. The changes could also have an impact in England and Wales: if we were to create a set of circumstances where the laws in Northern Ireland would be so open to abortion, basically anything could go. We would then have a set of circumstances in which Northern Ireland would be well out of kilter on this issue with the Republic of Ireland where I understand that abortion will be limited to the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. We would have a situation where it could be right up to the point of birth in Northern Ireland. That would be absolutely terrible and something that is clearly not the desire or the intention.

Stella Creasy indicated dissent.

Ian Paisley: I accept that it is not the intention of the hon. Lady, but it is the point that has been put forward on a number of occasions by experts on these issues.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I appreciate that we are veering into matters that should probably should be debated in detail tomorrow. As it currently stands, the Abortion Act 1967 bears no resemblance to what is actually happening with abortion today in the United Kingdom. It is really down to demand, and that was never the intention of the 1967 Act, according to those who were involved—I am talking about David Steel and others who brought the Act forward in the first place.

Ian Paisley: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention.

Let me turn now to some of the other points that have been raised in the debate. I am glad that the Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), is still in his place. First, let me congratulate him on his assumption of that role. I have, so far, enjoyed his chairmanship of the Committee and we are getting into some really meaty stuff. He has been excellent in terms of encouraging the Committee to get out reports. I think that we have published two reports under his chairmanship already. That is, of course, very good. /Interruption./ He may as well take the bouquets now, because brick bats might come at any point.

However, I was very disappointed with the Chairman of the Select Committee’s analysis of the border poll issue. I do not believe that we are anywhere near the point that Northern Ireland should either have a border poll or that the opinion is so close in Northern Ireland that it would deserve a border poll. Indeed once again, the Belfast agreement lays out the terms and conditions for having a border poll: the Government must have tangible evidence to show that the overwhelming weight of opinion is that a border poll would be successful. That is not the case; it is nowhere near the case. Even the analysis of the most difficult elections that Northern Ireland has been through shows that that is not the case, but there is a majority across both sections of the community to retain the link with the United Kingdom. To give way on that or to concede that point only encourages people who have the worst interests at heart for Northern Ireland and not the best interests. I certainly encourage the Chairman of the Select Committee to review his position on that and to consider whether he can analyse that situation differently and see from the evidence that there is not a wind of change in that direction. Yes, there is lots of talk about it, but it is from people who do not really care about the Union, never have cared and really have not changed. Gerry Adams has now been put in charge of the border poll issue; he did not have much success in the past 30 years in achieving any of his big goals and he will not have much success in achieving that goal either.

Those are the points that I want to leave before the House tonight. I look forward to the debate continuing and, indeed, to tomorrow’s debate.

Jim Shannon rose—

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

9 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I did not expect to be called ahead of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), but thank you very much for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions.

There are a great many issues to speak on, some of which we will come to tomorrow. I hope to have the opportunity and more time to comment on them then.

To say that I am disheartened to be living through this déjà vu is a massive understatement. I will put it in the words of one of my constituents, who spoke to me only this morning: “I’m absolutely gutted.” Those are the words of that gentleman. I am gutted for my constituents, who are good, hard-working men and women with families, whose day-to-day lives have been stymied because Sinn Féin refuses to be democratic and to put its demand list to the democratically elected Assembly.

We need to put the blame where the blame is—not with the democratic parties that are not holding up the process. My constituents see restrictions in secondary school places for their children and the threat of closure of one post-primary, non-selective school in a town of 30,000 in Newtownards, and they see no Minister to appeal to for common sense to enable that process to be stopped. They see waiting lists shooting through the roof—appointments for routine surgeries, with people sitting for two years in agony awaiting hip replacements. They see their children waiting for ear, nose and throat appointments for tonsil problems after nine months of pain. They see massive projects with shovel-ready funding in place that are not able begin because a senior civil servant fears overstepping his or her position. New builds are on hold. Primary and secondary school budgets are short of the moneys needed to keep them going. Principals from my constituency have expressed concern over their budgets for the coming year. The issue of
special needs is also a critical factor, which we have discussed in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, as hon. Members here who are on that Committee will know.

The one thing in this process that is clear to me is that when it comes to health, it does not matter if you are a nationalist or Unionist. Health issues affect everyone. When it comes to education issues, it does not matter whether you are a nationalist or a Unionist; they hurt you the same whoever you are. Potholes are not exclusive to the Unionist area or the nationalist area—they are everywhere. When it comes budgets and agreeing a way forward, those are things we clearly could do.

Benefits are now one of the biggest issues in my office, taking up some 25% to 30% of my office casework. That is a massive contribution. A working Northern Ireland Assembly could address the critical benefit issues of our constituents. Would it not be better if the Northern Ireland Assembly was in place, at least to be able to use some of the block budget, as we have in the past, to help to allay some of the fears on benefit issues?

The first food bank in the whole of Northern Ireland, a Trussell Trust food bank, was in Newtownards in my constituency. Is it not better that we slow down the rate at which people are referred to food banks? Poverty levels, especially among children, are at their highest for many years; we need an Assembly that can work, and that can only happen if we have a process that enables it to happen.

In the smaller realm of things, we have warm home schemes with budgets allocated, but as yet the previous scheme has continued. My constituents in their 80s who are sitting with their old boilers that lose as much oil as is used, damaging the environment and damaging their lungs, are being told, “Yes, you’re suitable, but, oh wait, we can’t do the new scheme just yet because—guess what?”—we haven’t got a Minister in place, we haven’t got a Department, and we haven’t got the extra moneys that are allocated and necessary.” Again, the whole process builds up. There are also the roads budgets. Only last Thursday, the Transport Committee talked about the potholes programme. Then there are all the tarmacking schemes for new roads across the whole constituency. I have said before and I say it again—Members will be surprised if I do not—that the bypass for Ballynahinch continues to be a big issue for my constituency and the people I look after.

We are coming towards 12 July, and in my constituency we are very pleased to have a good bonfire strategy. Working through Ards and North Down Borough Council, we have managed to ensure that tyres are not put on the bonfires in my constituency, so we do not have the problem that is found in other areas. We have the opportunity of Orangefest, the traditional 12 July parade being held in Holywood, in the constituency of the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), where both communities are able to enjoy all the culture, history and tradition. We are very fortunate in my constituency of Strangford and her constituency of North Down to have good community relations, and long may that continue. I am a member of Kircubbin Volunteers Loyal Orange Lodge, and over the past number of years I have been there I have seen the two communities coming together. They all come out on the 12th day to enjoy the parades.

The hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis), who is no longer here, pointed the finger at some of the political parties. I was disappointed with that, because the Democratic Unionist party has made special efforts through Dr Paisley, Peter Robinson and Arlene Foster, to move the political process forward. We have all gone on a road of change in our lives politically in terms of what we wanted in the past and what we were prepared to achieve. The political process in the Northern Ireland Assembly happened because politicians in the Democratic Unionist party—and, to be fair, politicians in Sinn Féin—felt at the time that the Northern Ireland Assembly was the way forward. It is good that that happened.

**Bob Stewart:** The elephant in the room is the fact that Sinn Féin just does not give a damn about the Northern Ireland Executive. A year and a half ago, we were talking about making moves very fast towards having direct rule, and each time we have pushed and pushed. It is actually in Sinn Féin’s interest to continue to procrastinate and to destroy the Northern Ireland Executive. We finally have to recognise that.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Gentleman. I echo the cries of my constituents. This is simply not good enough, and the Secretary of State must understand that. Last week, we lost one of our politicians’ brightest stars to the private sector—my colleague Simon Hamilton. I warned about this during the previous extension debates. I said that we would lose those with mortgages and young families who love their country but have bills to pay and lives to live. They need job security like anyone else. They need to have fulfilment in their job like anyone else. We are in danger of losing more people like Simon, in other parties as well, who are invested in seeing their children live, grow and work in a prosperous Northern Ireland. That is not because Northern Ireland is hopeless, because it is not, but because they are being prevented from doing what they want to do and should be doing. Simon Hamilton was a visionary politician. He was also my election agent in the past three elections, and I thank him for that. He had a vision for Northern Ireland and wanted to be part of the process. Unfortunately, the fact that we are not moving forward has made him take this decision.

I echo what my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) has said: we need a political process, and no longer can one party hold back others. We need to look at a different method. If five parties want to be involved in a democratic political process and a way forward, we should do that. No more one party—Sinn Féin—hold up the process, as the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said.

MLAs are maligned as lazy and self-seeking by some in this House and those who perhaps do not understand exactly what they do, yet they are desperate to do their jobs properly. They are prevented from doing so by serving Sinn Féin, who could not dominate through their machination regarding the voting system and procedure, and who have instead decided to cripple it from within.
I mean no disrespect, but that crippling was described to me as being aided and abetted by this Government—it has not been dealt with by a Government who have had their eyes on Brexit, as they must—at the expense of my constituents.

Many Members have referred to the hard border. The Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, has said that there is no need for a hard border. The EU has said that there is no need for a hard border. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has said that there is no need for a hard border. When all those players say that there is no need for a hard border, we must ask ourselves why we would pursue that. My father came from Castlefinn in Donegal, and my mother came from Clady, outside Strabane. That did not stop my mother and father crossing the border and meeting each other. I would not be here today if they had not met—that is a fact of life. The border never stopped people crossing it to meet and get together.

We want to see Northern Ireland move forward, and this Bill does not do that. It keeps us treading water. The problem is that we are fast losing all energy and are beginning to drown, not because the funding or the ability is not there, but because the tough decisions are not being taken. They are not being taken by the people who need to take them, but are afraid of taking the wrong one. We need action, not to continue as we are.

Tomorrow, we will consider the amendments, if they are selected, on abortion and same-sex marriage. I will go into more detail tomorrow if I get the opportunity, but as of 7 o’clock tonight, I have had 443 emails from my constituents—31 of those were in favour of change, and the other 412 were not. I say to the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy): listen clearly to what happens in my constituency. I will go into more detail tomorrow about all the issues in relation to abortion and same-sex marriage.

I will support this Bill. I have no option, unless I wish to see NHS staff not receiving their wages, no schools open in September and our civil service grinding to a halt. While there are few options, the Secretary of State and the Minister are not optionless and must create their options. They must introduce legislation to say that those who are elected must take their seats with no preconditions and be emphatic instead of inactive. The Secretary of State must do her job and make these decisions for Northern Ireland.

Our country is drowning. The Secretary of State and the Minister must be the life guards, stop patrolling around the edges and dive in to do something to save my constituents in Strangford and people across Northern Ireland. I support the Bill, and I ask the Secretary of State and the Minister to do their job and support the good, hard-working, decent people of Northern Ireland, instead of those who are hellbent on destruction.

9.13 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Having sat through the debate, I think it is quite clear that nobody really wants this Bill. It is a contingency Bill. We all hope that the discussions and meetings will bear fruit and that the Assembly and Executive will be up and running. We all want that to happen, and it is quite clear from what the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said that tough decisions are not being taken at the moment.

There have been compelling speeches from Members across the House—including the hon. Members for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) and for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson)—about all the important issues that need to be addressed, such as health and education. I was struck by the speeches from my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), who spoke about same-sex marriage, and my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who made a compelling case for a woman’s right to choose.

I want to refer to my experience on the recent pre-legislative scrutiny Committee of this House and the other place on the Domestic Abuse Bill. As my hon. Friend has mentioned, that Bill was brought forward by the Prime Minister to make sure that we can not only sign but ratify the Istanbul convention on domestic abuse. That Bill is really important, and the one thing the Committee was concerned about was that there is no provision for Northern Ireland. As has already been said, issues of coercive control and stalking are not covered in Northern Irish law, as I understand it, and on that basis we would not be able to ratify the Istanbul convention.

The reason I am talking about that is that one of the recommendations from the cross-party pre-legislative scrutiny Committee was that we ought to legislate for that in this place, but do so on the basis of a sunset clause for when the Assembly is up and running again, so it can then decide how it wishes to legislate for Northern Ireland. We felt so strongly about it that we thought that was the sensible approach to take.

I have borrowed from the approach of that particular Committee to table an amendment—I hope it might be selected tomorrow—saying that just as, under clause 3, the Secretary of State will provide a report on progress in bringing the Assembly back together, she could also put together a report on how this House, or the Westminster Parliament, could deal with the breach of human rights—women’s human rights—in Northern Ireland.

We know the Supreme Court is going to find such a breach in the next few months. We are absolutely clear from what was said in Sarah Ewart’s case earlier this year that there is going to be a finding of incompatibility. As we know—one of the DUP Members admitted it—that means it will fall to this place, the Westminster Parliament, to remedy that situation.

My amendment, which I hope we may be able to debate tomorrow, is to get the Secretary of State to do the work now—prepare, plan, talk to the parties—on how we can remedy the breaches of women’s human rights in relation to the legal framework on abortion, while also recognising the devolution settlement by saying, if Westminster has to take some action, that there will be a sunset clause for when the Assembly is up and running again, just as with the Domestic Abuse Bill proposal made by the Committee I spoke about earlier.

This is an opportunity to move forward and be practical about preparing for the inevitable, which is the Supreme Court decision that is coming down the tracks. Whether people like it or not, we are going to have to face this, so let us get the preparation and the planning done now, and also recognise devolution by having such a sunset clause. This is obviously a matter for tomorrow, and I think it is a practical way forward.
Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Lyra Catherine McKee has been mentioned two or three times during this debate. When we discuss Northern Ireland business, I sometimes think back to that incredibly, immensely emotional day in St Anne’s cathedral on 24 April, when Members from both Front Benches were present and we heard that extraordinarily moving homily. I like to think that Lyra Catherine McKee, who represents the best and the brightest of young Northern Ireland but is no longer with us, is listening and looking down on us, and I hope we have not disappointed her tonight.

The rather unfortunate statement is frequently made, and it is a slightly obsequious convention for people to say, “This has been a great debate,” but tonight we have heard some extremely fine speeches. We have heard excellent speeches right across the board on some extremely wide-ranging and difficult subjects, and I will come on to them in a moment.

It would be appropriate, as this is the first debate we have had on the Floor of the House since the death of Ivan Cooper from Claudy, who was well known and very widely respected throughout Northern Ireland, to say that the House should note his passing with sadness. We should also show our respect for the former Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, George Hamilton, who has now retired.

I was slightly embarrassed by the eulogies pressed on me by Members on both sides of the House. I have come to the conclusion that nothing succeeds in politics like dying or, if you cannot quite manage that, resigning. It is not often that my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) and I are locked together—or paired, as it were—but the fact that we are both leaving is probably more of a matter of regret for me for her than for her for me. But never mind that. I am extremely grateful for the comments made, and in the meantime I hope to be around for a short while yet.

We have heard an extraordinarily wide range of speeches. Rather than go through all of them individually—you will doubtless be greatly relieved to hear that, Mr Speaker—I will just say that there was not a dud among them. We have heard from the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and for Lewes (Maria Caulfield). The right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) made the extraordinary statement that Sinn Féin backed me and her inability to achieve what she and they want. It is all about. None of us wants to be here. It is a slightly God knows they really need it.

We also hear from the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), and it would not have been a Northern Ireland debate without hearing at length from the hon. Member for Stormont Central (DUP) (Jim Shannon). We were also delighted to hear a very perceptive speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson).

Of all the speeches we have heard tonight—this may be untrue because I am not the first person to have said it—the speech made by the hon. Member for Belfast South was extraordinary. It was one of the most remarkable speeches I have heard. She has made great speeches in this House before, but I have to say that she encapsulated the frustration, agony and annoyance that we all feel in this House, when she spoke so vividly, strongly and emotionally about her constituents’ needs, which, after all, is what we are here for. She expressed that frustration and her inability to achieve what she and they want. It was an extraordinary speech and I have no doubt that it will be referred to many times in many places.

A dark cloak has been spread over everything we have spoken about tonight, and that is the dark cloak of a hard Brexit. Bearing in mind the particular focus and locus of this debate, we have perhaps discussed rather more than we should have the possible arrangements on the border. It is only necessary to say that I do not think that anyone in this House seriously suggests that a 300-mile border from Donegal to Dundalk, with 298 crossing points, can somehow be managed by some technological solution and a fantasy frontier with cameras up poles. When people talk about the border between Sweden and Norway, I often point out that there are more crossing points between Monaghan and Fermanagh than there are on the whole of the Norway-Sweden border. The point is that, if we are going to have a hard Brexit, God forbid, there has to be some sort of customs arrangement. I do not think that we need to get into discussions about the common travel area and Schengen; there has to be some sort of a customs union. That may not be popular in every single corner of the House, but it is at least logical.

The other point of sadness that has come over our deliberations today is the fact that we as a House are admitting failure and that we cannot somehow manage this process and encourage, support and bring back the Executive and the devolved Assembly.

It is salutary to listen to tonight’s speakers and realise the depth of talent that exists in the political classes in Northern Ireland. There is no shortage of talent, energy, vision or absolute determination to serve their people well and for the best, but we need to move forward so that that energy can flourish and flower and produce the goods for the people of Northern Ireland, because God knows they really need it.

This has been an expedent debate. We know what it is all about. None of us wants to be here. It is a slightly St Augustine one: make me pure, but not just at this moment in time. We very much hope that we will not come back here, but we have to wish the Secretary of State and the Minister of State a fair following wind. We know what they are trying to do and we on the Labour Benches—although I have to say the 12 July marching analogy was slightly lost on me—will be walking in quickstep together, if not in lockstep.

In conclusion, there is one very serious danger that has not been touched on so far: if we continue to extend the existing arrangements, there is a real possibility of
an erosion of belief in the devolved institutions. People will lose patience in devolution. If we cannot come up with the goods, they will lose faith, they will lose hope and they will lose trust in the devolved Assembly and the devolved institutions. We cannot allow that to happen to the lowest possible level; it is subsidiarity. All decisions of devolution and devolving, wherever possible, decisions must be made at the lowest level. I hope that everybody agrees with that. The problem is that people are losing their faith and their trust. Above all, they are losing their hope. We have to restore that faith.

Tonight, we take an unwelcome step. It is a step that none of us wants to take, but it has to be done. Please, please let this be one of the last occasions when we have to come to this House to seek an extension. Please, one day, may we all be there in Stormont for the reconvening of the Assembly and have the most enjoyable time. If I am still a Member of this House, I will enjoy that as my swansong. If I am not a Member of this House, I am going to crash your party anyway.

9.27 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): Amen to that, Mr Speaker. I think that is the only way to follow that one. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound). It is perhaps not his swansong—in theory, he has another couple of years before the end of this Parliament, should we run to full term—but he has been a wonderful adornment and one of the funniest Members of Parliament for a long time. We also heard tributes to the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey). She is a member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and was temporary Chair while my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) was being selected and elevated to his place. Incidentally, it is good to see him, in his first legislative outing in that place, making a contribution today. But it will be sad to see the hon. Member for Ealing North go. We can see from his comments today why it will be sad.

This is a very short Bill. It is only three or four clauses long. It is a very simple extension of two dates and that is all it does. That has not stopped us from going on at quite some length about Brexit, hard borders, or not, in Northern Ireland and all sorts of other related matters, but at its heart it does something very simple indeed. It just extends the existing Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 by two dates: an initial period and then, at Parliament’s discretion, a potential further short extension.

It is good to know that speaker after speaker and party after party has expressed their support for the Bill. I would like to put on record the Government’s thanks to everybody, right the way across the aisle, for their support. It does matter, particularly when it comes to Northern Ireland, that we have cross-party support and, ideally, cross-community support. That support, however, is not unqualified or open-ended. As the hon. Member for Ealing North and many other Members have said, this is, frankly, wearing thin. We have been here before and there is both frustration and a great deal of concern about the missed opportunities in all sorts of areas in Northern Ireland, including on health, education, suicide prevention and even potholes. These things are not being done and decisions are not being taken. As many different Members said, this cannot continue for very much longer. In fact, I think the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) described it as the endgame and he was absolutely right.

Lady Hermon: The Minister just used the phrase “wearing thin”. I assure him and the Secretary of State that what is wearing thin is the patience of the people in Northern Ireland with the fact that we do not have a functioning Assembly, and adding to that and intensifying the annoyance is that MLAs continue to be paid. Will the Minister therefore commit this evening that, if the Assembly is not functioning again when we get to these dates in the Bill, the Secretary of State will use her powers to cut MLAs’ salaries?

John Penrose: I agree absolutely with the first half of the hon. Lady’s sentence. The sense of frustration and concern is not confined to Members on both sides of the Chamber this afternoon and evening, although that has been palpable; it extends right across all communities in Northern Ireland and she is absolutely right to make that point.

On the pay of MLAs, I gently remind the hon. Lady that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has already cut MLAs’ pay not once, but twice. They are now down 27.5% from their initial level. That does not mean that further cuts might not be possible. I am sure that my right hon. Friend, who is in her place, will have heard what the hon. Lady said and will consider it carefully. I am afraid that I cannot give the hon. Lady any stronger a commitment than that, but she has made her point.

The concern and frustration that I mentioned were palpable from speaker after speaker during the debate. Again, this point was made by the hon. Member for Ealing North: that frustration and concern are twinned with a fear of the erosion of faith in the Stormont Assembly and the Stormont Executive, and in devolved government and democracy in Northern Ireland. Underlying everything that we have been saying is a worry that, if the democratic institutions in Northern Ireland are not working effectively, a peaceful opportunity to give vent to and give effect to differences of opinion and to make collective decisions in Northern Ireland is lost. If those opportunities are lost, that lends help and gives succour and energy to those who say, “Well, democracy is not the answer in Northern Ireland, but other forms of expression are.” We all know where that can lead and where that has led in Northern Ireland’s tragic history, and we do not want to go there again, so it is very good to hear people saying that on both sides of the Chamber.

Bob Stewart: I ask the Minister and the Secretary of State whether there is the slightest scintilla—the slightest glint—that Sinn Féin will come to an agreement in the next three months, or are we just hoping that they might come to some sort of compromise?

John Penrose: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. At the moment, the talks are still ongoing. There is still breath and life left in the negotiating room. Again, it is worth while recording that everybody here, in different ways and at different points during this debate, has made the point that they want those talks to succeed. This is not just confined to one side of the
talks or the other. Everybody is still in the room and it is absolutely essential that, while there is still hope and breath left in those talks, they must continue, because the alternative is far, far worse. That is the only legitimate reason for any kind of extension to the EFEF Act: there is still a glimmer of hope that this can be done.

It would give nobody greater pleasure than my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for this Bill to be one that never needed to come into force. As she mentioned in her opening remarks, she will be delighted if this Bill never needed Royal Assent because it was unnecessary, because the talks had succeeded and because devolved Government had been reinstated in Northern Ireland. With the possible exception of the hon. Member for Ealing North, who has promised to crash the party if it happens, nobody would be happier at the success of the talks than the Secretary of State, who has basically been locked in a series of meeting rooms in and around Stormont for the last several months, seeing very little of her family, in an attempt to get the thing to work. I am sure we all wish her well.

There were two main types of contribution to this debate. One was from colleagues prefiguring amendments they have tabled for tomorrow that they hope to catch your eye on and debate, Mr Speaker. They included my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and the hon. Members for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) and for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). All of them, often from very different sides of the same issue, want to make sure that broader issues around the governance of Northern Ireland can be raised and debated tomorrow, in an attempt to move forward issues dear to their hearts.

The second type of contribution was much broader and more numerous. It came from people who said it was not wrong but it was sad that the Bill had to be used as a vehicle for these kinds of issues because it would be far better if Northern Ireland were being properly served by a Stormont Assembly, which could deal with the issues in the amendments to be discussed tomorrow in Committee and with many of the other issues raised, in many cases by Northern Ireland Members themselves, but by others as well, and which are much broader than the cultural issues—if I can put it like that. They are concerned with health, education, potholes, and everything else—the more mundane but absolutely essential warp and weft of government and of keeping the good governance of Northern Ireland up to date. Because decisions have only been taken in a very limited way under the existing powers and the EFEF Act, that has meant that Northern Ireland’s public services have gently but steadily become more and more out of date. As a result, in many cases those services have become less efficient than they would otherwise be if they had been kept up to date, and more expensive and less productive in the way they are delivered.

That was the broader thrust of many other people’s contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), a member of the Select Committee, gave a tour d’horizon with three options that we must all consider. I will happily pick them up with her when I have a bit more time to discuss with her how we can take them forward. We also heard from the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), the right hon. Member for Belfast North, plus a whole slew of other Northern Ireland colleagues, including the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and on and on.

The one thing I can promise is that this is not being rushed. We have two full days of debate—today and tomorrow—and then three days in the Lords, so there will be plenty of opportunity to debate this in more depth.

Gavin Robinson: I think I heard the Minister say the hon. Member for Belfast East goes on and on, but he knows the issue I want to raise. It is specific and discrete and concerns co-ownership. The Bill is ready and I understand that it rests with the Treasury. Has he got good news?

John Penrose: I did not say that the hon. Member for Belfast East went on and on, and nor would I ever do so. He is right to remind me of the pledge I was able to make from this Dispatch Box a month and a half to two months ago. I am afraid that I do not have a date for the introduction of the Bill for him, but he is right to say that the Bill has moved forward dramatically and is now in the necessary format for Westminster introduction. We do not have a date yet, but he is also right that the Treasury has a strong interest in moving this forward because it is to its financial advantage to get this change done, and where the Treasury wishes to lean is always a good place for any Minister to begin.

With that, I draw my remarks to a close. We have an entire day of this tomorrow when we can debate the amendments prefigured during this debate. Again, I thank all sides and all concerned for their broad support in principle for the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.
Bill accordingly read a Second time.
Committee tomorrow.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

ELECTRICITY

That the draft Electricity Capacity (No. 2) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 5 June, be approved.—[Iain Stewart.]

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Tettenhall Medical Practice

9.39 pm

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Wood Road surgery is a GP surgery in the Tettenhall Wood area of Wolverhampton, one of two sites run by Tettenhall Medical Practice. The practice wants to close the surgery, and to move all its patients to a site at Lower Green. Wood Road has more than 4,000 patients on its books. A high percentage are elderly people living in the area, and there are more meals on wheels deliveries there than in any other part of the city.
Many of those patients have no access to transport and will find it very difficult to get to Lower Green surgery, which is in a completely different part of Tettenhall. Many constituents have come to see me about Wood Road and to express their community’s strong feelings about why it should stay open. This petition, which has only been open for two weeks, has been signed by 1,338 of my constituents in the area. It states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to press NHS Wolverhampton Care Commissioning Group to find a way to ensure Tettenhall Wood Medical Practice can continue to provide services to local patients at its surgery in Wood Road.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom, declares that the Wood Road surgery of Tettenhall Wood Medical Practice is a vital element in the provision of primary care general practice in Tettenhall Wood, Wolverhampton; further that attending the practice’s alternative surgery on Lower Street would increase the difficulty faced by elderly patients in Tettenhall Wood to access GP services; further that public transport links from Wood Road to Lower Street are not straightforward; further that there is a lack of parking availability at Lower Street; further notes the local petition on this subject that has attracted 1,337 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to press NHS Wolverhampton Care Commissioning Group to find a way to ensure Tettenhall Wood Medical Practice can continue to provide services to local patients at its surgery in Wood Road.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

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And the petitioners remain, etc.]
markets and the vast amounts of derivatives that are outstanding at any one time. The last report I saw from the United States, I think from the last quarter, showed that something like $200 trillion-worth of derivatives were open at that time.

My second reason for raising the subject is that considerable quantities of gold and silver—and indeed the other precious metals, palladium and platinum—are mined in low and middle-income countries. As with other commodities—such as coffee and cocoa, with which I worked for many years, and still do a little bit—the price has a major impact on the economies of the producers; it has an impact on those who work in the mining industry and on the taxation revenues of the countries.

The third reason is that London is at the heart of the global trade in precious metals and has been since the late 17th century. At a time when institutions and businesses are under intense scrutiny, it is vital that we in this country uphold the highest standards, and I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister entirely agrees with that.

Just last year, a former vice-president of a major US bank pleaded guilty in the US to spoofing precious metals markets

“hundreds of times with the knowledge and consent of his immediate supervisors.”

Sentencing has been delayed; the implication is that the person is assisting the US Department of Justice’s investigation into others, possibly both within and outside the bank. Spoofing is a technical term, defined in the USA’s Dodd-Frank Act 2010 as

“the illegal practice of bidding or offering with intent to cancel before execution”,

or, in other words, to deceive the market. In another case, in January 2018, Deutsche Bank, UBS and HSBC paid $46.6 million in the US to settle Commodity Futures Trading Commission charges relating to spoofing in the precious metals markets.

I was first alerted to this subject by a constituent who had bought limited quantities of silver as an investment from Deutsche Bank while he was resident in Germany.

Over the period in which he purchased the silver, the price peaked at $48 an ounce in 2011, and declined to below $20 by the end of 2014. It is always very difficult to determine the precise causes of a market’s movement; this was at a time of global uncertainty, financial stress in Europe and North America, and increasing demand for physical silver in electronics and other industrial purposes.

My constituent stated in courts in both Germany and Birmingham in the UK that the bank had been manipulating the precious metals market. His cases were dismissed; nevertheless, shortly afterwards, in 2016, Deutsche Bank and others confirmed that market manipulation had indeed been taking place, and they paid penalties in the USA.

My constituent’s contention, with which I have considerable sympathy, is that it is the small retail investor who pays the price for such illegal behaviour of traders and the banks for which they work. The regulators, and hence the Governments, receive the fines, but investors find it almost impossible to prove a loss directly, because a number of factors affect market prices, not simply the illegal activity.
As I said at the beginning, my aim in this debate is to see whether there has been any activity in these markets in the United Kingdom that we should be taking a closer look at on behalf of investors, particularly the small retail investors who put some of their savings into these commodities; but it is also about the trust in our system in the United Kingdom. There is a huge amount of trust in the UK and its institutions. I believe that that trust is almost always well placed, but it can only continue to be well placed if we constantly scrutinise the system and check instances where we have an indication that things have not always gone well, or perhaps are not going well now, and take action quickly.

9.54 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):
I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) for raising a set of complex but important issues with the rigour and grasp of detail in his analysis that has characterised virtually every speech that I have heard him make in his nine years in the House. I listened carefully to what he said and I am grateful for our earlier conversation, which helped me in preparing what I hope is an appropriate response to the points that he has raised. Although I cannot comment on individual cases, I would also like to express my sympathies for the constituent whose experience he referred to.

The precious metals market is an important part of our economy, as my hon. Friend said, and London is one of the most important gold trading centres in the world. They and markets like them have a real impact on individuals, households and businesses, which includes his constituent. Those markets underpin borrowing costs, exchange rates and the cost of food and raw materials, and they help firms and households to manage financial risks and investments. A well-functioning derivative market fulfils a vital role in that process.

Jeremy Lefroy: One point that I should have mentioned but did not is that precious metals, probably with the exception of gold, have many other uses—silver in antimicrobial products and platinum and palladium in exhaust pipes and reducing emissions—so they are extremely important, both as a store of value and in having real practical uses.

John Glen: My hon. Friend raised several important questions, which I will attempt to answer. I want to refer first to the significant volumes of derivatives and his question about the potential risk for financial systems. Derivatives are an important risk management tool and are used to hedge positions in underlying assets against adverse movements. They allow financial institutions to identify, isolate and manage separately the market risks in financial instruments and commodities. It is internationally recognised in forums such as the G20 that derivatives need sound risk management. Global financial regulators work to ensure that the derivatives market has robust oversight, monitoring, reporting and controls. In the EU, the legislative framework, which includes the market abuse regulation and the markets in financial instruments directive, does this.

The market abuse regulation, or MAR, provides the Financial Conduct Authority, as the relevant national competent authority, with the powers it needs to detect and prevent financial market abuses, such as insider dealing, unlawful disclosure of inside information and market manipulation. The regulation has been regularly revised and updated, most recently three years ago in 2016. MAR covers all financial instruments traded on regulated markets, multilateral trading facilities and organised trading facilities in the EU. It also covers financial instruments not traded on such markets, where the instrument’s price or value is dependent on the price of a financial instrument traded on a regulated market, multilateral trading facility or organised trading facility. Included in this scope are exchange-traded commodity derivatives. This means that gold futures, for example, are in scope of MAR.

MAR imposes stringent requirements on UK trading venues and firms, which have a duty to detect and report market manipulation. Trading venues and firms are required to establish and maintain effective arrangements, systems and procedures to prevent and detect all types of market manipulation.

10 pm

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

John Glen: These arrangements must allow for the analysis of each and every transaction executed, and order placed, modified, cancelled or rejected. UK trading venues are also obliged to report to the FCA, immediately upon detection, all orders and transactions, including any cancellations or modifications, that could constitute market manipulation, attempted market manipulation or any other type of market abuse.

Jeremy Lefroy: Is my hon. Friend able to confirm whether there has been any indication, not necessarily just in precious metal markets, of this nefarious practice of spoofing within markets in the UK?

John Glen: I am just coming on to that, and I will make reference to some of the observations that have been made.

We are confident under MAR that where market abuse behaviour relates to exchange-traded commodity derivatives, as in the J.P. Morgan case, we have robust transparency systems and controls in place. Furthermore,
in terms of enforcement, there have been examples in similar markets where traders have been caught attempting a similar type of market manipulation. For example, in 2013 a trader was fined almost £600,000 by the FCA for the manipulation of exchange-traded oil and gas futures.

The recent J.P. Morgan manipulation case in the US involved activity on a US-regulated exchange. The FCA's regulatory scope obviously does not extend to oversight and enforcement in the US market. The FCA's remit covers instruments traded on UK markets. The US authorities, therefore, have a remit over this behaviour, and it is in their competence to act against it on behalf of consumers.

On the manipulation of bullion markets, it is important to distinguish between the underlying market for commodities and the market manipulation of exchange-traded commodity derivatives. With regard to the former, precious metals are global commodities, where price is determined by the forces of demand and supply.

It should be noted that the Government have already taken action to ensure that specific commodity benchmarks for price setting are in scope of the market abuse regime. The London Bullion Market Association gold price and silver price—the global benchmark prices for unallocated gold and silver delivered in London—are within scope of the UK's domestic benchmarks regime, which is the world's first framework for regulating benchmarks. This means the administrators of those benchmarks, and those firms submitting to them, became subject to FCA authorisation and regulation. Manipulating the benchmarks is a criminal offence. The benchmarks are also regulated under the EU benchmarks regulation, which will supersede the UK regime when it comes fully into force in 2020.

My hon. Friend raised the potential risk of “paper gold” contracts, which are designed to reflect the market price of gold. Investors may use the contracts for hedging or speculative purposes, and without any overall intention to receive or deliver the physical asset. For example, a customer may have a claim on a bullion bank account provider for an amount of gold without physically possessing it.

This type of activity, relating to unallocated gold, does not guarantee an equal exchange for metal. Therefore, the risk that delivery is not met as part of the contracts should not undermine the overall market, given that this delivery is not guaranteed and the risk is priced into the instrument.

The Government commissioned the “Fair and Effective Markets” review in 2014 to restore trust in fixed income, currency and commodities markets. This review made several recommendations for the commodities markets, including the benchmark reforms I spoke of earlier. The review also established the FICC Markets Standards Board—the FMSB—an industry body to improve standards in wholesale fixed income, currency and commodities markets. The FMSB has already produced several industry-led standards and statements of good practices that have seen widespread adoption. The FMSB also supported work by the London Bullion Market Association to develop and issue the global precious metals code in May 2017. The code applies to the LBMA's members' dealings in the bullion market. It sets out the standards and best practice expected from market participants in the global wholesale precious metals market. It covers a wide range of topics, such as conduct, information to clients and the avoidance of market abuse. The code applies to LBMA members, who must publicly attest their compliance with it.

To conclude, I am confident that the robust regulatory framework in place in our country provides the FCA with the right tools in its regulatory perimeter to detect and respond to these attempts and ensure that the market works in a way that is fair and effective for all who wish to participate. I thank my hon. Friend for raising these important issues in the manner that he has. I acknowledge the concerns he has raised and I will take them on board as we look to the future.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. The Minister does speak in a most learned fashion on these important matters, responding in kind to the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), both of whom have benefited from tutorials from those who are in a position to proffer advice, from a Department renowned for its intellectual cream.

Question put and agreed to.

10.6 pm

House adjourned.
The Secretary of State was asked—

 Courts Digitisation Programme

1. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on access to justice of the courts digitisation programme. [911797]

**Paul Maynard**: My right hon. Friend has cleverly anticipated Question 15. I have heard from Members across the House the deep frustration they feel regarding the current issues in the probate system. Delays had reached as long as eight weeks last month. We have put in place a number of measures to try to reduce the overall waiting time. It is now back down to roughly six to seven weeks, but that is still not good enough. We are now clearing the number of outstanding cases by about 1,000 a day, and I hope that the backlog can be cleared in around two to three months.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): Is not the truth that what is happening at the moment is a restriction on access to justice, because almost half the courts in the country have been closed? Will the Minister follow what the Association of Her Majesty’s District Judges has said, and put a moratorium on court closures until the digitisation programme—£200 million over budget, spending £70 million on consultants—is seen to work?

**Paul Maynard**: I very much hear what the hon. Gentleman is telling me. He will recall a debate that we had in this Chamber a couple of weeks ago on that point. We have no plans to close any further courts at the moment, but he will recognise that there is a need to make sure that our court estate is used appropriately, and he will recognise that where court buildings are not used, or indeed were used for less than half the time for which they could be available, we have to look at making sure that what we do in our courts best meets the needs of our estate and of the people using our courts system.

**Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): Last year, the Government made a huge fanfare about their female offenders strategy but announced only £5 million for it. Recently, legal aid was increased by £8 million, but that pales into insignificance compared with £67 million spent on consultants to provide cuts to our courts. Instead of throwing money at the consultants, surely there should be a proper debate in this House on the Government’s disastrous court closure programme.

**Paul Maynard**: When I speak to most sensible people across the entire justice system, there is a recognition that our justice system has to modernise. If we do not transform or modernise the system, the service will become increasingly unsustainable and will deliver a progressively worse service for the people for whom I know the hon. Lady wants to get the best outcomes possible—I do too. If we do not modernise, our district system will not be able to maintain that level of service.

**Benefit Application Appeal Tribunal Hearings**

2. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What recent estimate he has made of the average waiting time for benefit application appeal tribunal hearings in (a) Northamptonshire and (b) England. [911798]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice** (Paul Maynard): Between January and March 2019, the average waiting time for benefit appeals in Northamptonshire was 21 weeks. In England, it was 33 weeks.
Mr Hollobone: Too many of my Kettering constituents are having to wait far too long for their appeals to be heard when their benefit applications are turned down. The Minister has read out average figures, but some of the waits are over 30 weeks. What can he do to speed up the appeals process in Kettering?

Paul Maynard: I was almost disappointed that my hon. Friend did not phrase his first question better, because I was going to go on to tell him that in Kettering, the waiting time was actually 33 weeks, which is comparable to the England average—12 weeks longer than that in Northamptonshire. If I may anticipate the further follow-up question that he might have liked to ask, in Kettering we are making new venues available, particularly in Wellingborough and Northamptonshire, and we have added three judges, eight disability qualified tribunal panel members and two medically qualified tribunal panel members to try to reduce waiting times in his constituency.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) rose—

Mr Speaker: No, no, no, no, no, no, no. Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross is not only not in Northamptonshire; it is not in England! It really is stretching the point. Oh, very well. If the hon. Gentleman wants to make a pertinent inquiry appertaining to Northamptonshire, in which no doubt he has the deepest interest, or relating to England, I will give him the benefit of the doubt.

Jamie Stone: You are very gracious, Mr Speaker. Benefits actually cover the whole UK and I represent the furthest-away constituency in the UK mainland. Delays in decision making are troublesome to say the very least. The problem as I see it is that the key decision makers are not actually based in Wick, where there are excellent staff, but much further south. Would it not be a good idea if we moved key decision makers closer to people in need?

Mr Speaker: That is a very cheeky piece of shoehorning.

Paul Maynard: I am presuming that the hon. Gentleman is encouraging me to have more tribunals in Wick, as opposed to decision makers. Since I have 3,000 employed in my own constituency making key decisions on personal independence payments, I do not think we should move to Wick. None the less, there is a lack of tribunals in his constituency. We will have to hear further information from him as to how we can improve accessibility there.

Mr Speaker: In relation to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) just chuntered from a sedentary position, “Yes, but he’s a nice guy.” Well, I think we can all agree about that.

Prison Staff: Health and Safety

3. Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of health and safety for prison staff.

10. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of health and safety for prison staff.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): Keeping our prisons safe, both for the dedicated staff working in them and for the men and women in our custody, is our top priority. Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service continually assesses the risks to staff in our prisons, putting in suitable measures and controls. The effectiveness of those controls is monitored locally and nationally, and through joint audit work with prison unions.

Grahame Morris: I thank the Minister for that reply, but it must be of concern to the whole House when the Ministry of Justice’s own figures show that violence against prison staff is at a record high. There were almost twice as many assaults in 2018 as there were in 2010. Does the Minister agree that everyone working in our prison system, whether as a prison officer, an educator, a nurse or anything else, should have an absolute right to a safe workplace, safe from violent assaults? Will he support the joint trade union “Safer Inside” campaign to secure that objective?

Robert Buckland: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point and he is right to alert us to the day-to-day bravery of prison staff in whatever part of the prison estate they work. A lot of work is going on to improve how prison staff interact with prisoners, and the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018 allows the courts to impose greater sentences to deal with assault. I will look very carefully at the proposals that are being set out tomorrow and work with Members across the House to ensure that we rise to the challenge of prison violence.

Liz Twist: Sexual assaults against prison staff have soared by 360% since 2010—a shocking statistic that the Government should be ashamed of. Does the Minister agree that the recent attack that saw a prisoner ejaculate over a female officer should be treated as a sexual assault—and a serious sexual assault at that—and be prosecuted as such?

Robert Buckland: The hon. Lady raises a very interesting point. While I think it would be invidious of me to comment on a particular case, I can see the force of her point. That is quite clearly a very serious assault and there are aggravating features in there, which make it particularly distressing for the worker involved. As I said, a lot of important work is going on with regard to body-worn cameras and we need the roll-out of PAVA spray to help protect prison officers who, let us face it, are doing such an important job that is all too often unheralded.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The use of psychoactive substances is regrettably on the rise in prisons and has an effect on behaviour. What are the Government doing to tackle that?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Indeed, the service has started research on the effects on prison staff of second-hand exposure to psychoactive substances, in particular across 10 prisons.
That testing programme will be extended. We have also established a drugs taskforce, because the best way to deal with the risk is to minimise the use of drugs in prisons. That is a tough challenge, but one that the whole service is working towards.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Teachers, nurses, cleaners and many others are a vital part of our prison workforce. However, alongside prison officers, they are exposed to the dangers of the prison estate, which the prisons inspector just today has stated contains too much violence, drug use and inactivity, and frankly remains in a state of emergency. Staff have the right to work in a safe environment that is free from violence, abuse and danger, but violence against staff is reaching record highs. Will the Justice Secretary commit today to meeting the teachers I met earlier, and who are in the Gallery to hear his answers, to ensure the safety of all our staff in our prisons?

Robert Buckland: I am always interested in meeting staff from across the prison estate, and that includes the teachers who are here today. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight Peter Clarke’s important report. That report contains significant findings relating to the ongoing challenges, but it also celebrates the professionalism, the caring and the well-run, safe, calm parts of our prison estate that exemplify a successful history and pattern of working. I was delighted to be able to attend the prison officer of the year awards last week to acknowledge some of the outstanding service given by prison officers and other employees in HMPPS.

Divorce

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to encourage divorcing couples to reconcile.

[911800]

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to provide counselling to couples seeking a divorce.

[911817]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): When people make the difficult decision to divorce, the evidence suggests that counselling will often be too late at that stage. Seeking counselling would be a personal choice for those involved. For counselling to bring a change of direction, it would require the willing co-operation of both people in the marriage. We will look at the information available to people who are contemplating divorce to see whether we can strengthen signposting to marriage counselling, and our Bill will provide the opportunity for parties to reflect on the decision to divorce by introducing a minimum timeframe within the legal process. Couples who can reconcile will be able to do so.

Eddie Hughes: Now that divorce is being made easier, with no-fault divorce going on the statute book, should we have parallel provision to help couples to save their marriages? I think the best way to do that would be further investment in services under section 22 of the Family Law Act 1996.

Mr Gauke: I think there is a wider debate to be had about how Government as a whole can address issues that lead to relationship breakdown. Simply funding marriage support services may not address the heart of the issue or reach the people who need help most at the right time, but I agree that there is a need to test what works to help couples to stay together, and I am happy to listen to the arguments about that.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What mediation services and contact centres are available, and what is their role?

Mr Gauke: Family mediation offers a way to resolve child or financial arrangements without litigation, and child contact centres provide safe, neutral venues where separated couples can build sustainable long-term child arrangements. In reforming the legal process for divorce, we will look to strengthen how couples are signposted to such services. My right hon. Friend refers to counselling, a service for people whose relationships are in trouble. As well as using services such as Relate, many people draw on family, friends and others they can trust. A marriage is more likely to be saveable before the legal process of divorce has begun.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Can the Minister outline what discussions have been held about offering support for counselling through charitable initiatives such as Relate to cut down waiting times from eight weeks? During that time many couples decide that their issues are irrevocable when in fact they might have been salvageable with help and support.

Mr Gauke: As I said earlier, there is a wider debate on this matter. I believe that the earlier such support can be provided, the better. When it comes to reform of divorce law, my argument is that by that stage it is often too late. In any event, the current requirement in our divorce law to attribute blame and fault makes it all the harder for marriages to be reconciled.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I think my right hon. Friend and the Government have got the approach right. Divorce is not the time to start putting difficulties in people’s way. When people get married, they know it is going to end in desertion, divorce or death; on the whole, death is the one we would choose, but preferably not as a result of too active participation by the other half.

May I reinforce what my right hon. Friend said, and ask him whether he will try to make it better known, not just in his Department but in others, that if people can get into stable households, all sorts of things go better? Poverty is reduced, anguish is reduced, life is extended and people have better lives, so times of family formation, reformation and even de-formation can lead to a better life for most people.

Mr Gauke: I do agree with my hon. Friend, and I am interested by the insights into the Bottomley household. The fact that our current divorce laws introduce conflict at the point of divorce can make the break-up of relationships more confrontational than it needs to be in what are already difficult circumstances.

Mr Speaker: I believe that the hon. Gentleman has been married for 52 years.

Sir Peter Bottomley: In sickness and in health.

Mr Speaker: I believe that to be so. [Interruption.]
Mr Speaker: And Lady Bottomley says so as well, as the hon. Gentleman pertinently observes from a sedentary position.

Short Sentences

5. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of sentences of less than three months in reducing reoffending.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): There is persuasive evidence that short custodial sentences do not work for the purposes of rehabilitation and helping some offenders to turn their backs on crime. They are highly disruptive to people’s lives, and provide little time for the Prison Service to do any meaningful rehabilitative work. In certain circumstances, community sentences are more effective in reducing reoffending and addressing offenders’ needs. Unless we tackle the underlying causes of reoffending, we cannot protect the public from being victims of crime. There is a strong case for abolishing short custodial sentences, with some exceptions, and I shall set out proposals shortly.

Patrick Grady: The Secretary of State will be pleased to know that 85% of those who responded to the Scottish Government’s consultation supported the existing presumption against short sentences, and were in favour of extending that beyond the current three-month presumption. Given that that presumption has helped to achieve a 19-year low in reconviction rates, I hope he agrees with the outcome of the consultation. Perhaps he will also tell us exactly what “shortly” means, and exactly when the UK Government intend to follow the Scottish Government’s lead on these matters, as they should on so many others.

Mr Gauke: “Shortly” means “shortly”. [Laughter.] I am not going to elaborate on that, but I will say that in considering sentencing reform it is necessary also to look more broadly at the probation system. That is why I recently announced proposals to reform probation that will inform offender management and strengthen confidence in probation. However, I advise the hon. Gentleman to watch this space.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I welcome the link that my right hon. Friend has made between sentencing and probation. Does he agree that one of the compelling arguments in favour of reform is that the vast majority of people who are given short sentences tend to be repeat petty offenders whose behaviour is often driven by a number of factors such as drug addiction, debt, alcoholism and mental health issues—which are not and cannot best be treated in a custodial setting—and that we ought to invest far more in treating those people effectively outside, in the interests of public protection as much as anything else?

Mr Gauke: I entirely agree with the Chairman of the Justice Committee. If we put people inside for a short time—for instance, prolific shoplifters—we want to address that criminality, but all that we actually do is make them more likely to reoffend and continue to be prolific criminals. Evidence shows that when it comes to reoffending rates, community sentences work better, but we need to do everything we can to ensure that they can be improved.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): In the past five years, more than 300,000 prison sentences of less than a year have been handed out, but the reoffending rate among that cohort is a staggering 64.4%. The Justice Committee has repeatedly called for the abolition of short custodial sentences. I appreciate that the Secretary of State is sympathetic to that call—I note his answer to an earlier question—but may we please have swift and urgent action?

Mr Gauke: I agree with the hon. Lady’s point about the statistics—we should be led by the evidence—and I hope to make further progress on this matter in the time that is left ahead.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I very much hope that a large amount of time is left to my right hon. Friend, who has been a truly reforming Secretary of State in this area, and I endorse everything said on this question by my fellow members of the Select Committee on Justice. However, does the Secretary of State agree that it is very important that if we do have community sentences they are robust and well enforced? Given that the original question was asked by a Scottish MP, I am conscious of the fact that one in three community payback orders in Scotland are ignored by criminals.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that point, and much though I believe that we should make rapid progress in this area, I think that we should do so in a way that ensures the system works properly, and I do think that the link with, for example, strengthening community sentences and the way the probation system works is very important. I hope that we are moving in a direction whereby we can make progress and we focus on ensuring that these prolific petty offenders do not reoffend and we are led by the evidence on what is the most effective way to achieve that, and my sense is that there is a large cross-party consensus on this point.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): When the Secretary of State decided to bring back 80% of community rehabilitation company activity into the National Probation Service that was welcome news, and I thank him for that, but he has left the community payback and accredited programmes in a different place. If he does not intend to bring that back into the core service, too, will he at least commit to having it commissioned as locally as possible?

Mr Gauke: Again, we have been led by the evidence. Offender management is not working as we need it to work with regard to the CRCs, but some of the other activity CRCs do is done very well: there is good innovation and good measures are taken, and we should recognise that. So I believe the private and voluntary sectors have a significant role to play, but it is different from the role played until now. In terms of commissioning and so on, I believe we need to ensure that reflects local circumstances and that is part of our plans.

Prisoners: Access to Work

6. Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase opportunities for prisoners to access work before they are released.
21. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase opportunities for prisoners to access work before they are released.  

Mr **Barty Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): But the Minister will know that what prisoners need is not only to have been prepared and had training while they are in prison but to have the full monty when they leave. They need housing, an opportunity to work and the full support of a good probation service, as was said by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the Chairman of the Justice Committee. Does the Minister realise, however, that when people who are found not guilty following a miscarriage of justice come out of prison, they get nothing?

23. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase opportunities for prisoners to access work before they are released.

The **Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland)**: A year ago, our education and employment strategy set out plans to transform the way prisoners develop the skills they need to secure employment on release, and in addition our new release on temporary licence framework aims to increase the number of people these opportunities are available to by allowing more prisoners to access it sooner and for longer.

**Dr Johnson:** I pay tribute to companies such as Timpson that are leading the way in employing ex-offenders. Which other companies is my hon. and learned Friend working with on this issue?

**Robert Buckland**: I am delighted to say that large companies such as Greene King from the catering and hospitality sector and Wates from the construction sector are now working with the new futures network that was set up last year to bring more employers, large and small, into partnerships with prisons.

**Mark Pawsey**: Futures Unlocked is a charity in my constituency with a community café supported by Warwickshire police and crime commissioner Philip Seccombe. It gives work experience to people who have just completed a prison term and has just been awarded the Queen’s award for voluntary service. That is a great example of opportunities that can be offered after release, but what can be done beforehand?

**Robert Buckland**: I join my hon. Friend in supporting Futures Unlocked and extend my congratulations to it on receiving the Queen’s award, and my hon. Friend is right to talk about what can be done beforehand. It is about building confidence, and that is why the new futures network that I mentioned, which brokers partnerships with employers to provide opportunities before release, will be crucial if we are to extend the benefit of this scheme and reduce reoffending.

**Daniel Kawczynski**: There is still some reticence among certain companies to employ ex-offenders. The Minister has highlighted some of the real success stories in the private sector where companies have specifically hired ex-offenders in a very effective way. What is his Department doing to showcase those success stories, to ensure that more companies follow this important goal?

**Robert Buckland**: My hon. Friend is right to talk about changing the culture. A number of companies are quite openly employing ex-offenders. Also, the Ban the Box initiative, which is all about encouraging companies to employ people with previous offences and removing the tick-box exercise, is supported within the Government and increasingly in the wider business community. I attended an event with the creative industries only three weeks ago to highlight that important initiative.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Minister acknowledge that this sort of practice has been going on for some years in prisons such as Magilligan Prison in my constituency and that it is replicated in other prisons? Does he agree that the practice should be shared right across the United Kingdom and that it will, we hope, lead to a reduction in reoffending rates?

**Robert Buckland**: I am interested to hear the example that the right hon. Gentleman gives in the Northern Irish prison that he represents. The through-the-gate service, which deals with employment, housing and benefit support, is crucial if we are to reduce reoffending, and the Government are investing an extra £22 million a year in prisons in England and Wales. I am working actively with my colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions to improve early access to universal credit.

**Legal Advice Deserts**

7. **Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): What steps his Department has taken to tackle legal advice deserts.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard)**: After the latest Legal Aid Agency civil tender, the number of offices providing legal aid services has increased by 7% in the areas of housing and debt. The Legal Aid Agency reviews the access to services on a regular basis and takes any necessary action to maintain access to those services.

**Sandy Martin**: As the east of England is the region with the highest percentage of population with no providers of housing legal aid, and as Ipswich is in the centre of the housing legal aid desert that covers the whole of Suffolk and most of north Essex, will the Minister agree to meet me and the director of the Suffolk Law Centre to discuss what can be done to address this housing legal aid desert?
Paul Maynard: I anticipated that the hon. Gentleman might ask about his local situation. Although a contract was awarded in Ipswich in the last tender, we are waiting for the provider to advise us that it has managed to recruit staff to provide advice. We are aware that this will be restricting access, and we will shortly consider re-tendering the service. I am more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss this further.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Public confidence in the legal aid system is often determined by high-profile cases such as the inquests into the Manchester bombing and the London Bridge attacks, in which the taxpayer funded the legal fees of the public authorities and, in the case of London Bridge, the widow of one of the terrorists, but not the victims of the attack. Many people feel instinctively that this is not right, so what work is the Minister doing to build confidence in the justice of the current system so that the victims of terror do not face their own legal advice desert?

Paul Maynard: I certainly hear what my hon. Friend says. Our thoughts will always be with those who have lost loved ones in any terror attack. Our review of legal aid shows that bereaved families do not need specific legal representation at the vast majority of inquests. It is important to ensure that these inquests remain inquisitorial, but what is known as equality of arms has to be a key consideration, as we know from Dame Elish Angiolini’s report. I am therefore working closely with my officials to look at what more can be done to help those families who are in an inquest situation.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): This month marks 70 years since the post-war Labour Government introduced the Legal Aid and Advice Act 1949. Tory cuts have decimated access in recent years, and those cuts alone mean 90,000 families denied legal aid for benefits challenges—a move that the United Nations criticised—and 50,000 families denied housing legal aid, letting rogue landlords off the hook, as well as tens of thousands left facing the hostile environment without legal support. Labour has committed to restoring legal aid for all family law, for housing, for benefits appeals, for judicial review preparation, for inquests and for real action on immigration cases. Will the Minister mark the 70th anniversary of legal aid by committing to return any of those?

Paul Maynard: As we survey the decaying embers of a dying regime reaching its inevitable conclusion, it is good to see the shadow Secretary of State showing that he is waging and not drowning, as he desperately tries to draw attention to the fact he is full of vim and vigour. As he will know, we are currently reviewing legal aid thresholds and exceptional case funding. We are bringing special guardianship orders back within the scope of legal aid, and we are looking at legal support action plans.

I am unclear, the more I listen to Labour Front Benchers, about why they assume that the only way to provide legal support is to fund it through legal aid. We will shortly have a question on law centres and, for me, there have to be a number of ways to provide legal support.

[Interruption.] “And for us,” I hear the hon. Gentleman say from a sedentary position, and I am pleased to hear that.

Probation Reform

8. David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on probation reform.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): I am pleased to have announced plans to streamline probation delivery, through the National Probation Service, to build on the role of the private and voluntary sectors in driving innovation and to better support skilled probation officers. These changes will allow the public, private and voluntary sectors to play to their strengths and ensure stronger supervision and support for offenders. We are now developing the commercial and operational frameworks that will underlie the future system, and we are planning for the transition. We are undertaking a full programme of market engagement to inform our plans, in addition to engagement with probation staff and trade unions.

David Hanson: By any stretch of the imagination, the changes to the probation service have been a shambles, fragmenting the system and increasing risk to the community at large. A simple “sorry” may also help the Minister’s answer, but will he give an indication of the cost of cancelling the current contracts next year? What will be the replacement costs for the state or other providers in taking over those services?

Mr Gauke: First, “Transforming Rehabilitation” introduced bold reforms, and steps have been taken to ensure there is more innovation within our system, but I recognise that significant elements of it are not working as needed, which is why we have made the changes.

On the right hon. Gentleman’s point about costs, it is worth bearing in mind that we originally expected to spend £3.1 billion on community rehabilitation companies over a seven-year period, and we now expect to spend £2.7 billion over the same period. In other words, over the lifetime of the contracts, we now expect to spend £405 million less on CRCs than originally forecast.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Probation works best when working with local partners. A brilliant charity in my constituency is owed £1,800 as a result of Working Links going into administration. This is a significant sum for the Draeccaen Centre in Falmouth. Will the Secretary of State intervene to ensure it is paid for its excellent work?

Mr Gauke: We will look at the specific case my hon. Friend raises, but we have already intervened to ensure those charities that have lost out as a consequence of what happened with Working Links receive support. I will make sure I look at her individual case.

Liz Saville Roberts (Gwynfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Considering that many community rehabilitation companies are now discredited for prioritising profit over public safety, how will the Government hold them to account when mismanagement of their contractual responsibility for probation comes to light?
Mr Gauke: To be fair to the CRCs, I am not sure that any of them is taking steps to get profits—but perhaps to reduce their losses. In truth, the shareholders of CRCs have somewhat subsidised probation services in recent years. We will hold the CRCs to their contractual obligations and ensure they deliver what they are contractually obliged to deliver.

Leaving the EU: No Deal

9. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What steps his Department has taken to prepare for the UK leaving the EU without a deal; and if he will make a statement. [911805]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): Our justice system is respected across the world. That was the case before we joined the EU, and it will continue to be the case after we leave. The Department has taken all necessary steps to ensure we are prepared for a deal across MOJ interests and for the possibility of a no-deal exit, to the extent it is possible to do so.

This includes working closely with other Departments to ensure that essential services continue; working with suppliers of key products to ensure essential supplies are in place; providing the courts and judiciary with additional training and resources to enable them to prepare for possible changes; and ensuring that contingencies are in place for any potential traffic disruption in the south-east of England.

Stuart C. McDonald: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer and welcome the strong statements he has made recently on a possible no-deal Brexit. Does he agree that, regardless of how much preparation is done, the implications of no deal for our justice systems would be dire?

Mr Gauke: What I would say to the hon. Gentleman is that leaving the EU without a deal risks some significant impacts across the justice system, including potential disruption to goods and services to our prisons; an increase in case load and case complexity across court jurisdictions; increased pressure on our courts system; the loss of access to several law enforcement tools, including the loss of data exchange tools, making it more difficult to protect the public; and market access impacts on our legal sector, restricting or removing our ability to operate in EU markets. So do I think a no-deal Brexit is a good idea? No, I do not.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I commend the Secretary of State for his honesty, but I wonder whether he would pass on his knowledge on this subject to the two candidates to be the next Prime Minister, because, despite their recent and mercifully brief visits to Scotland, they seem unaware of the impact on the safety of people living in Scotland and across the UK if we leave the EU without a deal. Has he spoken to them to explain that if we do not have the use of the European arrest warrant, it will be extremely difficult to apprehend people who commit violent crime in this country and then go back to the continent, whereas at the moment this can be done within a matter of days?

Mr Gauke: Both candidates for the leadership of my party have made it clear that they do not want a no-deal Brexit, and I wish them well. [Interruption.] I understand that the chances are “a million to one”, so I wish them well in their endeavours.

Joanna Cherry: It would seem that the Secretary of State and I must be reading different newspapers. In an earlier answer, he mentioned problems of data protection if we leave without a deal. Has he explained to the candidates to be Prime Minister that leaving without a deal means we would lose membership of Europol and, because of data protection rules, that would mean that not only would the police no longer have access to data held by Europol, but information that Police Scotland has currently been providing to Europol will be removed from Europol databases, thus prejudicing ongoing investigations? Does he agree that it is not acceptable for people in Scotland to have their safety so prejudiced?

Mr Gauke: First, I can confirm that I suspect we do read different newspapers, but I agree that the loss of access to various law enforcement tools would make it more difficult to protect the public. I am sure there are ways in which these issues can be addressed, but a much better way forward would be to leave the EU—this is where we disagree—with a deal.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): A no-deal Brexit poses a serious threat to our justice system; ending access to the European arrest warrant and criminal database would leave us all less safe. The Justice Secretary agrees about those no-deal dangers, but I also fear that no deal is a stepping stone to a free trade deal with the United States of America. Labour’s justice spokesperson in the Lords recently asked whether our prisons would be up for grabs for American corporations in any post-Brexit free trade deal with the US, and the Government’s vague answer alarmed me. So will the Justice Secretary clearly state today that our prisons should not be part of any post-Brexit free trade deal with the USA?

Mr Gauke: First, I think I read different newspapers from the hon. Gentleman, although I do read the Morning Star when he has an article in it. [Interruption.] Which is not quite every day, although it sometimes feels like it. On trade deals with the US, it is the intention of this Government, and, I suspect, of the next Government, to enter into a trade deal with the US, but we would want to do so in a way that protects public services.

Tackling Reoffending: Voluntary Sector

11. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What assessment the Government have made of the role of the voluntary sector in tackling reoffending. [911807]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): The voluntary sector has a pivotal role in supporting rehabilitation and helping offenders to turn their lives around. I want to expand that role, including in the delivery of local and specialist services by smaller organisations. We have committed to tender up to £280 million of contracts for unpaid work, accredited programmes and rehabilitation interventions in the future model.
Nigel Huddlestone: There are indeed many brilliant charities and voluntary organisations that help ex-offenders get back on their feet, including in my constituency the likes of Caring Hands in the Vale, which is led by the brilliant Diane Bennett, and other organisations that work throughout the country, such as The Right Course, which is led by Fred Sirieix. What practical help can the Government give to such organisations?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend is right to raise the excellent work done by those two organisations. In fact, more than 10,000 people work for voluntary organisations that are involved in criminal justice, and I want to involve them more closely. I have mentioned the dynamic framework, but we will also have a £20 million regional outcomes fund to pilot innovative programmes. The new regional probation model will allow local approaches at a local level.

Support for Veterans

12. Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): What recent steps the Government have taken to support veterans in the criminal justice system. [911808]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): We all owe a great debt to those who serve in our excellent armed forces—including, of course, the hon. and gallant Gentleman—both during and after their service, and that also applies to those former armed forces personnel who enter the criminal justice system. The Government have committed £5.7 million to the support of ex-armed forces personnel in the criminal justice system, and we work in close partnership with a range of service charities to provide the help that they need.

Dan Jarvis: I thank the Minister for his response. I know he understands that veterans can have more complex needs than other offenders, but those needs are not always recognised, meaning that some do not get the support they require. Does he agree that we should have a dedicated veterans support officer in every probation and prison area?

Edward Argar: The hon. and gallant Gentleman raises an important point. He is absolutely right that many veterans have specific needs, which are, for example, often met in the custodial estate by service charities that understand and can relate to those needs. He raises a sensible and interesting suggestion that I am happy to pick up with him after questions.

Law Centres

13. Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): What his Department’s policy is on law centres. [911809]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): We recognise the valuable work that law centres do in local communities throughout the country and support them in that work through both grant funding and legal aid contracts.

Marsha De Cordova: Law centres such as South West London Law Centres, which has an office in my constituency, provide a significant cost saving to the public finances by helping to resolve legal issues in the fields of debt, employment, immigration and housing before they spiral out of control. Will the Minister commit to securing Treasury funding to provide a central grant to law centres to ensure their survival?

Paul Maynard: A few weeks ago I visited my local law centre in Blackpool, the Fylde Coast Advice and Legal Centre, and saw the excellent work that it does. The centre that the hon. Lady mentioned is on my “to visit” list, so staff will be seeing me imminently. She makes the important point that we need to bring early legal advice as close as possible to the individual’s front door, and not wait for matters to reach the court door. We are committed in our legal support action plan to looking into how law centres can best be utilised to deliver on that agenda, so I am keen to hear what staff have to say to me when I get to meet them.

Family Courts: Rape and Domestic Abuse Survivors

14. Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the service provided by family courts to survivors of rape and domestic abuse and their children. [911810]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): We are determined to improve the family justice response to vulnerable parents and children, including victims of rape and domestic abuse. An expert panel has been established to help us better to understand victims’ experiences in the family courts, and we will hold a public call for evidence to build a more detailed picture of any harm caused during or following proceedings.

Preet Kaur Gill: One of the most senior family court judges has described it as “shaming” to preside over so many cases where individuals are being forced to represent themselves because of the impact of legal aid cuts, especially as we should be minimising harm to children of victims of domestic violence. This really should be a central concern of our justice system. Is the Minister shamed by the effects of his Government’s policy?

Paul Maynard: What we are seeking to do with the panel that we have set up is make sure that we reappraise the incremental changes that have occurred over time and understand how that has impacted on practice in the courts. I am very keen to see what the panel has to say. It is independent, and I am not trying to pre-judge its outcomes at all, but I hope that it comes up with a series of short-term changes that we can make immediately. Areas of further work may be required.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I wrote to the Minister requesting the removal of automatic entitlement to joint assets from those guilty of attempting to murder their spouse. In his response, he expressed concern that to do so may punish the offender twice. But that is exactly what is happening to the victim: they are subject first to attempted murder and then to continued abuse through the courts and the potential loss of their home. The victims’ rights must always come first. Does he support the removal of the presumption of entitlement to joint assets in these cases?
Paul Maynard: I do understand the points that the hon. Lady makes. I am glad that she read my reply carefully, and I understand why it might concern her. Part of the objective of this panel is to make sure that we look across the wide spectrum of practice in the family justice system. I have heard the points that she has made and I am sure that the panel will have, too. I look forward to seeing what advice the panel has.

Topical Questions

T1. [911822] Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The Government intend to bring forward legislation when parliamentary time allows to create a Helen’s law. We propose to change the life sentence release test to ensure that, in a case where an offender has been sentenced for murder and the remains of the victim have not been found, the Parole Board must take account of any failure or refusal to disclose the location of those remains when assessing whether such an offender is safe to release. Although the Parole Board already considers such a failure or refusal as part of its risk assessment procedures, our proposal will set that out in statute. I pay tribute to Marie McCourt for her tireless work on the Helen’s law campaign and the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) for similar such work.

Marsha De Cordova: Last month, in a letter to me, the Secretary of State revealed that more than £26 million of public money has been wasted in a single year fighting and losing personal independence payment appeals. That is a vast sum, in addition to an appeals process that is forcing many disabled people to wait for their decisions. Does he believe that we are getting good value for public money, or does he accept Labour’s view that out in statute. I pay tribute to Marie McCourt for similar such work.

Mr Gauke: The hon. Gentleman sets out many of the reasons why we brought in the female offender strategy last year. We are seeking to address the root causes of criminality, which are very often—even more so with women—to do with mental health issues, as well as the fact that a very large proportion of women offenders are victims of domestic abuse. It is right that we have a female offender strategy that focuses on non-custodial measures; part of that will be women’s residential centres.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Will the Minister update us on the sale or transfer to the Isle of Wight Council of Camp Hill prison? Is he aware of the importance of the site to the Island and to public housing on the Island, and does he understand the frustrations of Islanders, who see yet another bit of land being land-banked by either developers or Government Departments?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. I am as anxious as him to ensure that that land can be put to good use. I wrote to him last month. We have commissioned a demolition survey of the former Camp Hill prison, and I will meet him when the results are available later this month. I will also visit the Island to see the prison estate and to talk about the matter directly with the Island council.

T2. [911823] Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Since the Corston review into women in the criminal justice system in 2007, over 100 women have died in prison. INQUEST has recently published an update on its report, “Still Dying on the Inside”, which sets out the tragic and often avoidable circumstances around the deaths of women in custody. What concrete actions has the Minister taken to resolve this crisis?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. Although the female deaths in custody
rate is lower than that of men, every single death is a tragedy that we must do everything we can to prevent; and likewise with self-harm. We have improved the support available to women in prisons. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, we believe that in many cases a community sentence or community support is better and more effective than prison. The hon. Gentleman will have seen the announcement we made a few weeks ago about the health and justice plan that we are currently working on to improve health and support for everyone in prison—not just female offenders, but obviously including them.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): Recent Ministry of Justice research shows the increasing concentration of crime in the hands of a few prolific criminals, but written answers that I have received in the past few weeks suggest that too few are being jailed. Will my right hon. Friend look to review the sentencing of prolific offenders?

Mr Gauke: This is one of the rare occasions when I have to say that I disagree with my hon. Friend. For prolific offenders of minor crimes, it is my view that a non-custodial approach is the right one, but we need to ensure that that works effectively. That is why I have announced reforms to probation. One problem we have at the moment is that such offenders get a short custodial sentence, which only disrupts lives but does not allow any opportunity to do any work on rehabilitation.

T3. [911824] David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I agree with the Secretary of State’s last point, but in order to achieve that he will need to reverse the trend that has seen a fall in drug and alcohol rehabilitation requirement orders from 170,000 five years ago to 120,000 this year. Will he look at that point?

Mr Gauke: I certainly will. We have recently announced an extension of the community sentence treatment requirement pilots. That is the direction that we need to be going in to address some of the substance abuse and mental health issues that often lie behind these prolific offenders who do cause great difficulties for society. If we want to reduce reoffending, we need to focus on that group and take effective, evidence-led measures.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): On behalf of my constituent Linda Jones, may I thank and congratulat the Justice team, from the bottom of my heart, for bringing forward Helen’s law? Let us collectively hope that making parole harder to achieve unless a perpetrator reveals the whereabouts of the body will lead to the discovery of the remains of Danielle Jones. Having met Marie McCourt, I know the pain that is felt by all those families. We have improved the support available to children and prioritising areas that are effective in bringing down crime. Will Ministers read that report and respond with the urgency required?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): I am always happy to read any report relevant to my brief. We are already reviewing many parts of the legal aid framework, particularly around the thresholds. I will have a look at that report and take it on board.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): As we head into the comprehensive spending review, what pitch will my right hon. Friend make to the Treasury relating to prisons and schemes that have been successful in reducing reoffending?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, we believe that in many cases a community sentence or community support is better and more effective than prison. As my right hon. Friend has said, we believe that in many cases a community sentence or community support is better and more effective than prison. The hon. Gentleman will have seen the announcement we made a few weeks ago about the health and justice plan that we are currently working on to improve health and support for everyone in prison—not just female offenders, but obviously including them.

T5. [911826] Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I have been in communication with the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), about a constituent of mine who is facing an appalling situation with the Legal Aid Agency. The Legal Aid Agency applies a £100,000 disregard to eligibility for legal aid if someone is living in their main dwelling, but because my constituent is fleeing domestic violence and living in a women’s refuge, her property is considered to be her second home and she is being asked for the legal aid back. That cannot be the intention of the policy, but the Minister has not been able to do anything for my constituent. Will he urgently look into this and get us to a situation where people fleeing domestic violence are not penalised as a result of living in a refuge?

Paul Maynard: The hon. Gentleman wisely sent his communication to my parliamentary email, so I got to read it. That is a note to other Members around the House as to how to get my attention. I have already asked to speak to officials this afternoon and I hope to be in touch as soon as I can.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Non-Contentious Probate (Fees) Order 2018 went through Committee at the beginning of the year but has still not been subject to a vote here. Given that the proposed increase, for no additional work, from £215 to potentially £6,000 has been described as an abuse of the Lord Chancellor’s fee-levying powers, has he had second thoughts and decided to reject this iniquitous proposal?

Mr Gauke: I think the Government will be responding to that in due course.

Tim Loughton: What does that mean?
Mr Speaker: “What does that mean?”, the hon. Gentleman chuntered from a sedentary position. He is not in a minority of one in posing that question, but the Secretary of State’s reply was delphic.

T7. [911828] Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Youth offending teams are struggling to provide their services for young people and the public as a result of year-on-year cuts to those services. This has meant highly complex case loads for staff, meaning that they can only respond through crisis intervention work. What are the Government going to do to help councils provide the sustained preventive interventions that are desperately needed in this sector?

Edward Argar: We, like the hon. Lady, value the work that youth offending teams do with children who have offended and the work they do to prevent offending. The Youth Justice Board’s total funding this year for frontline services, including youth offending teams, is £72.2 million, which is an increase on last year. We continue to invest in youth offending teams, but it is also important that we encourage innovations such as I saw when I visited Lewisham’s youth offending team earlier this year.

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend asks an important question about sentences of indeterminate length for public protection. I assure him that the Parole Board applies the most rigorous of tests before release. Indeed, the number of recalls to prison pursuant to that regime is about 1,000 prisoners. We still have 2,500 within the estate subject to that regime. There are counterweights that suggest to me that some prisoners have been there for too long, but I hear what he says.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): IPP prisoners are those imprisoned indefinitely for public protection who have been found guilty of serious violent and sexual offences. In 2011, 300 were released. In 2017, 616 were released. How can the public feel safe when more than 10 of these people a week are being released on to our streets?

Mr Speaker: Well, that sounds an intoxicating read.

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those remarks. I believe it is very important to this country that we respect the independence of the judiciary, and the rule of law is at the heart of what we are about as a country. I can tell him that my speech is available on the gov.uk website—I hope that this announcement will not result in that website crashing, but I assure the House that it can be found there.

Mr Speaker: “What does that mean?”, the hon. Gentleman chuntered from a sedentary position. He is not in a minority of one in posing that question, but the Secretary of State’s reply was delphic.

T9. [911830] Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I look forward to meeting the Prisons Minister next week to discuss HMP Nottingham. One of the major challenges at the jail is drugs. What is the latest update on the roll-out of body scanners at this prison and others?

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his continued interest in and concern for the welfare of prisoners and staff at HMP Nottingham. I look forward to updating him in detail next week. Among the issues we will discuss is that of drugs and how to eradicate them.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I was delighted last Friday to present long-service awards to more than a dozen prison officers and staff at Long Lartin Prison in my constituency. Will the Prisons Minister join me in thanking them for their service, often of more than 20 years? What is being done on the recruitment and retention of prison officers?

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Friend for taking such an interest in his local prison and taking part in that scheme. I mentioned the prison officer of the year awards. The importance of those awards is to recognise the outstanding service of prison officers and other staff within the estate. In terms of retention, we are improving the way in which we train and support prison officers, particularly the newest recruits, and the number of prison officers has increased by 1,500 in the year to date.

T10. [911831] Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): The work of our youth offending service in Sunderland is vital, yet since 2011 it has almost half its funding. If the Secretary of State is serious about diverting young people away from crime, will he look again at the current funding situation? We can and should be doing much more to support our young people, their families and the wider community.

Edward Argar: As I said to the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), we recognise the vital work of youth offending teams across the country. We have increased the funding for frontline services this year. Local authorities also have a role to play. While she is right that the funding has reduced, it is worth remembering that so too has the statutory case load, by a significant amount. That is not the only factor—they do other work, which must be recognised—but it is a factor.
Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): What assessment has the Minister made of the delays and errors at the Cardiff probate office, because what used to take a matter of 10 working days for my constituents is now taking months? Can he set out exactly what is causing the delays and, more importantly, what can be done to reduce them?

Paul Maynard: As I said at the start of Question Time, it is wrong that people in a state of bereavement are having to wait so long for these matters to be addressed. In May the average waiting time was eight weeks, and it has now decreased to six or seven weeks. I intend to keep working with Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service to keep that downward trend and bring waiting times back to the traditional two to three weeks.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Prisons Minister has been good enough to keep me informed of developments at HMP Bristol in Horfield and of the urgent notification status. Will he agree to visit the prison with me, hopefully in the next couple of months, so that he can see for himself the challenges there are and how we can support the prison and the next governor to provide a safe regime?

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her continuing interest in HMP Bristol. The response to the urgent notification will be issued this week, and I will indeed visit the prison with her in the coming months to ensure that the necessary progress is achieved.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): In his answers to my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) and for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), the Minister seemed content with youth offending services, yet every day we see the results of the Government’s neglect of those services. Assuming that he has learned from that failure, what advice will he offer his successor to sort it out?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that question—I am not yet sure whether that will be a matter for me or for a successor, but I assume he meant it kindly. He is right that the central Government grant has been reduced, as I said in answer to the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), and so too has that contributed by local authorities. It is important also to recognise the reducing statutory case load to set alongside that, although that is in no way to diminish the absolutely vital work that youth offending teams do. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that. I share his concern and will continue to work closely with the Youth Justice Board on it.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Campaigners and I are really pleased that the Government have commissioned a review of the treatment of victims of domestic abuse by the family courts, but we are concerned that survivors’ voices are not at the heart of the panel. I am looking forward to meeting the Minister next week, but will he take this opportunity to confirm on the record how victims and survivors of domestic abuse can participate in the review without fear of breaching gagging clauses imposed on them by the family courts?

Paul Maynard: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. I have already had discussions with the panel’s chairs on how to ensure that as broad a spectrum of people as possible can participate in the panel and its evidence taking. I will take away that point and hopefully have a concrete answer for her by the time we meet.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Witnessing domestic abuse, especially as a child, is traumatising and has an impact on life for years to come. In the upcoming domestic violence legislation, will the Minister commit to including children who have witnessed domestic abuse in the statutory definition of a domestic abuse victim?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady rightly highlights the importance of the draft Domestic Abuse Bill, which we hope to bring forward as soon as we have fully considered the recommendations of the Joint Committee on the draft Bill. I know that is something that came up in evidence and in the Joint Committee, and it is something we will be looking at very carefully.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): My constituent Claire Ball was sexually abused as a child. She bravely went through the trauma of giving evidence against the perpetrator in court. Throughout that process, Claire was given less support than the perpetrator, had no option for witnesses to support her and, disgustingly, was accused of “leading him on”. He was found not guilty—Claire has still not been given a clear reason why—and has remained living close by. Can the Minister explain to me and to Claire, since she must relive the trauma every time she sees the perpetrator, when the Government will redress the inequity faced by child sexual abuse victims in our justice system?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady makes a powerful point. The issues to which she alludes are likely to fall under the responsibilities of both the Crown Prosecution Service and the court. I am happy to meet her to discuss the specifics of the case and, as appropriate, take them up with the Solicitor General and the Attorney General.
Speaker’s Statement

Mr Speaker: In a moment, we will come to the ten-minute rule motion. However, the House will be aware of the subsequent business appertaining to Northern Ireland. By way of explanation, I wanted to mention the following. Last night, my office received a telephone call from a sadly rather uninformed tabloid scribbler who seemed much excited by the rumour that “Mr Speaker would not be chairing Committee proceedings”. He was most anxious to decipher the reason for this, because it seemed to him most mysterious. Kindness and generosity of spirit prevent me from naming the said individual. [Hon. Members: “Go on.”] However, perhaps I can be permitted to say on the Floor of the House what is well known to Members: it is a very long established convention that Mr Speaker does not chair the Committee of the whole House. When I say a long established convention I am referring to a convention dating back to the 17th century.

I know that some people are slow learners and others are late developers, but I hope that the chappie has now got the point, and it will be a professional utility to him thereafter not to need to trouble my staff to be educated on this front. There we go, there is hope for us all. The fella has now, I think, probably grasped the point.

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

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

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Coal Authority to undertake remedial works on properties with subsidence damage as a result of tin mining; to make provision for the Coal Authority to make compensation payments in lieu of such works; and for connected purposes.

The Cornish tin mining industry left many great legacies. In its heyday, it generated extraordinary wealth for our nation. Between the 15th and 18th centuries, there was even a stannary parliament in Cornwall that had the power to veto certain tax proposals coming from central Government. The industry was also a catalyst for great invention and innovation. Richard Trevithick from Camborne invented the first steam locomotive, and William Murdoch from Redruth invented gas lighting—both inventions that shaped our modern world.

There were companies, too, such as Holman’s, which developed extraordinary drilling technology that was exported to mining operations around the world. When the industry declined in the late 19th century, Cornish miners took their expertise around the globe to build mines as far afield as Australia, South Africa, California, Mexico and South America. Today, we still have the world-famous Camborne School of Mines, located with Exeter University at Falmouth, and a new generation of companies is taking that heritage of drilling expertise to the oil and gas industry, and to renewables. There is even some discussion about reopening the last tin mine at South Crofty, as tin prices have recovered.

For those living in Cornwall, however, there is a less welcome legacy from tin mining—the problem of subsidence damage caused by historical mine workings. The subterranean area in Camborne, Pool and Redruth in particular, but also in many parts of Cornwall, is said to resemble a Swiss cheese. It is a complex network of tunnels and mines under the towns in my constituency.

Those mine workings pose several difficult problems for residents. First, there can be significant costs when damage occurs. One of my constituents had to raise a second mortgage on their property to secure £20,000 to put right a mining feature that had opened up in their front garden. Secondly, there is sometimes ambiguity over the liability of insurers. In general cases, insurers help when there is damage directly to a property, although they seldom assist when there are problems arising within the curtilage of a property but not to the structure of the building. They do not generally remedy features to prevent future damage.

The final problem this issue poses for my constituents and others in Cornwall is that there are many cases where people undertake a mining search with a particular company when they buy a property and the company tells them there are no issues, so they purchase a property and secure a mortgage, but often when they want to move and sell their home, they find that a different buyer will use a different mining search company that
has different data available to it, and that reveals an issue that can make it difficult for a purchaser to get a mortgage.

The problems arising from mining subsidence damage are obviously not unique to Cornwall—coalmining took place in huge areas of this country—but what is unique to Cornwall is that there is no Government-backed scheme to assist residents with the problems they face.

There has been a long-standing Government scheme for coal. In 1957, when the Coal-Mining (Subsidence) Act was introduced, there was an opportunity to include tin mining workings, but it was not taken. In 1975, there was a new Coal Industry Act, which formalised the role of British Coal in giving compensation, particularly to the nationalised industry. Again, the opportunity to include tin was missed. In 1991, new legislation was introduced to consolidate the compensation schemes in this area, through the Coal Mining Subsidence Act 1991. Again, tin was excluded. In 1994, the Coal Industry Act assigned responsibility for these compensation schemes to the Coal Authority and, again, this excluded tin. My Bill would correct that long-standing oversight and end the prejudice against communities that suffer from subsidence damage as a result of tin mining.

It is sometimes said that coal is different, and it is sometimes said that coal is different because it was a nationalised industry. However, this claim does not stand up to any kind of scrutiny, because the 1991 Act applies to all damage caused by coalmining, whether that was pre-nationalisation, during the war or post-nationalisation, and whether it was private or public. Even after the nationalisation of our coal industry, there continued to be some private mines. Indeed, the original 1957 Act on coalmining subsidence mainly addressed the issue of private mines, where the liability for damage could not be established.

Sometimes it is said that the geology of Cornwall means there are fewer problems. Cornwall is okay, people say, because it is built on granite and there are fewer subsidence issues. All I can say is that if a homeowner does have a subsidence event on their property, that is every bit as difficult for them as it is for any resident in a coalmining area. The fact that there could be proportionately fewer cases in tin mining areas, frankly, ought to make the Government more ready to act in this space. There is no need for the Treasury to fret about the cost of it all, because including tin mining would be a modest extension of the scheme.

The Coal Authority deals with between 500 and 600 claims in coalmining areas each and every year, and it has a budget of about £27 million, much of which is spent on remedying subsidence issues. In 2014, there was a triennial review of the functions of the Coal Authority, and in 2017 a separate, tailored review was run by the Cabinet Office. Both those reviews concluded that the current approach and the current system in the Coal Authority were fit for purpose. They considered other alternatives to compensate communities, but those were all ruled out. My contention is that what is good for coal is good for tin.

I am aware, from my discussions on this, that the Treasury—I think some officials in the Treasury—also took the view that there was an unfairness here, with coal being treated differently from other types of mining. Initially, I was encouraged by that, but the Treasury being the Treasury, it of course had a rather different solution to this, which was to pull the rug out from under the coalm scheme, rather than to add tin to it. Thankfully, both the reviews and Ministers have ruled out such action.

My Bill would broaden the remit of the Coal Authority, placing an equivalent legal requirement on it to assist in subsidence cases in tin mining areas. The geographical footprint for tin mining—located, as it is, mainly in west Cornwall, although in other parts of Cornwall too and in some parts of west Devon—means there will be far fewer cases for tin mining than there are for coalmining. As I said earlier, the geology of Cornwall—built, as it is, on solid granite—means the Government could expect proportionately fewer claims coming from these tin mining areas than they currently receive from coalmining areas.

The addition of tin to the compensation scheme that has existed since 1957 would be a drop in the ocean for a Department such as the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. However, it would mean a great deal to those families and communities that are affected by the blight of subsidence caused by mine workings. Given Cornwall’s great contribution to the wealth of our nation and to the industrial revolution, I believe that the least we could do in this House is correct this historical oversight, prejudice and injustice against Cornwall and against communities suffering from tin mining subsidence.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That George Eustice, Derek Thomas, Sarah Newton, Scott Mann, Steve Double, Mrs Sheryll Murray and Sir Gary Streeter present the Bill.

George Eustice accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 418).
Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill

Considered in Committee (Order, 8 July)

[DAME ELEANOR LAING in the Chair]

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): We will begin with new clause 1, but before I call the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), I will point out a few matters to hon. Members. There are several changes to the provisional selection and grouping. These are fairly minor changes, but Members will appreciate that the Bill was published very recently and that there has been quite a lot of interest in it.

New clause 10, in the name of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), currently appears in the second group of amendments. It should have appeared in the first group of amendments with new clause 1, so I would be grateful if Members read the first group of amendments as including new clause 10, in the name of the hon. Lady. New clause 19 should not have appeared on the provisional selection of amendments at all, as new clause 19 has not been selected. Amendment 11 has a small error in it, and an amended text of amendment 11 will be issued shortly; it is not dramatic.

New Clause 1

MARRIAGE OF SAME-SEX COUPLES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

“(1) The Secretary of State must make regulations to change the law relating to marriage in Northern Ireland to provide that marriage between same-sex couples is lawful.

(2) Regulations under this section must be in force no later than 21 October 2019, subject to subsections (3) and (4).

(3) A statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (1)—

(a) must be laid before both Houses of Parliament;

(b) is subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.

(4) If a Northern Ireland Executive is formed before the regulations under this section come into force, any regulations made under this section and any extant obligations arising under subsection (1) shall cease to have effect.”—(Conor McGinn.)

This new clause would require UK secondary legislation to extend same-sex marriage to Northern Ireland unless a Northern Ireland Executive is formed by 21 October 2019.

Brought up, and read the First time.

12.58 pm

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

The First Deputy Chairman: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—Pension for victims and survivors of Troubles-related incidents: debate—

“(1) A Minister of the Crown must, within the period of two sitting days beginning with the first sitting day on or after the day on which the report on progress made towards preparing legislation to implement a pension for seriously injured victims and survivors of Troubles-related incidents mentioned in section 3 is published, make arrangements for—

(a) a motion to the effect that the House of Commons has approved that report to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Commons sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published, and

(b) a motion for the House of Lords to take note of the report mentioned in paragraph (a) to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Lords sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published.

(2) In this section—

“Commons sitting day” means a day on which the House of Commons is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Commons is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day);

“Lords sitting day” means a day on which the House of Lords is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Lords is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day).

This new clause is linked to amendment 1 on a report on progress made towards preparing legislation to implement a pension for seriously injured victims and survivors of Troubles-related incidents, and provides for the report to be debated in Parliament.

New clause 4—Reproductive rights of women in Northern Ireland: debate—

“(1) A Minister of the Crown must, within the period of two sitting days beginning with the first sitting day on or after the day on which the report on progress made towards meeting international human rights obligations applicable to the United Kingdom in relation to the reproductive rights of women mentioned in section 3 is published, make arrangements for—

(a) a motion to the effect that the House of Commons has approved that report to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Commons sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published, and

(b) a motion for the House of Lords to take note of the report mentioned in paragraph (a) to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Lords sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published.

(2) In this section—

“Commons sitting day” means a day on which the House of Commons is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Commons is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day);

“Lords sitting day” means a day on which the House of Lords is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Lords is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day).

This new clause is linked to amendment 2 on a report on progress made towards meeting international human rights obligations applicable to the United Kingdom in relation to the reproductive rights of women, and provides for the report to be debated in Parliament.

New clause 6—Historical institutional abuse in Northern Ireland: debate—

“(1) A Minister of the Crown must, within the period of two sitting days beginning with the first sitting day on or after the day on which the report on progress made towards implementing the recommendations made by the Report of the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse in Northern Ireland between 1922 and 1995 is published, make arrangements for—

(a) a motion to the effect that the House of Commons has approved that report to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Commons sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published, and

(b) a motion for the House of Lords to take note of the report mentioned in paragraph (a) to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Lords sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published.

(2) In this section—

“Commons sitting day” means a day on which the House of Commons is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Commons is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day);

“Lords sitting day” means a day on which the House of Lords is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Lords is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day).

This new clause is linked to amendment 3 on a report on progress made towards implementing the recommendations made by the Report of the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse in Northern Ireland between 1922 and 1995, and provides for the report to be debated in Parliament.
Commons sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published, and
(b) a motion for the House of Lords to take note of the report mentioned in paragraph (a) to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Lords sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published.

(2) In this section—
“Commons sitting day” means a day on which the House of Commons is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Commons is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day);
“Lords sitting day” means a day on which the House of Lords is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Lords is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day).

This new clause is linked to amendment 3 on a report on progress towards implementing the recommendations made by the Hart Report of the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse in Northern Ireland between 1922 and 1995, and provides for the report to be debated in Parliament.

New clause 8—Same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland: debate—
“(1) A Minister of the Crown must, within the period of two sitting days beginning with the first sitting day on or after the day on which the report on progress made towards implementing marriage for same-sex couples in Northern Ireland is published, make arrangements for—
(a) a motion to the effect that the House of Commons has approved that report to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Commons sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published, and
(b) a motion for the House of Lords to take note of the report mentioned in paragraph (a) to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Lords sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published.

(2) In this section—
“Commons sitting day” means a day on which the House of Commons is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Commons is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day);
“Lords sitting day” means a day on which the House of Lords is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Lords is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day).

This new clause is linked to amendment 3 on a report on progress towards implementing the recommendations made by the Hart Report of the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse in Northern Ireland between 1922 and 1995, and provides for the report to be debated in Parliament.

New clause 10—International obligations—
“(1) In accordance with the requirements of section 26 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 regarding international obligations, the Secretary of State must make regulations by statutory instrument to give effect to the recommendations of the Report of the Inquiry concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

(2) Regulations under this section must come into force by 21 October 2019, subject to subsections (3) and (4).

(3) A statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (1)—
(a) must be laid before both Houses of Parliament;
(b) is subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.

(4) If a Northern Ireland Executive is formed before 21 October 2019, any extant obligations arising under subsection (1) shall cease to have effect.”

Amendment 9, in clause 3, page 2, line 15, at end insert—
“(1A) The report under subsection (1) must include a review of the current legal framework on abortion in Northern Ireland with an analysis of how that framework could be amended by Parliament during the period when there is no Executive, subject to a sunset clause to respect devolution, in order to comply with the human rights obligations of the United Kingdom.”

The subsection would include placing a duty on the Secretary to State to report on the legal framework on abortion in Northern Ireland with an analysis of how that framework could be amended by Parliament during the period when there is no Executive, subject to a sunset clause to respect devolution, in order to comply with the human rights obligations of the United Kingdom.

Amendment 10, page 2, line 15, at end insert—
“(1A) Before making a report under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must publish a report on or before 4 September 2019 on progress made towards preparing legislation implementing a pension for seriously injured victims and survivors of Troubles-related incidents.”

The subsection would include placing a duty on the Secretary of State to report on the implementation of a pension for seriously injured victims and survivors of Troubles-related incidents.

Amendment 11, page 2, line 15, at end insert—
“(1A) Before making a report under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must publish a report on or before 4 September 2019 on progress made towards meeting international human rights obligations applicable to the United Kingdom in respect of Northern Ireland in relation to the reproductive rights of women.”

The subsection would include placing a duty on the Secretary of State to report on the implications of any relevant judicial decision in relation to abortion.

Amendment 12, page 2, line 15, at end insert—
“(1A) Before making a report under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must publish a report on or before 4 September 2019 on progress made towards implementing the recommendations made by the Report of the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse in Northern Ireland between 1922 and 1995, including the establishment of a publicly funded compensation scheme under an HIA Redress Board, distinct from the Northern Ireland Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme 2009.”


Amendment 13, page 2, line 15, at end insert—
“(1A) Before making a report under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must publish a report on or before 4 September 2019 on progress made in preparing legislation to make provision for the marriage of same sex couples in Northern Ireland.”

The subsection calls for a report on preparations for same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland.

Conor McGinn: I rise to speak to new clause 1 in my name and the names of many right hon. and hon. Friends and Members across the Chamber. I want to speak briefly about the purpose of the new clause, the rationale for my tabling it and for word ing it in the way I have and my motivation for bringing this before the Committee today.

The purpose of the new clause is straightforward. It stipulates that, if devolution is not restored to Northern Ireland in the form of a functioning Assembly and Executive, the Secretary of State would bring forward regulations in this House to introduce the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland.
My rationale for phrasing the new clause as I have, with the stipulations that it contains, is simple. There is an ongoing talks process at Stormont. Two and a half years since the Assembly and Executive collapsed, we are still waiting on that to come to a successful fruition. As I said last night on Second Reading, these issues are difficult and complicated, and politicians in Northern Ireland have my respect and full support in trying to resolve those; but if, in three months’ time, they—along with the two Governments—have not been able to ensure that a fully functioning Executive and Assembly are back up and running, we should legislate here for equal marriage. In the event that they are up and running before then, this provision would not be enacted. In the event that the Stormont Executive and Assembly are up and running after we enact this measure here, of course the power to legislate on marriage remains with the Stormont Executive and Assembly, and they could seek to change or overrule the regulation that we have made here.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Is the hon. Member at all concerned that the implication of this could impact on the negotiation process and de-incentivise one of the parties from negotiating at this particular time—that it would just sit it out until 21 October?

Conor McGinn: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his own party and other participants in the talks, because to my mind the idea that this measure would lead to a failure of those parties to restore the Stormont institutions and get on with doing the business of Government on everything, including health and education, is quite far-fetched. It should act as an incentive for the parties to come to an agreement and have the institutions restored.

When the hon. Gentleman talks about one particular party, I think he refers to Sinn Feín. It has been very clear with me that it wants to see this decision made at Stormont, not Westminster. I have had discussions through the Love Equality campaign—the broad-based campaign for equal marriage—but also directly with all the political parties in Northern Ireland, including members of the hon. Gentleman’s own party, about the new clause. I understand the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues strongly, firmly and sincerely held views, both on the substantive issue that we are discussing and on the interpretation of its impact on the devolved settlement. I hope, however, he will accept that I, in crafting the new clause in this way, have tried as far as possible, in absolutely and unapologetically trying to make this happen and have same-sex marriage extended to Northern Ireland, to give the time and space for the political parties and the two Governments to restore the institutions. I have also respected the devolved settlement by emphatically saying that the power remains with Stormont.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): We are very proud of the introduction of equal marriage in Scotland under an SNP Government, led by the former First Minister, Alex Salmond. I am happy to hear the hon. Gentleman making it clear that he respects the devolved settlement. It is much easier for many of us in the SNP to support this excellent measure in the knowledge that he is proposing it given the fact that there is no Assembly at the moment, but it still respects the devolved settlement.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I am very grateful to the hon. Member for his intervention and pay tribute to him and her colleague the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) for the work that they did to ensure that their party is in a position to support the new clause tonight. That is very important to me, because the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) raised a point last night about her validly and genuinely held concern about the impact this would have on devolution; and when the lady speaks, I listen, as I think do most Members across this House. I hope that, given the answer that I gave last night and my explanation today, she is comfortable with the knowledge that this power does remain a devolved one, but that in the absence of an Assembly and Executive we can make what might be described as an interim provision here, which can then be overruled by the Assembly if it is back up and running.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind) rose—

Conor McGinn: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her intervention and pay tribute to her and her colleague the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) for the work that they did to ensure that their party is in a position to support the new clause tonight. That is very important to me, because the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) raised a point last night about her validly and genuinely held concern about the impact this would have on devolution; and when the lady speaks, I listen, as I think do most Members across this House. I hope that, given the answer that I gave last night and my explanation today, she is comfortable with the knowledge that this power does remain a devolved one, but that in the absence of an Assembly and Executive we can make what might be described as an interim provision here, which can then be overruled by the Assembly if it is back up and running.

Lady Hermon: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene. May I just remind him of the fact that a large number of constituents, and those who are not constituents, have emailed me, and have contacted other Members representing Northern Ireland constituencies and who have taken their seats here, greatly concerned about the possibility that his new clause might undermine the devolved settlement in Northern Ireland? What can I say to those constituents, in an email reply to them, that confirms to them that the hon. Gentleman’s new clause in no way undermines the devolved settlement that was crafted so carefully by a Labour party led by Tony Blair?

Conor McGinn: I thank the hon. Lady again for the direct way in which she puts the question. I was not old enough to vote for the Good Friday agreement, but everything I have done in my personal life and political career has been about supporting the principle of consent, supporting power sharing, supporting peace on the island of Ireland, and supporting reconciliation between people who live in Northern Ireland and between Ireland and Britain. I am a passionate defender of the devolved settlement and a devolutionist. I think that, despite the ups and downs we have had, it has been a force for good in Northern Ireland, and my priority, and what I want to see, is the Assembly back up and functioning in Stormont.

As I have said, it is my strong view that, given the way the new clause is crafted—it has been selected by the Chair—it does not impinge upon the devolved settlement; it explicitly recognises that this is a devolved power. At the minute, however, the Assembly and the Executive exist in the ether, or as a concept, not in reality, so if they cannot make this law, we will make it here, because, as I have said often, rights delayed are rights denied. We will make the law here, and then when the Assembly is back up and running, the power remains its to change it.

Nigel Dodds: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for giving way so frequently so early. This is an important issue because his proposal does
drive a coach and horses through the principle of devolution and, if the SNP is prepared to accept it, this House can legislate and then ask a devolved legislature to overturn it. That is an interesting and novel concept. But would the hon. Gentleman confirm that, in seeking to drive a coach and horses through the principle of devolution, overriding the concerns—[Interruption]—overriding the concerns of people in Northern Ireland that the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) has referred to, his proposal actually would be not for a vote in this House, but that the procedure would be a process of annulment, so that regulations would come forward without any further vote in this House? Perhaps he would explain whether that is the case; I am just asking a question of information.

Conor McGinn: Regulations would come forward in the usual form, on the basis of a vote tonight approving the mechanism to do that. The Bill in fact makes specific provision for the Secretary of State to introduce regulations, through statutory instruments, for governance in Northern Ireland. That is not specified—what I am actually doing is specifying one area where I would wish them to do that.

I understand that an issue like this is binary, and that the right hon. Gentleman and I are on opposite sides on this, but I hope he understands that it certainly is not my intention to drive a coach and horses through anything. I gently say to him, I have always supported the devolved institutions from 1998 and the power-sharing arrangements that were made then.

Ian Paisley: No one challenges the hon. Gentleman’s sincerity, both on the point of his desire to see relations fixed in Northern Ireland and his opinion on this matter. We are just at different ends of the scale in terms of opinion on this matter. Surely he must accept, under the work that he did when he was in the shadow office, that this completely and totally usurps the role of the Northern Ireland Assembly. It does drive a coach and horses through the issues. There is not sufficient time between now and 21 October to establish a new Executive that would be able to function on these matters by that date. Surely he recognises that.

Conor McGinn: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said and I will answer him very directly. Far from usurping the role of the Assembly, I am acting on a mandate given by the Assembly when it voted in favour of equal marriage. That was vetoed by his party, using a petition of concern to block it. The majority of the Assembly, the majority of political parties in Northern Ireland, members of his own party, and the overwhelming majority of the public support legislating to legalise equal marriage in Northern Ireland.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The constitutional debate we are hearing this afternoon is very important—no one would deny that. My hon. Friend has already made the point that the distinction between Northern Ireland and Scotland is that there is a functioning Scottish Government and a functioning Scottish Parliament. But this is not just about constitutions; it is about people and the fact that Northern Ireland is, at present, the only place in the whole of the United Kingdom, or indeed the island of Ireland, where LGBT people cannot exercise their right to marry. Given that there is already, as he says, a majority in favour in the Assembly and a majority in favour among the public, is this issue not now about democracy and human rights?

Conor McGinn: I think it is. That has always been my contention and I hope to speak on that in my closing remarks. Did the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) want to intervene? I will give way one last time and then I will have to make progress.

Ian Paisley: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous. He makes a point about rights. There is the protection of rights in the Assembly: the petition of concern allows for all rights to be protected. That is why, I assume, he supported Tony Blair when he introduced the petition of concern mechanism.

Conor McGinn: It is very important that we have a mechanism where sensitive, cultural or constitutional issues get support on a cross-party basis. I do not believe same-sex marriage was one of those issues and I do not think it was appropriate to use the petition of concern in that respect.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I pay tribute to the very pragmatic and careful way the hon. Gentleman has drafted his new clause and gone about this. What can I say, other than that I give my full support to him, the people of Northern Ireland and, in particular, the LGBTIQ people in Northern Ireland? The hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) made the important point that it is a very different situation when the Northern Ireland Assembly has not sat for 900 days. The Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government are fully functioning, and Scotland has had a coach and horses driven through its devolved settlement. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) should remember that. We absolutely support the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn). I hope that Democratic Unionist party and Government Members will listen to him very carefully. We have an opportunity to do something very positive here. I hope Members from across the Chamber will support him.

Conor McGinn: I appreciate the hon. Lady’s remarks and the work she has done in Scotland. I also appreciate her acknowledgment that this can and should be done, and that it does not impinge on the devolved settlement.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend knows his new clause has my full support. As I made clear on Second Reading last night, I am a proud devolutionist. I support the Welsh Assembly and the Welsh Government, as I do the other devolved Administrations. This matter is about a fundamental issue of rights. He has constructed this in a very careful way. Does he agree that there is a fundamental anomaly here? Individuals in the rest of the UK who want to marry Northern Irish citizens, or get in a marriage in Northern Ireland are unable to do that at present. That is a huge anomaly that affects relationships and people across the United Kingdom.

Conor McGinn: Absolutely. I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) is in his place. He is married to a Tyrone man.
As an Armagh man, I make no further comment on his choice of husband and his county affiliations. [Laughter] He makes the point frequently that, when he is in Scotland they are married and recognised by the law, but when they get off the plane in Belfast they quite simply are not. That cannot continue and, from a Unionist point of view, is anathema to anyone who values equal rights within the Union as a whole.

**Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab):** My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and I wholeheartedly support his new clause. Does he agree that we in this House need to remember that it is not unique for us to propose to legislate from Westminster in respect of Northern Ireland? It is not particularly anomalous. There have been myriad occasions in recent history, during the difficult periods of the political process in Northern Ireland and over the past two years, when we have legislated effectively in this place to either put in place important provisions for the people of Northern Ireland or to keep the peace process on track. This is an important instance when we should do likewise and step in in the absence of the Assembly.

**Conor McGinn:** I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I have always been clear that I am an MP from Northern Ireland, not for Northern Ireland. It is his job and the job of his colleagues and other MPs to lead on issues that are affecting their constituents. I do not claim a mandate from Northern Ireland but, as I said in last night’s debate, I hope people will accept that it is the place that I will always call home. Family and friends still live there. I try to visit when I can and I care deeply about the place.

On the hon. Gentleman’s point about Westminster engaging in other issues that have been raised over the course of the debate on the Bill, I acknowledge that there is a deep frustration among people in Northern Ireland on a whole range of issues that progress is not being made. I think we are fast approaching the time when they will want politicians somewhere to do something. If that has to be this place, then, reluctantly, I would agree with him that after this current extension we have to think seriously about making some progress on all the matters that have been discussed. It would have to be, in my view, strongly based on a three-stranded approach, north-south co-operation with the Irish Government, and co-operation between the two Governments through the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference.

I have focused a lot on process in last night’s debate and in my speech today, because I want to provide reassurance about the devolved settlement. When I made my speech to move my private Member’s Bill in February 2018, I quoted some of the wit and wisdom of people in south Armagh and Northern Ireland, and some of the Ulsterisms that were used. I have to say that it is not funny anymore. This is really serious and it needs to be addressed. This House has failed LGBT people in Northern Ireland before. It failed a generation of people in Northern Ireland by not decriminalising homosexuality, and condemned them to discrimination, to abuse and to living in fear many years after that stopped being the case in the rest of the UK. It failed people in Northern Ireland by not extending same-sex marriage when it became the law here, making people in Northern Ireland less valued than the rest of us. Tonight, we have the chance to do the right thing. People in Northern Ireland, and indeed across Britain and Ireland, are watching. I, for one, am not going to let them down. I hope colleagues do not let them down either.

**Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con):** It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), who made a powerful argument for extending same-sex marriage across Northern Ireland. I was the Minister who did not extend same-sex marriage to Northern Ireland at the time, because of the devolution settlement, so I viscerally understand his arguments. I regret that that was not done when the legislation was put in place for England and Wales.

I spent many hours at the Dispatch Box making arguments similar to those that the hon. Gentleman made about the importance of equal marriage. The state
Mrs Maria Miller

has no right to discriminate against people on the basis of their sexuality, and we have laws that prohibit that. As marriage is a fundamental part of our society, we should encourage more people to be married, including those in same-sex relationships. He is right that we need to make this change, but today’s debate will be about whether this is the place to do so. Does this debating Chamber and body of people have the right to do that?

If we had that right, we would have exercised it when the initial legislation came through. I will listen closely to the Minister’s response before I make a decision on whether to support new clause 1. My heart tells me that it is the right thing to do, but my head is yet to be convinced that this is the right place to do it.

At the heart of my comments are new clauses 10 to 12, in the name of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), and amendment 9, in the name of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson). The Women and Equalities Committee did a detailed and forensic analysis of the current situation on abortion in Northern Ireland. That was because of the report by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which was published last year, and our concerns about the evidence that was put forward by individuals and organisations representing a range of beliefs and positions in Northern Ireland.

I will not go through all the recommendations in that report; I will focus on the key recommendation, which the Committee almost unanimously believed to be the change that should be made. It was about mums and dads facing the appalling prospect of their unborn baby dying before it is born or shortly after, because it has been diagnosed with what is called a fatal foetal abnormality. Our Committee felt strongly that the law needed to change in this respect forthwith—quickly, immediately—because of the impact that that was having on people’s lives and wellbeing, as well as the threat to their mental and physical health.

Hon. Members will be aware that cases are before the courts and will be going before the Supreme Court for consideration. There has already been partial consideration of the issue, following which the Supreme Court said that there was a very real prospect that the law in Northern Ireland contravened human rights. As a Parliament we should be concerned that not every woman in our constituencies, wherever they might be, enjoys the same access to care and support. If the women in my constituency were facing the prospect of having to carry a baby that was going to die, I would march the barricades to change that law.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): My right hon. Friend, who chairs the Select Committee, is making an excellent speech. The judgment of the Supreme Court—the case was lost on a technicality—made it quite clear that Parliament is out of step with its UN treaty obligations. Does she agree that it is regrettable that despite that, Sarah Ewart and Diana Johnson have been forced to go through the High Court in Belfast, when we could have changed the law and avoided that outcome?

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend gets to the nub of the matter. The human rights organisation in Northern Ireland did not have standing to take a case, because of a strange error in the way that the law was drafted. Presumably, that could be put right quickly—possibly through this Bill—so that individuals such as Sarah Ewart would not have to go through this process, which is heartbreaking and impossibly difficult for anyone, let alone someone who has lost a child in this way.

New clauses 10 to 12 go much further than the Select Committee’s recommendations, and they talk about implementing the CEDAW report in full. I have no problems with the CEDAW report. I think it is comprehensive and compelling, and the Government should address it in full, because we are signatories to this agreement—as a well-respected international country, we adhere to the rules and regulations that we sign up to. However, hon. Members should be careful before finalising their thoughts on whether to support new clauses 10 to 12.

The CEDAW report calls on the Government to repeal sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. Doing so would go much further than simply making it lawful for an individual to undertake an abortion if they have had a diagnosis of a fatal foetal abnormality, and it would have significant repercussions not only in Northern Ireland but in England. I ask hon. Members to consider whether this Bill is the most appropriate avenue to make such a fundamental change.

I do not disagree with the sentiment of the hon. Member for Walthamstow. She has consistently made a powerful argument in many similar debates, and one day we will get the opportunity to debate the matter in full. However, it does not feel right to me to make these changes through a Bill that has absolutely nothing to do with England and Wales, on a matter that is fundamental to many hon. Members who are probably not here today because they might not have realised the implications of her new clause.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. As a member of the Women and Equalities Committee, I, too, was involved in its detailed inquiry into this very challenging issue, and I completely agree with the cross-party recommendations in that report. I agree that the fundamental issue with new clause 10 is that it affects abortion law across the whole UK, not just in Northern Ireland. I remind her that we made a number of other recommendations in that report to assist women. Does she agree that the Government should consider all the recommendations in the Committee’s report with urgency?

Mrs Miller: I thank my hon. Friend for all her work on the Select Committee, of which she is a valuable and valued member. She is right that we cannot look at these things in isolation. There has to be a package of measures. Hon. Members from all parties know that if we were to repeal the law in the way that is recommended in new clauses 10 to 12, we would also have to look fundamentally at the provision of services in Northern Ireland.

The first step is to address the issue of fatal foetal abnormality. I fear dreadfully treading on the toes of my colleagues from Northern Ireland, who represent the men and women who live there. However, in the absence of a functioning Executive, it would be an absolute abrogation of my responsibility as a Member of Parliament not to raise these issues in the House today. I have had conversations with my Northern Ireland colleagues and with members of other parties.
who choose not to take their seats here, because I believe it is important for the voices of the people who represent those in Northern Ireland to be heard strongly in this debate, but I do not think it is easy to argue against the factual findings of the Select Committee report.

1.30 pm

New clause 10, to put it bluntly, asks the Government to cut and paste the CEDAW report into legislation. I do not think that that would really work, not least because it has profound effects for England and Wales as well, but I do think that the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North is absolutely right, in amendment 9, to ask the Government to go further. It is a difficult issue, and sensitivities are acute, but “placing a duty on the Secretary to State to report on the legal framework on abortion in Northern Ireland with an analysis of how that framework could be amended by Parliament during the period when there is no Executive, subject to a sunset clause” could be a constructive procedure, including, perhaps, cross-party involvement. I have a great deal of sympathy with the hon. Lady’s approach, which is perhaps a little more tailored to the situation in hand than new clause 10.

These issues are never easy to discuss, but I am not sure that a time when Parliament is already engaged in one of its most difficult discussions about Brexit is the right time for it to be tackling issues relating to the whole United Kingdom through a Bill that focuses on Northern Ireland. That, to me, is not an obvious way of solving the problems. I have enormous sympathy with the new clauses tabled by the hon. Member for Walthamstow, but at this point I do not think I can find it within me to support them, because of the profound implications for my constituents in England and their ability to communicate with me about their thoughts and views, and for our ability to discuss more broadly how we would accommodate those changes in the United Kingdom as a whole.

Nigel Dodds: Thank you, Dame Eleanor, for giving me an opportunity to speak briefly about the new clauses and amendments.

I entirely respect the sincerity of the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) and the way in which he spoke about new clause 1, but I fundamentally disagree with his view that because the Assembly is not sitting at present, it is right for this place to legislate on certain issues but not on others, although I recognise that his approach was that we should legislate across the board.

There are many issues about which people in Northern Ireland feel strongly, including the health service, education, infrastructure investment, jobs, the suicide strategy, mental health and the implementation of the Bengoa report on health and social care. The lack of progress on those issues through legislation and Executive decisions is having massively detrimental effects, but no one has addressed that point today. Instead, Members have picked out certain issues, which I think is the wrong approach, especially when talks are under way and there is a prospect of devolution in the short term.

I entirely accept that if we do not reach that point and there is direct rule, it should be for the House to legislate across the board. It has the right to do so, and we can still have a debate and discuss and argue about those issues. As the Secretary of State explained yesterday, the purpose of the Bill is simply to maintain the status quo by moving two dates to allow talks to continue, with no election in the meantime. However, that has now been effectively hijacked by a number of Members who want to introduce measures to override the Assembly, which I think is wrong and which is certainly not in keeping with the vast number of representations that have been made to me and to other Members from across Northern Ireland by constituents who have said that it is not an appropriate way in which to proceed.

I am particularly concerned about the wording of new clause 1. It appears to propose that, if the Assembly is not already up and running, there will be no further vote in the House before the regulations are implemented and the law is changed. When I intervened on the hon. Gentleman, he did not dispute that. Here we have a major issue: a change that will not be subject to any further vote in the House before its implementation, but will be subject to the procedure of annulment. I think that that is a highly questionable approach.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does my right hon. Friend not find it amazing that when we spent literally hours in the House debating the Henry VIII clauses during the Brexit debate, those clauses were raided against by Labour Members and members of other parties, whereas Labour is now proposing that Henry VIII powers be granted to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland so that regulations can be introduced with no scrutiny and, in fact, never even presented to the House?

Nigel Dodds: My right hon. Friend has made an important point. We are to have four hours of debate on this and a number of other devolved issues, but that is not the way in which such laws should be made. Members who have raided against emergency procedures, a lack of proper scrutiny and all the rest of it would be the first to protest if we were dealing with a different issue.

Owen Smith: Does the right hon. Gentleman not accept that there have been instances in the recent past when we have legislated in this place on what has ostensibly been a devolved competence? I am thinking of, for example, the provision to extend access to medicinal cannabis to Northern Ireland.

Nigel Dodds: I think that the hon. Gentleman is mistaken in relation to that issue, but there have been instances in which legislation has been passed for the whole UK, which was entirely appropriate because there was no dispute about it.

Conor McGinn: May I draw the right hon. Gentleman’s attention to his own new clauses 15 and 17, which propose the introduction of legislation relating to the armed forces covenant and the definition of a victim through exactly the same process through which I am proposing legislation relating to same-sex marriage?

Nigel Dodds: I shall deal with new clauses 15 and 17 when we discuss the second batch of new clauses and amendments, but the issues that they concern are UK-wide. The definition of a victim should be a UK-wide definition, and the military covenant should apply across the UK.
That is the difference between the hon. Gentleman and me. I am taking a UK-wide approach, while he wants to override the devolution settlement at a time when there is a prospect of devolution being restored.

I referred earlier to issues on which there has been a consensus, a cross-party view that something should happen. The Government have always been willing to take such issues on board, as, indeed, have the Opposition. One example is the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry. All the party leaders have written to say that that is one area in which they would be content for something to be done, but that had been agreed by everyone across the community.

In this context, it is clearly appropriate to mention the sad passing this morning of Sir Anthony Hart, the chair of the inquiry which did such fantastic work in relation to victims of historical institutional abuse. It is a shock to us all, and I am sure that I speak for the whole House in extending sympathies and condolences to his family. That inquiry, and the sterling work done by Sir Anthony and all involved with it, has resulted in recommendations that have not been able to be taken forward, and indeed the Assembly was collapsed just a few weeks before proposals could be tabled. We urged that the Assembly not be collapsed to allow these proposals to be taken forward, but that was ignored by the Sinn Féin Minister of Finance. The fact of the matter is that there is one area where we do have total cross-party consensus, and we would certainly be supportive of taking that forward.

There is not cross-party support on the other areas, but on abortion there would certainly be a degree of concern among all parties in Northern Ireland about legislating; although the Northern Ireland Assembly parties across the board may take a different view on what needs to be reformed, they might not agree with Members here about the extent to which reform should happen in terms of time limits and the other aspects.

Ian Paisley: The point my right hon. Friend makes about the late Sir Anthony Hart’s inquiry is all the more poignant and pointed when we consider that the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee unanimously agreed that we should ask the Government to deal with this issue, and the point was ignored by the Government.

Nigel Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing out that and the role the Select Committee has played in relation to it. That was a very useful and important report that again demonstrated that there was cross-party support for those recommendations to be taken forward.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I had the opportunity to work very closely with the late Sir Anthony Hart. He conducted the inquiry in an incredibly professional way; it was very victim-centred. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be a poignant and appropriate legacy to Sir Anthony Hart if this Government acted swiftly to implement those recommendations in terms of redress that he has just recently concluded?

Nigel Dodds: Yes, I agree; that is entirely right. This points to where we should be taking things forward in the interim. There are certain issues that have total cross-party support in Northern Ireland and where the demand has come from the Northern Ireland parties to the Government to do something. That is entirely different from Members here seeking to impose changes that are not agreed by the parties in Northern Ireland and when other pressing concerns—mental health and suicide strategy, health, education, jobs—are not being put forward for consideration at this stage. Moreover, this is not the appropriate vehicle through which to do this.

Mrs Miller: As has been said, it is important for us to be taking forward things that have got agreement. The recommendations of the working group on fatal foetal abnormality, which was commissioned by two Northern Ireland Ministers in 2016, have now been published; does the right hon. Gentleman agree that they present another example of how we could, in this period where we do not have a functioning Executive, move forward even on an issue as sensitive as that?

Nigel Dodds: The right hon. Lady will be aware that there are court proceedings in relation to that issue that are due to be concluded in September. Certainly, I agree with the principle that issues where there is a cross-party view that is supported across the board by the parties in Northern Ireland, and where the request comes from the parties, should be looked at with favour and support and approval by the Government and, indeed, this House as a whole, but that should not be the case where there is no such consensus and agreement.

Finally, I wish to mention pensions for victims. Victims have suffered grievously in Northern Ireland over many years, and many of them are dying without seeing proper justice on the one hand and without getting some of the recompense that has been recommended that they should receive from many years back. Therefore, I am entirely sympathetic to and supportive of the idea of having a report and certainly debates in relation to this matter. We address in our amendment the UK-wide definition of a victim, because there is a problem in Northern Ireland.

People do not like the idea of an amnesty for past crimes, obviously, but they also do not support the idea that those who injure themselves in the commission of a terrorist act—for instance the Shankill bomber who went out with the purpose of murdering people and who did murder people—should be regarded as victims as a result of the injuries suffered in the same way as the people they maimed and caused terrible injuries to through their criminal acts. That is an unconscionable situation and this issue is holding up the payment of pensions to victims in Northern Ireland. That needs to be addressed. Therefore, again, I support amendments that call for that to be looked at and to be reported upon and to be taken forward.
reached is to skew those negotiations. As has been said, some people will say, “If we’re going to achieve certain outcomes, we don’t need to negotiate; we don’t need to reach agreements.” That is entirely counterproductive.

I ask Members to think very carefully, whatever their views are on these issues, which I respect deeply; they, too, should respect the views of people in Northern Ireland. They should also respect the devolved settlement and the fact that talks are going on in Northern Ireland and that these are very sensitive matters, and these talks could be impacted greatly by what we do here today.

**Nick Herbert** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I rise to support new clause 1 and to agree with everything that the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor Dodds) said in moving it. I take very seriously the points the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) has just made, as I am sure do many on both sides of the Committee. It is not a small matter for this House to decide that it will legislate in this area; we should consider it carefully, and I have done so and want to explain why I have reached the decision that it is right for the UK Parliament to step in at the moment.

First, we need to reflect on the fact that 28 countries worldwide have now legislated for, or enabled through a court or referendum decision, same-sex marriage: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden and most recently Ecuador through the courts and Taiwan through its legislature. Costa Rica will make it 29, as of course England and Wales and Scotland have legislated too.

Too often, people find themselves saying that the UK has provided for same-sex marriage, but that is not true. It is anomalous, as has been said already in this debate, that citizens in one part of the United Kingdom cannot avail themselves of something that many people regard to be a fundamental right: to be able to enter into a marriage with the person they love.

Two arguments therefore have to be addressed. The first is that, in spite of it being the right thing to do, the UK Parliament should refrain from making such provision because it should be a devolved matter. The problem is that we do not have a functioning Executive in Northern Ireland. We have not had devolved government for some time, and notwithstanding the optimism of the right hon. Gentleman outlined by the right hon. Member for Belfast North—I hope he is right—we might not have it for some time going forward.

Meanwhile, there are couples in Northern Ireland who do not enjoy the same rights as those in the rest of the United Kingdom. They wish to get married but are legally prevented from doing so. How much longer will they have to wait?

**Ms Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that this House has been quite patient on this issue, given that it involves a fundamental matter of human rights? Is it not clear that the House’s patience is now running out and that we have to act?

**Nick Herbert**: I agree entirely with the hon. Lady. It was six years ago that this House legislated for equal marriage in England and Wales. There is a precedent for the proposal in new clause 1: when the Assembly was suspended in 2004, this House passed the Civil Partnerships Act 2004 to extend civil partnerships to Northern Ireland.

There is consent for this proposal in Northern Ireland itself. The Assembly has voted five times for this measure, and it is only because of the petition of concern that it has not already become law there. That petition could not be exercised now, because there would not be a majority for it in Northern Ireland. So if an Assembly were to be constituted under the current arrangements, it would almost certainly vote for equal marriage, because it is has said repeatedly that it would do so. We are not trespassing on what we know the Assembly wants to do; it is just that it does not exist, so it cannot act. The only body that is competent to act on this matter at the moment is the UK Parliament.

**Gavin Robinson**: The right hon. Gentleman has outlined a history of events that is not correct. The Northern Ireland Assembly voted against the introduction of same-sex marriage on a straight majority until the last vote, in which a petition was used. He also recognises that we as a party do not have the numbers to table a petition. Had he been here yesterday for our Second Reading debate, he would have heard that the one party that is frustrating the ability of the Northern Ireland Assembly to legislate on this issue is Sinn Féin, the very party that says it wants to introduce it. If the Assembly were restored tomorrow—we have no red lines on whether it is restored or not; we want to see it—we could not prevent the Assembly from legislating on this issue.

**Nick Herbert**: The hon. Gentleman has made his points, and I read yesterday’s debate very carefully this morning. Nevertheless, there is a majority for this proposal in the Assembly at the moment. That majority has been demonstrated. Crucially, there is also a majority among the public in Northern Ireland, but who is speaking for them at the moment? A Sky Data poll last year showed 76% support for equal marriage in Northern Ireland, with fewer than one in five opposing it. On any issue like this, that is a very large majority indeed. I believe that the case is made. We have waited for some time, and we have been patient. It is now right and proper that the UK Parliament should act.

**Lady Hermon**: The right hon. Gentleman has outlined the problem in Northern Ireland as one in which those in same-sex relationships are unable to be married, whereas they can be in the rest of the United Kingdom. The situation is actually more complicated than that, as was touched upon by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who was the responsible Minister when the legislation was taken through this House. A problem exists for those who are in a same-sex marriage in Scotland, Wales or England and who come to Northern Ireland, in that as soon as they arrive in Northern Ireland, their marriage becomes a civil partnership. That cannot be right within the United Kingdom, can it?

**Nick Herbert**: I strongly agree with the hon. Lady. This shows that people in Northern Ireland simply do not have the same rights as those in the United Kingdom, and that is something we should act upon.

There is a case, on its own merits, for introducing same-sex marriage, and I just want to say to the Committee that, frankly, this argument has been won. It has been won in the country and it has been won in this House.
One by one, the arguments against this reform fell away. First, there is no compulsion involved. The legislation that we introduced in England and Wales protects religious freedom. Churches are not compelled to introduce same-sex marriages in their own institutions. That is a matter for them. No individual is compelled to enter a same-sex marriage. There is a very simple remedy if someone does not like the idea of same-sex marriage: they should not enter into one; it is not compulsory.

Secondly, why should we not allow people to enter into an institution by which they will demonstrate a lifelong commitment to each other and make that commitment in front of their friends and family? What harm is done by this legislation? We as hon. Members know very well that we pass laws and vote for things every day that make people profoundly unhappy or that irritate them. We put on taxes, we restrict freedoms, we do things that irritate sections of our communities, and we do these things because we think they are right. It is not often that we pass legislation that has a single effect. The single effect of the legislation for England and Wales that was passed six years ago in this House was to make people happy. It was to allow people to enter into lifelong commitments that brought moments of enormous happiness to them and their families.

That is why public opposition to same-sex marriage has continued to fall away. I have enormous respect for those of my hon. Friends who voted against that legislation but who have now admitted that they were wrong. One by one, Members on the Conservative Benches have stood up and said that they were wrong to oppose the measure, just as some Members have said that they were wrong to oppose civil partnerships. They have seen that the legislation has been an unalloyed force for good.

**Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con):** I was one of those who stood up and said that they had got it wrong. I got it wrong, and I now support the legislation. I agree with this proposal, and I agree with the one on abortion, but it was wrong, and I now support the legislation. My hon. Friend for saying that they had got it wrong. I got it wrong, and I now support the legislation. I agree with this proposal, and I agree with the one on abortion, but it was wrong, and I now support the legislation.

That is why public opposition to same-sex marriage has continued to fall away. I have enormous respect for those of my hon. Friends who voted against that legislation but who have now admitted that they were wrong. One by one, Members on the Conservative Benches have stood up and said that they were wrong to oppose the measure, just as some Members have said that they were wrong to oppose civil partnerships. They have seen that the legislation has been an unalloyed force for good.

**Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op):** It is a genuine pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), and I agree with every word he said. I will be proud to vote today for new clause 1 in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), who is now leaving the Chamber. He made an incredibly powerful speech. I also support amendment 9.

I rise to address new clause 10 with great reluctance, because none of us wanted the governance of Northern Ireland to be in this position today. We all want to speak up for the importance of devolution but, as my hon. Friend said, human rights denied are human rights denied. New clause 1, new clause 10 and amendment 9 all speak to the human rights challenges. I understand the concerns of the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) about it being the thin end of the wedge, but I see this as a temporary way of dealing with something that this place is centrally about: protecting the human rights of every UK citizen.

Those of us who are strong defenders of devolution and human rights tread carefully. Section 26 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 charges this place with upholding our international obligations for the whole United Kingdom, even when the Assembly is sitting. As we have now not had an Assembly for two years, and as it is unlikely the Assembly will have sat for three years at this rate, it is even more important that we ask what our obligations are so that we do not see human rights denied. The Women and Equalities Committee has been very powerful in stating that on these two specific issues, especially in the past couple of years, our country has been censured for what is happening in Northern Ireland. Members will know that I am a passionate defender of women’s rights, and I believe powerfully that we will never have true freedom if women do not have the same control over their bodies as men. If we say to women that we will force them to continue an unwanted pregnancy, they will always be second-class citizens compared with their male counterparts. That is exactly what we are saying to our fellow UK citizens in Northern Ireland. As the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs said, these amendments are about equality. They are about treating every UK citizen equally; in Northern Ireland there are no such rights.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) talked powerfully of fatal foetal abnormalities. I cannot imagine what it is like for somebody who so desperately
wants a baby to discover that their baby will not live. All our hearts have gone out to Sarah Ewart, but those court cases were not just about fatal foetal abnormalities; they were about sexual violence, too.

We are not living up to our obligations to protect the rights of the women of Northern Ireland—those 1 million women are UK citizens. If we do not act on these issues and find a way, in the absence of an Assembly, however temporary, to deal with this issue, it will not only be Sarah Ewart who has to go to court. We will be in the invidious position of rape victims having to go to court to have their rights upheld. That is torture, which is why the UN Committee against Torture censured our country and said that how we treat the women of Northern Ireland is torturous.

That is why it is right that we find a way through. I am very conscious of the words of the Women and Equalities Committee, which said that the Government need to set out a clear framework and timeline for addressing the breaches of women’s rights in Northern Ireland, which have been identified by CEDAW, if there is no Government in Northern Ireland to take action.

**Ian Paisley:** The hon. Lady knows where I stand on this issue, and my position is very different from hers. She rightly indicates that there needs to be a framework, but if new clause 10 were to become law, abortion would take place in Northern Ireland without any framework whatsoever. It would be completely and totally unregulated. We have no idea of the scope. Would we have terminations at 12 weeks, 28 weeks or right up to birth?

We would have no regulations on where abortions could take place. There would be no regulatory framework on who could carry out those abortions, and there would be no regulatory framework on sex selection or, indeed, disability denial. All those matters require careful and considered regulation and legislation. Unfortunately, new clause 10 is not careful and does not give the time or scope for any of these matters to be properly considered.

**Stella Creasy:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising those issues, which are myths that need to be dispelled, although I understand his concerns. The CEDAW report talks about the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, which is why a woman who is raped in Northern Ireland and seeks a termination after becoming pregnant will face a longer prison sentence than her attacker. It is why, in November, a mother who bought abortion pills online for her child—she was a child, because she was a 15-year-old girl in an abusive relationship—faces a jail sentence.

We must deal with the effects of this anachronistic, ancient law in Northern Ireland. My constituents, and constituents across England and Wales, are exempted from that Act, but it does not mean a free-for-all. In fact, new clause 10 is crafted in terms of statutory instruments under the Northern Ireland Act.

I am mindful that the British Medical Association, the Royal College of General Practitioners, the Royal College of Midwives, and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists have all set out proposals for medical guidance. Absolutely, abortion should be regulated. Absolutely, there should be clear guidelines. Nobody is seeking to change the term limit we have in England and Wales. The question is whether the law should be underpinned by criminal legislation or medical regulation, which is what new clause 10 would allow us to consider. It would therefore allow us to answer the question about the inequality of experience between my constituents in Walthamstow and the constituents of the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) in Northern Ireland.

A thousand women from Northern Ireland have had to travel to England and Wales to have an abortion in the last year, and those are just the women who can travel. What a horrible, lonely journey to ask somebody to make at the most vulnerable moment in their life. That option is not available to women in an abusive relationship, who cannot get childcare or who cannot afford to travel.

New clause 10 is carefully crafted to respect the fact that, at the moment, we do not have an Assembly. If there were an Assembly, it could step in and deal with the criticisms that have been levelled at us by the UN. It could deal with the decisions made by the Supreme Court, which have not been enacted only because of a technicality. New clause 10 would mean these situations can be dealt with. Medical regulations could be introduced, but it would be done through a statutory instrument. It does not prescribe what the regulations would be, so it does not remove any of the protections the hon. Gentleman talks about.

**Emma Little Pengelly:** You have said many times, and it has caused distress, that a woman in Northern Ireland who is raped and seeks an abortion could face a longer jail sentence than her attacker. I have corresponded with the Police Service of Northern Ireland on this matter because of the concern you have caused out there. PSNI has confirmed that no woman has been sent to prison for an abortion-related offence, and I am meeting PSNI to talk it through.

Secondly, the issue about regulations is important. Regardless of whether you perceive abortion to be a right, the regulations are not prescriptive about some of the details highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), but your proposal would mean there is no scrutiny of the regulations.

**The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. You do not directly address another Member but address your comments through the Chair. This is obviously a sensitive debate, so it is important that we stick to the rules.

**Stella Creasy:** Thank you, Dame Rosie. It is simply not the case that people have not been prosecuted. A mother is facing a jail sentence in November. We know that, in 2017, a man and woman accepted formal cautions under OPA for the same offence, and the charges were withdrawn only after the judge imposed a ban on identifying the woman due to the heightened risk of her suicide because of her distress at the situation. We know that, in 2016, a 21-year-old pleaded guilty to procuring her own abortion by poison after she bought pills online and her flatmate reported her to the police. Prosecution is a very real prospect for my constituents in another part of the United Kingdom who are in exactly the same situation.

**Emma Little Pengelly:** Will the hon. Lady give way?
Stella Creasy: Forgive me, but I have given way. I am conscious that other people want to speak in this debate. I understand the concerns of the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs, who is no longer here, but I genuinely believe that if we do not address the international obligations that we have—and that this legislation leaves us unable to address at the moment—we will continue to see these cases. We will continue to see the distress of women in Northern Ireland, and that will be a human rights issue.

There is a more fundamental point here, which is the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs talked about: if we are prepared to set some human rights and say that they are not as important as others, that is the thin end of the wedge. Are we going to say that in Northern Ireland people will not have the same rights of freedom of expression, of protection from slavery and of protection from torture, and the same rights to life? Specific human rights, and specific international reports and obligations that we have been part of, are at the heart of this amendment. We will not be able to stand up and champion human rights in other parts of the world, because other countries will rightly turn to us and say, “Hang about, what about your own backyard? What are you doing there?”

I understand that, if it was not for the fact that we do not have an Assembly, this would absolutely not be the right way forward, but we do not have an Assembly and we cannot have one any time soon. This is about a power of a statutory instrument; it is not about specifying what should be in that statutory instrument, so there is plenty of scope to address these issues. Medical guidelines have been prepared by campaign groups in Northern Ireland, be they Alliance for Choice, the London-Irish Abortion Rights Campaign, Together for Yes or those medical agencies.

There is a simple point here: each of us should want, in the work that we do at a national and international level, the same rights that we want for our own constituencies. I would like every woman in Walthamstow to be able to have the choice to have a safe, legal and local abortion if she wants it. We all know that stopping people accessing abortion legally does not stop abortion. The cases where there have been prosecutions, where people have been killed and where we see online the stories of these women tell us that abortion is still happening for Northern Irish women, but right now that issue is being exported, rather than dealt with as an equality issue. So I ask the Committee: how much longer are the women of Northern Ireland expected to wait? How much more are they expected to suffer before we speak up—the best of what this place does—as human rights defenders, not human rights deniers?

Huw Merriman: Does my hon. Friend recognise that treaty obligations are a matter for Parliament, so this is not actually an issue about devolution? The Supreme Court has made that point, too.

Fiona Bruce: I will come on to that point in considerable detail in my speech, if Members will bear with me.

Emma Little Pengelly: I wish to touch on a point that was raised earlier. Does the hon. Lady agree that things are being said about this, particularly in relation to threatened imprisonment, that are not true and causing additional distress? In relation to the recommendations, they are simply recommendations on the way this could be done. It is right and proper that this is scrutinised to see exactly what the detail should be, and it should not be done by way of simple regulation or statutory instrument.

Fiona Bruce: I absolutely agree. If Members will permit me, I will go into detail on those concerns.

Last year, this House debated a similar Bill and many similar arguments were aired when we debated the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), which was passed and became section 4 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018. That section required the Secretary of State to “issue guidance to senior officers of all Northern Ireland departments which will specify how to exercise their functions in relation to—

(a) the incompatibility of the human rights of the people of Northern Ireland with the continued enforcement of sections 58 and 59 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861 with the Human Rights Act 1998” within three months of the Act passing. That guidance was issued by the Secretary of State in December. She clarified that:

“No declaration of incompatibility under section 4 of the Human Rights Act 1998 has been made by the Courts in respect of sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861.”

She added that the guidance notes that it does not, and cannot be used to, change the current law on abortion. Section 4 did not require any further reporting on the law or its operation in Northern Ireland. So here we are again with Members seeking to put forward a considerable number of amendments relating to substantial changes to the law on abortion in Northern Ireland, despite this issue being within the devolved competence of the Assembly.

2.15 pm

I am disappointed that new clause 10, which seeks to change the law substantially, has been selected, along with new clauses 11 and 12, and I wish to make three initial points on that proposal. First, it clearly overreaches the devolution settlement and sets a precedent that should concern all the devolved jurisdictions. Secondly, the people of Northern Ireland would have no opportunity to have a say in the decision, which does not respect democracy, if we were to pass these new clauses today. Thirdly, they require the Secretary of State to bring forward regulations, but I understand that those will be unamendable. This is no way to legislate for sensitive matters such as abortion.

The amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Walthamstow rely on the authority of CEDAW and its committee, which is a minor sub-committee of the UN that looks at that convention. It is important for
this House to note that the convention does not provide a right to abortion. That is not my opinion; hon. Members will want to hear the views of Lord Wilson, a Supreme Court Justice in the 2017 case of R (A and B) v. Secretary of State for Health, who said:

“The conventions and the covenant to which the UK is a party carefully stop short of calling upon national authorities to make abortion services generally available. Some of the committees go further down that path”—

as the CEDAW committee has:

“But, as a matter of international law, the authority of their recommendations is slight.”

The hon. Lady also suggests that, since the CEDAW committee made various recommendations on the law on abortion in Northern Ireland, the Secretary of State must act. But the Northern Ireland Act 1998 devolved human rights to the Northern Ireland Executive. In the case where the Supreme Court makes a declaration of incompatibility under section 4 of the Human Rights Act 1998, which it has not, it is for the Northern Ireland Assembly to act. However, the hon. Lady is suggesting the Secretary of State must act under section 26 of the Northern Ireland Act—she relies heavily on that. It requires action from the Secretary of State if proposed actions by the Assembly are considered incompatible with international obligations or she considers actions should be taken to give effect to international obligations. However, the guidance issued in December 2018, which I have just cited, made it clear that the Secretary of State does not believe that we are in either of those situations. Her guidance did not even mention the CEDAW committee, upon which the hon. Member for Walthamstow relies for authority. That is not surprising, as it is a committee with no judicial authority.

Professor Mark Hill, QC, has written extensively about the authority of the CEDAW committee and its report. He says in paragraph 4 of his opinion:

“The Committee does not have the capacity or standing to give a binding adjudication on the United Kingdom’s obligations under CEDAW or on the proper interpretation of CEDAW. The interpretative function under the CEDAW is reserved, not to the Committee, but to the International Court of Justice.”

He goes on to say in paragraph 5:

“The Committee’s views are not binding interpretation of the law, nor do they contribute to customary international law when approaching the interpretation of these rights.”

I make no apology for quoting at length from the opinion: it is really important because of the reliance of the hon. Member for Walthamstow on the CEDAW committee. Professor Hill says:

“The text of international treaties such as CEDAW are carefully crafted expressions of intent and belief. There is no reference to abortion in the text of CEDAW. There is nothing in the text of CEDAW which requires a state party to allow abortion on specified grounds and/or decriminalise abortion generally. The absence of such a provision in the formal text gives a clear indication that no such obligation exists. The International Court of Justice has not interpreted CEDAW in a manner which departs from the plain wording of the text so as to require a right to abortion or the decriminalisation of abortion to be “read in”.

Finally, Professor Hill says:

“Nevertheless, the Committee, based on its expertise in interpreting [the Convention], recommends that abortion be decriminalised in all cases and asserts that States parties are obligated not to penalise women resorting to, or those providing such services [abortion]. The Committee is not a judicial body, no source is given for its claimed ‘expertise in interpreting’ CEDAW.”

It simply does not have the power it has abrogated to itself to interpret the CEDAW regulations in the way that the hon. Member for Walthamstow proposes.

The Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee referred to its report on abortion in Northern Ireland. The decision on the report was not unanimous. In the minority report, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) said that

“to suggest that the Government establish a framework to address the recommendations of the CEDAW report places a disproportionate and misguided degree of authority on its substantive findings and the limited jurisdiction of this unelected UN Committee.”

Indeed, the non-binding nature of the CEDAW committee’s report was acknowledged by the chief executive of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission himself in evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee during that inquiry.

Let me turn briefly to the Supreme Court judgment that has been referred to. That judgment is non-binding. It is being used to justify the proposals for change, but there is nothing in it that could be said to give rise to a requirement for such a change. The Supreme Court and Lady Hale made it clear that, although important, CEDAW and other treaties are not binding on our domestic law. There is simply no basis for the Secretary of State to act on the basis of the CEDAW report. New clauses 10, 11 and 12 should be rejected. The law on abortion is a matter for the people of Northern Ireland. I hope we will see the Assembly restored soon so that this matter can be resolved in its right and proper place.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before I call the shadow Minister, colleagues will be aware that a large number of people wish to contribute. I cannot set a time limit, but let me put it this way: we could certainly get everybody in if everyone spoke for around eight minutes each.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I shall endeavour to make sure that everyone has time to speak, Dame Rosie.

The Opposition Front-Bench new clauses each cover three issues in three stages. On each issue, the relevant new clause would first, compel the Government to bring forward a report on progress to implement change in the relevant area on or before 4 September 2019; secondly, require the Government to bring forward, within two sitting days of that report, a motion to take note of the report; and thirdly, require the Government then to introduce legislation, following the passing of a motion. Let me be clear that any incoming Labour Government would seek to legislate on these issues.

Let me address new clause 1, which was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn). I can add little to the speeches made by my hon. Friend and the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) on the subject of gay marriage. I will say, though, that I had the very sad honour to attend the funeral of Lyra McKee in Belfast earlier this year. Much attention has been paid to some of the sentiments expressed at that time. We heard that day that Lyra was making arrangements for her own marriage to her partner. Sitting in the cathedral, I was struck by the huge sadness and irony: we rightly praised this remarkable young woman for being a child of the peace process, for being so openly happy with her own
[Karin Smyth]

sexuality, and for having touched every part of Northern Ireland society with her optimism, but while she was making plans for her marriage to the woman she loved, her own society was in essence saying to her, “Away you go to Donegal. You can’t do that here.” What a great testament it would be to her memory, and for the thousands of people throughout Northern Ireland who simply want to express their love, if we could make progress on this issue.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for allowing me to intervene at this early stage of her contribution. I have looked closely at the new clauses tabled in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, and I have also looked carefully at the wording of new clause 1, which was tabled by the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn). Will the hon. Lady explain how the devolution settlement would be protected in the new clauses for which she is encouraging us to vote? The hon. Member for St Helens North was very careful to draft his new clause to respect the devolution settlement, but that does not appear to be true of the Leader of the Opposition.

Karin Smyth: As the hon. Lady knows, Labour was the architect of much of the devolution throughout the United Kingdom, so we are proud of the devolution settlement. We are asking the House to give a voice to people who currently do not have one. Our proposals would require the Government to bring forward reports to make some progress on issues on which, some two and a half years on—by the time we get through this legislation, it will be some three years on—no progress is being made.

Let me turn my attention to the proposals on abortion. It is some 50 years since this place recognised the cruelty, danger and hypocrisy of the law in respect of women’s rights, but in the late 1960s the Northern Ireland Parliament did not adopt the change. From 1972, when that Parliament was suspended and direct rule was introduced, until 2010, when the criminal justice and policing powers were introduced in Northern Ireland, abortion law was the responsibility of the UK Government. Successive Administrations, both here and in Belfast, have turned a blind eye to this issue over the past 50-plus years and hoped that it would go away. Continually, each year, 1,000 women travel for abortions.

Last night and today, we have yet again heard exemplified the arguments on whether this is a human rights or a devolution issue. We are citing laws—both here and in the European Court and the Supreme Court—regarding whose responsibility this is, which particular legislation or Act we want to be mindful of, whether we have suddenly become cloaked in the glory of devolution or whether this is a human rights issue. But I ask all hon. Members to hear the testimony of the women who are involved and their voices because this is not going to go away. Whether these women are fleeing abuse, domestic violence or rape, know that their baby cannot live, have concerns for their own health, have family reasons, or do not wish to be pregnant, we have to trust women.

2.30 pm

The Supreme Court’s opinion was crystal clear that the UK is in breach, yet we are still making women take their cases and relive the trauma of their travelling. The women in Northern Ireland are being caught in this absurd political ping-pong across the Irish sea and it is simply time for it to come to an end.

Hannah Bardell: When we first started to debate these issues, I said to the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) that I would listen and meet women from Northern Ireland. I did that: I met with Denise Phelan and Sarah Ewart. Nothing could have prepared me for hearing about their experiences. I cannot even imagine what they have been through. Is it not time to stop making women tell their stories and being re-traumatised just so that they can get basic human rights? Is it not time that that changed?

Karin Smyth: I wholeheartedly agree. I commend the hon. Lady and others. Women have travelled here to tell us about those experiences. I commend hon. Members, whatever their views, to take time to listen to those experiences. Like her, I heard Denise’s testimony. I learned more when I heard evidence at the hearings of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. The way in which services here are not established to cope with what then happens to people, particularly if they are travelling, and particularly with regard to foetal remains, is just the most shocking thing that I have heard in this place. It really is time that that stops happening and that we stop making these women relive this experience. Let us be very clear: they are determined to do that and they will keep coming forward and supporting each other.

Let me just move on to historical institutional abuse, which is another issue covered by these amendments. May I also join the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) and pay tribute to Justice Anthony Hart, who has sadly passed away suddenly today? His diligence and work on the inquiry have helped to shine a light on the suffering of many in Northern Ireland.

Thousands of people were let down when they were placed in the state’s care. That pain has been compounded by the delay in establishing the compensation and redress mechanisms laid down under the recommendations of the Hart inquiry. I understand that representatives of victims and survivors will be in Westminster tomorrow to give evidence on the delay in legislating to provide compensation. That is really helpful to them. They are travelling again to talk to us so we hear what they have to say. Labour has consistently called on the Government to legislate on this issue as it is an urgent matter. It has been said many times in this place that, since the publication of the Hart report, some 30 survivors have passed away. Again, we need to see action now as these people are passing on.

Let me turn to the issue of pensions. We have again called for the implementation of pensions for those seriously injured as a result of the troubles. More than 500 people have been unable to live the lives that many of us have been able to, and to plan for their future with their family and to build up their pensions. I have met many of those people through the WAVE project and the South East Fermanagh Foundation. Again, they are travelling here to talk to us. I urge hon. Members, when they have the opportunity, to listen to them and to hear how their lives have been devastated.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I am sure that the hon. Lady is aware that some of the people who have been identified as possible beneficiaries of this pension are former IRA terrorists who injured themselves in the
pursuit of their terrorist activities. Can she confirm that the Opposition are clear that no IRA terrorist should benefit from these pensions?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman raises what is a hugely controversial subject, as he knows. I have met some of those people, who have challenged me directly on the matter. We know that it is a controversial and difficult subject, but we have the definition from 2006 and it is absolutely our view that that remains and, if it is to be changed, it has to be with the agreement and work-through of the political parties in Northern Ireland.

The pension is a recognition of the suffering of those people as a result of the troubles. Again, we need to make sure that this matter is progressed. There are real victims who are struggling in Northern Ireland and who do not have a voice. It is absolutely incumbent on people here to listen to them and to make progress.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth). Having given a fairly lengthy speech on Second Reading last night, the House will be relieved to know that I intend to speak only once in Committee.

The devolution settlement is perfectly clear, as is, I believe, our duty to respect it. Less clear, I suggest, is how we as politicians address the issues raised in the amendments today when devolution is not present, but where there is a clear and pressing call for action. I understand entirely that human rights were devolved under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, but I cannot understand why that was the case. It seems to me that there is an incredibly strong and compelling argument about the universality of human rights for citizens of the United Kingdom and to try to move away from that in some way starts to pick at some of the fabric of Unionism.

Ian Paisley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Simon Hoare: I will not. Having given way many times yesterday, I just want to make my remarks today. The hon. Gentleman will, I am sure, forgive me.

The amendments clearly deal with sensitive issues covering moral, legal and rights considerations. They are being argued with clarity and passion. However, it is my view that this is a process Bill. It has two days of debate. It is not a policy Bill, but rather a housekeeping Bill to ensure that civil servants can keep some sort of show on the road to serve the citizens and residents of Northern Ireland. I want the devolution talks to succeed and I share the hope that the Bill, as suggested by the Secretary of State, will not actually need to become an Act. If it does, I want it to be a clean Act—in other words, an unamended Act.

I say to the Secretary of State and to the Minister on the Front Bench that I am certainly prepared to see the extension of the Bill’s provisions to the short date, but ideally not to the long date—until 21 October, but not to the Northern Ireland Acts concerned, really are the last chance saloon.

Ian Paisley: I have not commented on the part of the Bill which is concerned with the operation of the courts. In effect, there is a call for a committee of the whole House, in this case to take a close look at the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) has already said that if the House would not consider the points she has made, she will not vote for the Bill. That is a very serious call for serious action. I have no doubt that if the House were seized of the responsibility to consider the matter, the result would be entirely different.

Simon Hoare: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Paisley: No, I will not. I am merely trying to draw the House’s attention to the fact that the House has a great deal of power in this matter because there is a provision in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 that says:

"It is the duty of the Assembly to promote co-operation between the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Government of Ireland in matters of common interest."

I suggest that means that the House could take a look at the whole Bill and that a Committee of the whole House could do that job properly, if it were seized of the matter.

Simon Hoare: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Paisley: No, I will not. I am trying to make my remarks and I hope that the House will consider the matter properly.

Ian Paisley: I want the House to consider the Northern Ireland Act 1998, but the Bill is not concerned with that at all. It is purely concerned with the provisions of the Bill. I have no doubt that there are many people in Northern Ireland and in Westminster, in Ireland, and in the rest of the United Kingdom who are very worried about the provisions of the Bill. I do not see why it is not possible for the House to take the Bill and the Northern Ireland Act together. If the Government are not prepared to do that, I hope that the House will consider the matter properly and seize of it in a Committee of the whole House.

Ian Paisley: I do not intend to enter into arguments about whether we should have same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland or whether there should be a change in the law relating to abortion. I have totally different views from those expressed in the Chamber today, but that is not what the debate on the Bill ought to have been about in the first place. This debate is about the narrow issues in the Bill. The other issues that have been introduced have been introduced in a way that does not do justice to this House; that creates great dangers in Northern Ireland, especially when there is a sensitive talks process going on; and, indeed, that angers many people in Northern Ireland whose views will be ignored if the amendments are passed today.

Sammy Wilson: It is kind of does.

Ian Paisley: If this Bill is amended, I shall be very frightened—seriously frightened—that that might prove to be a reason, an excuse or a smokescreen to collapse the talks coming from either end of the spectrum, and that would be lamentable. I do not believe that this House should do anything to jeopardise those fragile talks. I understand entirely the passion that underpins the amendments, but effectively, for the reasons given, I intend to abstain on all amendments this afternoon. I will also abstain on Third Reading if the Bill is amended. I do not think that that is an inappropriate stance for the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee to take.

In the words of Bob Dylan, someone whom I have not knowingly quoted before, the times they are a-changin’. Politics in this place and in Northern Ireland will injure itself—possibly irrevocably—if it seeks to set its face against the arguments of change that we are hearing today. It is my view that it is a question not of whether change is delivered, but of how and in which forum. It appears that profound social change is coming to Northern Ireland. That change is going to be authored either here in Westminster or in Belfast, but the issues articulated by the hon. Members for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) can no longer be dodged or fudged.

The choice of where, how and by which mechanism that change is delivered will be in the hands of those involved with the talks. I impress upon the hon. Members for Walthamstow and St Helens North that I believe that the impression needs to be made—the urgency of the need for speedy success. I hope that the parties involved in those talks are seized of their responsibility, because the next few weeks, as far as the future political arrangements of Northern Ireland are concerned, really are the last chance saloon.

Sammy Wilson: There is great dismay in Northern Ireland at the way a Bill described by the Chair of the Select Committee as a process Bill that is narrowly focused on a particular issue—how to keep Northern Ireland government going during a period when we do not have devolution, and how to get devolution up and running again—has been hijacked by those who have their own particular interests in specific issues, and who are now using the Bill as an attempt to drive through that agenda.

I do not intend to enter into arguments about whether we should have same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland or whether there should be a change in the law relating to abortion. I have totally different views from those expressed in the Chamber today, but that is not what the debate on the Bill ought to have been about in the first place. This debate is about the narrow issues in the Bill. The other issues that have been introduced have been introduced in a way that does not do justice to this House; that creates great dangers in Northern Ireland, especially when there is a sensitive talks process going on; and, indeed, that angers many people in Northern Ireland whose views will be ignored if the amendments are passed today.

I want to say three things about the amendments and the reaction of some Members of this House. First, there is a very clear inconsistency. These matters are devolved. It really does not matter whether there is a devolved Assembly in operation at the moment or not; they are still devolved issues.

Hannah Bardell: It kind of does.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Lady says from a sedentary position, “It kind of does.” If it kind of does, why are those who are saying that we should interfere on the
issue of same-sex marriage and abortion not being consistent and arguing that we should be using the powers of this House and bringing back to this House all the other issues, many of which are also human rights issues, such as the human rights of people who need special education to get special education, and the human rights of people who need life-saving operations to have life-saving operations? I do not hear any siren calls from the people who are saying, “Yes, it kind of does matter that there is no devolution in Northern Ireland.” If it does, let us bring other matters back to this House.

Emma Little Pengelly: Looking around the Chamber, it strikes me that there are a number of people present who were not here for yesterday’s debate, when we talked about a range of these issues. Whenever we talk about human rights, it is important to say that there are people sitting on waiting lists, when one of the fundamental human rights is the right to life. People on waiting lists are dying while waiting for cancer treatment and other treatments because there is no Assembly in Northern Ireland and there is a refusal of this place to intervene and try to do something about that. We do care about the rights of people right across the board, but that means that we must have the Northern Ireland Assembly back up and running to deal with these issues.

2.45 pm

Sammy Wilson: And indeed, it is significant that some of those who are saying that they do not wish to see steps being taken to deal with those issues are not even prepared to accept that what has stopped those issues being discussed in Northern Ireland is the attitude of Sinn Féin and the refusal of Sinn Féin to get back into government. There is an inconsistency there.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sammy Wilson: Well, the hon. Lady has just wandered into the Chamber, so I am not going to give way.

The second inconsistency is that many of those who are saying that these limited and very specific powers should be taken by this House are the same people who, during the debate on Brexit legislation, complain time and again that we should not interfere with the powers of devolved Administrations. Indeed, when the Government were suggesting that some of the powers that currently reside with Brussels might be brought back and held at the centre—or at least, that they would wait to discuss whether those powers should be devolved—there was an outcry in this House: “You’re interfering with the devolution settlement and the powers of devolved Assemblies.” Yet the very same people who made those arguments are now saying, “But it’s okay to take away the powers of the Northern Ireland Assembly on these sensitive issues.”

Look at the inconsistency of SNP Members; they cannot even be consistent for 24 hours. Yesterday evening, the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), said that “the SNP Benches do not vote on matters devolved to other parts of the UK...We are not blind to the circumstances in Northern Ireland, but we intend to stick to that principle.”—[Official Report, 8 July 2019; Vol. 663, c. 73.]

Well, the Gorilla Glue they used did not work very well because they are not sticking to that principle at all. They have changed their minds on this issue within 24 hours.

Mhairi Black: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sammy Wilson: No. I have told the hon. Lady that I am not giving way. Despite the fact that SNP Members have railed against this House when it comes to devolved issues for Scotland, they seem to believe that it does not matter when it comes to Northern Ireland.

There is also an inconsistency regarding the way these issues would be dealt with—that is, through regulations introduced by the Secretary of State, which we will never debate in this House and which will not be scrutinised. I can remember many hours of debate in this House about how the power-grabbing and power-snatching desire of the Government must be opposed by those of us who are democrats and who want to stop these Henry VIII powers being taken by a dictatorial Government. But the Members who tabled these amendments today are quite happy to say to the Minister, “Go ahead. Take the powers. Make the regulations. We don’t care whether they are scrutinised. Make sure they are in place for 31 October.” When people look at the way these issues are being dealt with, they will ask, “Where is the consistency?” That is an issue that people in Northern Ireland will be asking questions about, but it is one that this House ought to be asking questions about.

Either we respect devolution and we do not want to see powers granted to Ministers that are unscrutinised, or we do, and if we do in these particular instances, we have to ask ourselves the question, “In what other circumstances will that happen?” If this House decides that government is not going to function in Northern Ireland, as might well be the case, and decides to take these powers back, I, as a democrat, even if this House votes for things that I do not want, will fiercely argue for that.

If this House is a decision-making body, I will have to live with that, as will many of my constituents who might take a different view from people in this House, but at the minute we cannot have it both ways, such that these issues are devolved and the Assembly should decide them, but that the House will take part when individuals in this House decide, “Here is an issue that I’m not keen on.”

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): In dealing with the overarching issue of the devolution settlement, does my right hon. Friend agree that part of the problem—he seems to be alluding to this—is that some Members of the House seem determined to say, on the one hand, that they want to get all the parties together to agree in Northern Ireland, yet, on the other, that they are going to try to force through issues here that drive a coach and horses through the devolution settlement? Those are the very issues, among others, that divide parties and people in Northern Ireland, rather than uniting them.

Sammy Wilson: Yes, and the danger is that that has an impact on the talks that we are trying to progress to a satisfactory conclusion.
Furthermore, the proposed measures are undemocratic. The views of the Assembly on abortion have been clearly expressed. Back in 2015, the Assembly—not by a vote using a petition of concern, but by a majority, and a big majority at that—decided that it did not want to change abortion legislation in Northern Ireland. Indeed, in October last year, a ComRes survey in Northern Ireland showed that 64% of people in Northern Ireland did not believe that this issue should be decided here, but should be decided in Northern Ireland. Significantly, 66% of women took the view that that should be the case, and, among young people, 72% of those aged between 18 and 32 believed that the issue should be decided locally. That being the case, trying to impose change through this place on the people of Northern Ireland, ignoring the devolution settlement, is obviously undemocratic.

If we are going to take extra powers to this House, why take them on some of the most sensitive issues? They could be taken on other issues where people would accept that, but these are some of the most sensitive. The fact that I have had hundreds of emails on this issue within the past week indicates how sensitive it is. Regardless of whether people agree with my views on the two issues before us, they should ask themselves, “Is this the way this should be dealt with?” I do not believe it is. It is not consistent with previous decisions of the House and it is not democratic.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I believe that decisions regarding the law on abortion in Northern Ireland should be a matter for the people who live there and their elected representatives. The whole concept of devolution is based on the idea that different jurisdictions in the United Kingdom are entitled to adopt different approaches to areas within their competence. It was a decision of this House to transfer policing and justice powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly, and Westminster has not sought to impose legislation in this area at any stage during the history of Northern Ireland since 1921.

In 1967, the elected representatives of Northern Ireland determined not to embrace the Abortion Act 1967. As recently as 2016, the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland voted not to change the law on abortion in any way. In that sense, Northern Ireland’s law enjoys a more recent democratic sanction than that of any other part of the United Kingdom. This is a matter of great debate in Northern Ireland, but there is robust statistical analysis to show that about 100,000 people who are alive in Northern Ireland today would not be if we had embraced the 1967 Act. I point to what the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) just said: polling shows that a large majority of people in Northern Ireland—64%—say that this is not a matter that should be addressed by Westminster, rising to 66% of women and 72% of 18 to 32-year-olds.

Inevitably and understandably, it will be pointed out that the Executive has not been functioning since January 2017. However, for reasons the Secretary of State has articulated on numerous occasions, there has been a concerted effort to avoid direct rule, which is no way to run a complex society such as Northern Ireland’s; only in extremis should it be considered. If direct rule came in, this House would of course be entitled to legislate on matters that are currently devolved. Ministers would be accountable for legislation and for the operation of Executive Departments in Northern Ireland. But direct rule has not been introduced, and while this remains the case, this House cannot selectively intervene in relation to some issues as if direct rule were in place without unravelling the wider devolution settlement.

Huw Merriman: If that is so, why did Lady Hale say in the Supreme Court, when looking at whether this is incompatible legally, that Parliament, not the Northern Ireland Assembly, has three choices to correct it?

Sir Edward Leigh: I am going to deal precisely with that point if my hon. Friend will be patient.

The process we are undertaking this afternoon does not assist the talks process—quite the opposite. Some of those who support these amendments and new clauses will claim to generally accept this argument but suggest that abortion is different because there is a human rights imperative to override the devolution settlement. However, significant misinformation has been spread with regard to the status of the law on abortion in Northern Ireland in relation to human rights. Specifically, as we have heard, a number of claims have been made with regard to the CEDAW and a recent report by the CEDAW sub-committee on Northern Ireland.

First, let us consider the position of the legislation on abortion in Northern Ireland in terms of the Human Rights Act 1998 and the European convention on human rights. It is important to stress that at this point there has been no declaration of incompatibility with regard to the law on abortion in Northern Ireland. Yes, in the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission judgment released in June 2018, a majority of judges indicated that if the plaintiff had standing in the case, they would have made a declaration of incompatibility with regard to cases involving fatal foetal abnormalities and in cases of sexual crime. However, these non-binding comments do not constitute a declaration of incompatibility.

Emma Little Pengelly: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Edward Leigh: I had better keep going to obey your ruling, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I want to reply to this point, which has been made in an intervention.

In addition, the Supreme Court, again in non-binding comments, unanimously found that the law on abortion in Northern Ireland was compliant with the European convention on human rights in restricting access to abortion on the grounds of non-fatal disabilities. This part of the judgment is conveniently often forgotten in the rhetoric of proponents of change in the law on abortion in Northern Ireland. One might instead think, listening to the arguments made by some, that the Court found that the decriminalisation of abortion is required on the basis of human rights. That is simply false and needs to be understood as such. Individuals are of course entitled to argue for the decriminalisation of abortion, but they are not entitled to make this claim on the basis of human rights conventions or jurisprudence.

A future panel of the Supreme Court might well make a similar finding to that made in the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission case. Indeed, a properly constituted case is currently before the courts in Northern Ireland with regard to fatal foetal abnormality. However, even if that were the case, the incompatibility
to be resolved would be on the narrow grounds of some of the most tragic and difficult cases imaginable—that of fatal foetal abnormality, not on the grounds of decriminalisation of abortion. Furthermore, section 4(6) of the Human Rights Act makes it clear that even had the Supreme Court determined that a piece of primary legislation was incompatible—which it did not in this case—and made such a declaration, a declaration of incompatibility “does not affect the validity, continuing operation or enforcement of the provision in respect of which it is given” and “is not binding on the parties to the proceedings in which it is made.”

Indeed, Baroness Hale pointed out that, even in cases where there is a ruling of incompatibility, that does not compel the legislature to change the law. It still has what she describes as a “do nothing” option.

3 pm

That leads me on to CEDAW and the report of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. I remind the House of the legal opinion of Professor Mark Hill, QC, which points to the reality of CEDAW and the status of the committee. On a point of fact, which needs to be reiterated due to the number of times this has been claimed, the CEDAW committee and the United Nations are not coterminous. The CEDAW committee does not represent the entirety of the United Nations. Professor Hill, argues cogently that there is no requirement for the UK or Northern Ireland to act in response to the CEDAW committee’s Northern Ireland report, first because there is no right to abortion under the convention, and secondly because the committee does not have the power to make binding resolutions on the UK. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) quoted Professor Hill’s report in some detail, so I do not need to repeat it.

Far too much weight has been put on the recommendations of the CEDAW committee. To imply that the Secretary of State should consider taking action in law as a result is entirely inappropriate. We need to be very careful with regard to the precedent we would set if we passed these amendments and new clauses. Do we want to give reports of UN treaty monitoring bodies this kind of status, irrespective of the topic?

The United Kingdom Supreme Court certainly does not treat reports of the CEDAW committee with the kind of authority that these amendments do. As Lord Wilson, with whom Lord Reed and Lord Hughes agreed, put it in R (A and B) v. Secretary of State for Health—this is an important point:

“The conventions and the covenant to which the UK is a party carefully stop short of calling upon national authorities to make abortion services generally available. Some of the committees go further down that path. But, as a matter of international law, the authority of their recommendations is slight.”

These amendments and new clauses are not required under human rights jurisprudence and could lead to an unhelpful precedent. They tear up the devolution settlement and are a naked power grab that must be rejected.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I rise to speak to amendment 9, which has cross-party support. I was very pleased that the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), spoke in support of my amendment. The amendment would add to clause 3 a new subsection to place a duty on the Secretary of State to report on the legal framework on abortion in Northern Ireland, with an analysis of how the framework can be amended by this Parliament during the period when there is no Executive, subject to a sunset clause, to respect the devolution settlement. That would be done to comply with the human rights obligations of the United Kingdom.

We have had plenty of debate about our human rights responsibilities, and I know that many Members of this House are very concerned about the breaches of women’s human rights in Northern Ireland in relation to abortion. As we have heard, the law is still based on the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, which punishes a woman who terminates her pregnancy or anyone who assists her with up to life imprisonment. Members will also be aware that the Abortion Act 1967 has never applied in Northern Ireland.

The law on abortion in Northern Ireland is one of the most restrictive and harshest in the world—abortion in cases of rape, incest and fatal foetal abnormality is not allowed in Northern Ireland. We know that prosecutions take place. We have heard about the mother who bought tablets off the internet for her daughter, who was in an abusive relationship.

Fiona Bruce: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Diana Johnson: I am going to carry on.

We have heard about the woman who had a self-induced abortion because she could not afford to travel to England or Scotland. We have also heard of the 1,000 women who travel to access abortion services in England and Wales.

Following the referendum in the Republic of Ireland, a very stark light is now shining on this archaic law in Northern Ireland. With no Assembly sitting for over two years, we have seen no progress in dealing with this situation, but we have seen the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women finding grave and systematic breaches of women’s human rights in its inquiry into abortion in Northern Ireland in February 2018. The Women and Equalities Committee said:

“The UK Government needs to set out a clear framework and timeline to address the breaches of women’s rights in Northern Ireland under the CEDAW Convention that have been identified by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women if there is no government in Northern Ireland to take this action.”

In July 2019, the UN Committee against Torture said:

“The Committee recommends that the State party ensure that all women and girls in the State party, including in Northern Ireland, have effective access to the means of terminating a pregnancy when not doing so is likely to result in severe pain and suffering, such as when the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, when the life or health of the pregnant person is at risk and in cases of fatal foetal impairment.”

Some Members have tried to disparage the committees of the United Nations, but the United Kingdom Supreme Court identified a breach of human rights in relation to cases of fatal foetal abnormality, rape and incest—it simply did not make a declaration of incompatibility.
because the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission did not have locus, due to a drafting problem with the legislation that needs to be rectified. The Women and Equalities Committee has made it clear that it believes a very strong case is made by the highest court in the land.

There is a case currently making its way through the courts, and it is very likely that there will be a finding of incompatibility in the next few months. I want to pay tribute to that exceptional, strong, brave woman from Northern Ireland, Sarah Ewart, who, supported by Amnesty, is bringing this case through the courts because of her own experience of having to travel to England when she was told that her pregnancy had a fatal foetal abnormality. The reasonable approach to take, recognising that finding of incompatibility is coming at us in the next few months—

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Diana Johnson: I need to finish this point.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: It is on that point.

Diana Johnson: I will give way, then.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. On the point about fatal foetal abnormality and the case involving Sarah Ewart, I have met Sarah on a number of occasions—most recently, last week—and she is very clear that, in respect of a change to the law on abortion in Northern Ireland, she does not want any change beyond dealing with the very narrow issue of fatal foetal abnormality. She is very clear about that, and I think she would want me to put that on the record on her behalf.

Diana Johnson: Today, we are looking at the opportunity we have with this Bill, and I think that most Members of this House would agree that legislation that is over 150 years old governing what is essentially a healthcare matter is no longer fit for purpose. That is why we should have the opportunity, as set out in my amendment, to look at the options available to the House when that finding of incompatibility comes down the road.

I want to respect the devolution settlement. That is why I have drafted the amendment with a sunset clause, so that once the Assembly is, we hope, back up and running, whatever we need to do in this House will revert back to the Assembly to carry forward.

I want to reiterate what I said last night. This idea came out of discussions we had on the Joint Committee conducting pre-legislative scrutiny of the Domestic Abuse Bill. We found that if the Government wanted to ratify the Istanbul convention on combating violence against women and girls—which I am sure everybody in this House feels is an important thing to do—they could not because that Bill does not cover Northern Ireland, and Northern Ireland does not have legislation on issues such as stalking and coercive control. The idea that came out of that Committee was that we would again legislate for Northern Ireland, but with a sunset clause ready for when the Assembly is up and running again—it could then take the matter in whatever direction it wanted to—so that the bare minimum is in place.

I hope that the Committee will look at amendment 9 carefully, because it would give us an opportunity to consider how to take the matter forward. I think that all Members are really very concerned and moved by the stories of women who have been affected by the current abortion laws in Northern Ireland, and I am sure that we all want to ensure that we do not carry on, year after year, with the issue of women’s reproductive rights and healthcare in Northern Ireland not being addressed and with their human rights not being upheld. I hope that the Committee will support amendment 9.

Huw Merriman: I rise to speak in favour of amendment 9, the details of which have just been explained by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson); of new clause 10, tabled by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy); and of new clause 1, which stands in the name of the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn). I will focus on abortion in Northern Ireland.

I have some sympathy with the point that this is a very narrowly defined Bill that is supposed to deliver certain eventualities, and that the amendments are widening in scope. Of course, the Clerk of Legislation, who is an absolute legend in this place, has decided that they are within scope. It is greatly frustrating that we have been having this conversation in this place for some time, because the Supreme Court has decreed that the law is incompatible with our obligations under treaty rights. When it comes to treaty rights, that is a matter for Parliament to correct; it is not a matter for Northern Ireland.

That opens up the point about why the Bill is being used in this regard. It is with regret, but with great frustration too, that we cannot seem to get Parliament to deliver by updating our laws to make them compliant with the Supreme Court’s judgment, because the Government have not moved.

I have great sympathy with the views held by hon. Members from Northern Ireland. I met representatives who were put in touch with me by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), and they made their case, with great dignity and respect, for why they do not want to see abortion rights changed. I think it is important for us to meet all sides of the divide.

Equally, I spent time with Amnesty International in Belfast, meeting those who felt that their lives had been ruined by the current situation.

It feels wrong to me that one part of the United Kingdom can be left behind with a near total ban on abortion. The situation is even more perverse now that the Republic has changed its legal position on the matter. In 2018, as we have heard, 1,053 women had to travel outside Northern Ireland in order to exercise the rights that would be available to them elsewhere in the UK. That shows the absurdity of the situation, because the abortions still took place, but the extra inconvenience has to be suffered. I think that we need to change that.

I want to return to the words of Lady Hale in her Supreme Court judgment. She said:

“...agreed, for the reasons given by Lord Kerr and Lord Mance, that in denying a lawful termination of her pregnancy in Northern Ireland to those women and girls in these situations who wish for it, the law is incompatible with their Convention rights.”

She then explained that Parliament—she was very clear that this was for Parliament—could do three things:
[Huw Merriman]

“First, it may share the court’s view and approve a ‘fast track’ remedial order under section 10 of the HRA”—the Human Rights Act 1998;

“Second, it may share our view and pass an Act of Parliament to put things right... Third, it may do nothing” and see the matter taken further, through to Strasbourg.

More tellingly, for me—this is why I think we have it within our gift and should enact the provision—she said the following:

“It is at this point that the democratic will, as expressed through the elected representatives of the people, rules the day.”

The Bill is perhaps not the best vehicle, but the law requires updating. We have an opportunity now to give people their dignity and their human rights.

Emma Little Pengelly: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Huw Merriman: I will take one intervention, given that I have made so many myself.

Emma Little Pengelly: It is also the case, as we have articulated—we have received thousands of emails from across Northern Ireland—that the democratic will of the people of Northern Ireland does not support what is outlined in the amendment. The hon. Gentleman has highlighted an issue with the court case, but this amendment goes well beyond that.

3.15 pm

Huw Merriman: I understand the hon. Lady’s point, because when I visited Northern Ireland I received a few choice emails from residents suggesting that I go back to where I came from. The reality is that this is the UK Parliament, and I believe that it is for this Parliament to take action. Even if I was wrong about that, for two years now the people of Northern Ireland have been unable to make those changes. We have conflicting polls—I could offer her one from Amnesty International.

For two years there has not been the ability to legislate, so for how many more years are we to carry on, with people in Northern Ireland being without a vehicle for having their rights enforced?

I believe that is the fundamental point, because given that hon. Members argue, in relation to certain matters, that there should be no split down the Irish sea between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, I find it slightly perverse that they think that is okay when it comes to fundamental human rights. That is why I believe very strongly that we must make a change.

I will end with this, because I know that there is always a tendency—

Nigel Dodds: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Huw Merriman: I said that I would take only one intervention, if the right hon. Gentleman does not mind.

I say this, particularly to Members on these Conservative Benches: there might be technical reasons why they could be persuaded by the argument that this is a devolved matter—although I think legally that is wrong—but if we want to change, then we cannot change by abstaining, and if we want to make the point that we believe in equality and in human rights for all UK citizens, then it takes bravery. Do not just wear a badge or a T-shirt; walk through the Division Lobby and stand up for people whose rights have been abused for far too long.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It was Lord Palmerston who said that the Schleswig-Holstein question had only ever been understood by three people: one had gone mad, one had died and one had forgotten what it was all about. Here, however, we are considering a set of political, constitutional, legal and moral issues that are hopefully of far less complexity than that diplomatic incident all those years ago. They are unquestionably complex issues. To many people outside this Chamber—and probably to some inside it—it is a straight yes or no, for example on new clause 1 and same-sex marriage. But we are legislators and must take into consideration all the complex constitutional, political and possibly economic—whatever it might be—pieces of the kaleidoscope before reaching an informed decision.

Of course, the West Lothian question, which presents itself in some guise for the Scottish National party in this debate, needs to be answered and explained. It is entirely correct that Members, particularly those who represent Northern Ireland constituencies, would expect us to answer for that from us. There has been an historic self-denying ordinance on the Scottish National party not to participate in matters, such as this, that are outwith the scope of the devolved settlement in Scotland. However, we made it clear four years ago, not long after the larger arrival of my colleagues here, that there may be times when we decide to do so. We said in the election campaigns of 2015 and 2017 that we would do so where we deemed it to be appropriate, and I believe that this is one such occasion.

We talk a lot in this place at the moment about hard borders. There is currently a hard border on civil rights and equal rights for LGBT people, and it runs down the Irish sea. It is notable that Scotland is the only part of the United Kingdom where a same-sex union in Northern Ireland can be converted into a full marriage. I beseech the Government to amend their legislation to allow for that to happen in England and Wales.

I say to members of the Democratic Unionist party—I single out the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), who is taking his seat and was frothing at the mouth when we heard from Members who have genuinely held positions in relation to this problem; doubtless he does as well—that we have a unique set of circumstances. I do not like this place interfering in devolved Administrations and institutions perhaps any more than he does, but there is no point in the Scottish National party trying to out-Sinn Féin Sinn Féin on these matters, as they have said it would be entirely appropriate. I take no pleasure or joy in having to do this—I wish it could be settled in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Sinn Féin are right that the Assembly is the proper place to take that decision, but we are where we are. I could not go back to my constituency, and I could not not look someone from Northern Ireland who wants this change in the eye ever again if I abstained or did not seek to advance the cause of equality, which I can enjoy, and which every Member of this House can enjoy, but which they cannot.

I will not accept any accusations of not being consistent. When the Democratic Unionist party blocked equal marriage, I argued for it consistently. In the gruesome
history of the DUP’s—[Interruption.] They might laugh, but during the party’s gruesome history of anti-LGBT campaigning—and no, I will not calm down—I was consistent in standing up for equal rights, as were many other Members who have spoken in this debate. This is not simple—it is not black and white—but we face a set of unprecedented political circumstances in Northern Ireland. I do not enjoy them any more than anyone else, but voting for the Scottish National Party to take part is entirely right and consistent, and I look forward to voting for new clause 1 when the Division is called.

Vicky Ford: As Members of Parliament, we often meet people who have suffered deep trauma and have been through challenging times, but the evidence that I heard when I served on the Women and Equalities Committee, which was looking at the issue of abortion in Northern Ireland, was one of the most harrowing experiences that I have had in over a decade of being an elected politician. I speak as someone who firmly believes in a woman’s right to choose, but I also believe strongly, in sensitive matters such as abortion, that local people should be able to make their own decisions, and not have views imposed on them by people in another area.

I was born and raised in County Tyrone, and I know how sensitive issues on abortion and devolution are in Northern Ireland. During the Select Committee inquiry we heard from over 700 people, who had their own individual stories to tell about how the law and medical care in Northern Ireland affected them. I travelled to Northern Ireland three times. We held a number of public sessions, and also many sessions in private. The Select Committee report was agreed unanimously by all the Members who had taken part in those evidence sessions in Northern Ireland. The two Members who signed the minority report had not been to Northern Ireland to hear evidence.

Some cases were deeply traumatic. Sarah Ewart, who has been mentioned, was a young mum, newly wed, who was firmly opposed to abortion. At her 20-week scan, she was told that her baby had anencephaly, which means that the baby’s head is not developing—the baby had no skull or brain—and the baby will not be born alive. Sarah spoke to her grandmother, who told her how having to give birth to a child with a similar condition meant she had nearly lost her own life. Sarah told us how, when she received the diagnosis, backs were turned. The doctors, midwives and nurses felt that they could not give advice, because they had been told that if they gave advice to a woman in those circumstances they risked being sent to jail for life. Sarah went to England to have her abortion.

We heard from another woman who was carrying a baby that she knew would not survive birth, and who was too sick as a mother to travel. She ended up having to carry her baby in her womb until the baby died, and then deliver a dead baby. We also heard from a woman who had been diagnosed when living in London as carrying a child who was going to die, and was wrapped around with love and support, and enabled to deliver the baby early on and terminate the pregnancy. When she moved back to Northern Ireland in similar circumstances, she did not receive that care.

To be balanced, we also heard from a mother who was told that her baby was almost certainly due to die. She decided not to have an abortion, and the baby is now a healthy teenager. Most worrying for me was the evidence I heard from the chief medical officer, who believed that under the current regime, doctors, nurses and midwives in Northern Ireland could not carry out their duty of care obligations to women, especially women whose babies are going to die, so those mums’ lives were being put at risk.

The UK Supreme Court has identified a breach of human rights in cases of fatal foetal abnormality, rape and incest. The UN committee has found grave and systemic breaches of women’s rights in the same areas. Britain is a country that upholds human rights across the world. We cannot turn a blind eye to what is happening in our own country. There is no question but that the situation must be changed—the question is how. The Select Committee report contains a number of recommendations. The law on fatal foetal abnormalities needs to be changed. Women’s lives should not be endangered—women should be loved and cared for at that time. The situation for healthcare professionals needs to be changed, so that that chilling effect no longer occurs. We need to provide more support for those who find themselves pregnant as a result of rape and incest, and we must address those human rights concerns.

The new clause tabled by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) goes much further. It suggests that we remove sections 58 and 59 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861, which would fundamentally change abortion law in England as well as in Northern Ireland. In England, we have the 1967 Act, which tells us how abortion can be done lawfully, but what happens if there is an unlawful abortion? We know that the vast majority of abortions today are not surgical procedures; they are medical procedures, such as taking a pill. What would happen if I was pregnant and my partner gave me that pill? How do we make sure that we can still prosecute an unlawful abortion if we have decriminalised it? I want to ensure that, before we change the rules or the law in England, we have gone through these circumstances and made sure our regime is robust. Before we decide to remove those sections, we need to make sure that our law throughout the whole UK is robust. I think that needs detailed consideration and does not just get done on a Tuesday afternoon in Westminster on the back of one Back Benchers’ amendments.

Finally, the lack of a devolved Assembly in Northern Ireland is having many really serious consequences. We have heard Members talk about people having to wait for their cancer care. I have heard about delays to education spending and about delays to infrastructure projects. I have heard about the uncertainty that that gives to people’s lives and people’s businesses, and the impact it is having on the economy. We need the devolved Assembly and we need these laws to go through, but we do not need the Back-Bench amendments attached to them. For that reason, I will vote in the same manner as the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee this afternoon.

3.30 pm

Ian Paisley: Thank you, Dame Rosie, for giving me the opportunity to speak during the Committee stage of this important Bill.

This Bill is called the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill, yet the debate has been pretty thin on how an Executive could be formed again in Northern Ireland. In fact, we have had a debate about every other
issue under the sun except what we are supposed to be debating. That is no reflection, of course, on the Chair; it is because of the amendments that have been tabled to try to frustrate the very important issue of how we form an Executive in Northern Ireland.

People give us lip service. They tell us, “We want to have an Executive in Northern Ireland. We want the Executive brought back.” Here is a Bill that would let us do that, give impetus to the negotiators and give a fair wind to what is going on in Belfast and in Stormont at this particular time but, instead of being an encourager or facilitator of those talks, this House—during the debate today and yesterday—has actually become a frustrator of those talks. It wishes to frustrate them for the obvious reason that it wants to debate other issues that could interfere and affect the strange but important counterbalance required between the parties to encourage them to get in to the talks, to make progress and to ensure they are not put off by what is happening outside the Assembly.

Emma Little Pengelly: It is fair to say that we have entered into the substance of some of these issues here today, and everybody is clear that the DUP and others in the House have strong views on the substance of a number of those issues. However, it is also clear that what we are asking people to do is to vote on the process—an inadequate process. Fundamental change by way of Back-Bench amendments is not the way to do this. It does not facilitate scrutiny and it will impact on the talks process. We can revisit this appropriately in October, if need be.

Ian Paisley: My hon. Friend makes an appropriate point. Either we decide to direct-rule all powers in relation to Northern Ireland and deal with the issues honestly, openly and transparently here, or else we give a fair wind to the Assembly, allow it to get up and running, and allow it to be responsible for the affairs it is supposed to be responsible for. Having a foot in both camps, and saying we might legislate on these issues and we may have an impact on those issues, sometimes gives an advantage to one party in Northern Ireland over the other. That is where the process today, being driven by Back Benchers, on some of the amendments is totally disgraceful and wrong. I know—I have said this as clearly as I possibly can—that that is not the intention of many Members and that they all want to see stability back in Northern Ireland, but that is the effect of what they are doing. The impact of what they are doing will have that counterbalance on the situation in Northern Ireland.

A year or so ago, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee published a report, “Devolution and democracy in Northern Ireland”, on dealing with the democratic deficit, which listed 67 issues that were in deficit and required to be addressed. Not one of those issues has been the subject of a Back-Bench amendment today—not one of them—yet that is the list; that is the authorised version list of what needs to be put in place to address the democratic deficit. But oh, no: we have other subject matters, which parties here know are part and parcel of the ongoing debate in Northern Ireland and of the ongoing negotiation in Northern Ireland, and they could hold other parties to ransom if they are dealt with here in advance of the outcome of the talks process in Northern Ireland. I think parties should waken up and recognise that they should be facilitating that process, not frustrating it.

Lady Hermon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Paisley: I really do not have time. The hon. Member is a cousin of mine. She knows that I always want to give way, but now I do not have time. Other Members wish to speak.

Lady Hermon rose—

Ian Paisley: I really cannot.

Lady Hermon: The hon. Gentleman—

Ian Paisley: I really cannot. I always give way to you, and I really cannot.

Lady Hermon: I think the hon. Gentleman needs to—

Ian Paisley: Please.

Unfortunately, the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) is not here at the moment but the issue of abortion has been made the centrepiece of this debate. It is very important that we ask Members who support this to think about the framework that would be put in place, or would not be in place, as a result of that amendment if it is supported. There would be no framework for abortion in Northern Ireland. Think of the consequences of that.

No matter what people’s position is—I have a very clear position on abortion; other Members have taken the opposite view and they are entitled to their point of view, as I am entitled to my point of view—the fact and the impact of the matter would be that we would have unregulated abortions taking place in Northern Ireland. They would be so unregulated that we would have no idea of the scope of those abortions. Would the limit start at 12 weeks, as is proposed in the Republic of Ireland? Will it go up to 28 weeks? Will it go to full-term abortion? There is no framework. No one here proposing this could give us an answer on that point because they do not have an answer. The measure would just open the door to unregulated abortion.

Where would abortions take place in Northern Ireland? People might say, “Oh, we can do it the way we do it in—.” Well, I am sorry; there is no regulatory framework to allow it to happen. Who would carry out those abortions? Who would take part in them? These matters need to be properly scrutinised, regulated and legislated for, if that is the way Parliament would choose to go. That is why there has been a convention to leave those matters to the devolved Assemblies—since 1921. This has not just been the case since the 1990s; it has been the case since 1921, because it is at the local level that these matters can be properly regulated.

There would be no regulatory framework for sex selection. There would be no regulatory framework for deciding on the abortion of a living soul that would have a disability—none whatever. Those matters need to be properly regulated for.

Hon. Members have made the point that it is unlawful in Northern Ireland to do certain things that are legal here. I must say, Dame Rosie, we have got to nail that. If it is a criminal offence to facilitate and to encourage an
abortion illegally—outside of the law—in Northern Ireland, that same law applies in the rest of GB. One cannot facilitate or encourage illegal abortion anywhere in the UK, whether one is in Walthamstow or in any other part of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland. It should not be put about that there are different liberties on this issue; there are not. There are regulations that would apply in England, but none of them would apply in Northern Ireland under this measure. Even if Members take a different view from me on the principle, they should think long and hard before they support this, because of the impact that it would have.

Let me read into the record of the House what the Supreme Court judgment in R (A and B) v. Secretary of State for Health said, as recently as 2017. It was confirmed that there is no right to abortion in any international treaties:

“The conventions and the covenant to which the UK is a party carefully stop short of calling upon national authorities to make abortion services generally available. Some of the committees go further down that path. But, as a matter of international law, the authority of their recommendations is slight”, yet we are being told today that no, that is not the case. That is the law; that is what the international treaties say. How can Members tell us that they are campaigning on a great rights issue? There is no right under the international treaties to terminate an unborn life. That is the fact of the matter, and we must make sure that that right—the right to life—is upheld.

Other Members have indicated that they wish to speak for the rights of women. The biggest survey done on this matter in the past year, under ComRes, has shown that 66% of women in Northern Ireland, if they want to see changes to abortion laws, want those changes to be done exclusively in the Northern Ireland Assembly, which will take cognisance of the specific and peculiar needs that the Province has. That is what the surveys show. They do not indicate that they want this House to legislate for it in a day, or in a hop, skip, jump and a prayer manner that would lead to unregulated abortions.

It is important that we address one matter that was brought before the House last night. The Scottish National party made a principled case here to support what it has always done—their words, “a principled case”. It said that it would ensure that it would stand away from interfering in a devolved matter. It is important that we look at what was said on the record, at column 75. The SNP said that it does not vote on matters of devolution and that it sticks to that principle. If that was the principle, it is very disappointing that, today, tactically, the SNP has decided to change it. It is entitled, of course, to make that change, but it is not right to try to suggest that it is all the DUP’s fault, when we know that the leaks, which are worse than those coming out of Washington, indicate splits in the ranks of the SNP and that it has more problems internally on this matter and it is trying to use the cover of this matter to take away from its own splits.

Ian Paisley: Thank you, Dame Rosie, for allowing us to make these points. I hope that we will be able to continue this debate and that we see the formation of an Executive in Northern Ireland. That is what we should really be about. I am happy at any point to debate any of those other 67 subjects, but I fear that this Chamber will echo to the one or two normal voices who come for Northern Ireland affairs. Unfortunately, the Bill has today become a Trojan horse for other matters that really should not have been allowed to come on to the agenda.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak, Dame Rosie. I had intended to speak last night on Second Reading, but my flight was delayed so I was not able to do so. I did, however, watch a large chunk of it on the television—until “Love Island” started anyway—and I was particularly struck by two excellent speeches from the hon. Members for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly), who represent my old stomping grounds. I would like to touch on a couple of points that they made last night.

I often find these debates very telling in terms of the number of people, who for years have shown no interest in Northern Ireland and absolutely no interest in devolution, suddenly appearing as if they were the newly found single most important thing to their being. It is a bit frustrating and why I thought, as a Scottish Conservative who believes in and grew up under devolution and is a representative of one of the devolved nations, I would throw in my two cents.

I think we need to start with the pretty fundamental point that devolution in Northern Ireland does not exist at the moment. It has not existed for two years. There is no Executive and there is no Assembly. Arlene Foster is the former First Minister, and she is the First Minister in waiting of an institution that right now does not exist.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: It is not true to say that devolution does not exist in Northern Ireland. There are 11 district councils in Northern Ireland, with extensive powers given to them by this Parliament, which exercise power in my constituency and take very important decisions that affect the people I represent. So please let us not suggest that there is no form of devolution in Northern Ireland. Of course we would love to have our Executive and Assembly in addition to that, but local government is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland and continues to function very effectively as a devolved government.

Paul Masterton: I take the right hon. Gentleman’s point. I think he knows what I mean about that layer of government, but having benefited from the excellent services of Belfast City Council in my time in Northern Ireland I will uphold his comments about the quality of local governance.

We also have Members of the Legislative Assembly, who are the Members of no such Assembly. Some of them continue to do very good work in their communities but a large number do very little for the salary they are paid. We have to have this debate in the context in which it is held. That is why, as sorry as I feel for the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) being slightly undermined by his party’s
switch in position overnight. I am pleased that the SNP has at least accepted the principle of the sovereignty of the Westminster Parliament. That is important, because this is the UK Parliament and, as Members of Parliament, it is our responsibility to represent and act in the best interests of all of the United Kingdom’s citizens.

3.45 pm

I agree with the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) that it is a shame that this Bill has been hijacked. That was always going to happen. We must accept that the reason it has been hijacked is that, in this place, we have allowed this process to stumble on from six months to six months. I like the Secretary of State; she has been given a complete hospital pass in this role and she is doing the best she can. But every once in a while she has to say that the talks are going well and there could be progress. We reach a deadline, set another one and limp on, but eventually we will have to make a difficult call about how much longer we are prepared to accept and put up with that.

I come at the matter as a Scottish Member of Parliament. The system is different and the likelihood of Holyrood collapsing in this way is next to nil but, if it did, I would be so angry at every person in this place—whether I was an MP or not—for allowing that to happen. Remarks have been made about special needs education and the lack of legislation for free childcare. As the father of a five-year-old daughter who will start school in August and a three-year-old son who is going to start nursery, I would be absolutely furious if devolution in Scotland failed and led to the collapse of those services, and time and again MPs in my Parliament have washed their hands of the matter, saying, “This is too difficult. We don’t want to touch this for political reasons.”

Mr Gregory Campbell: I share the hon. Gentleman’s frustration. Does he agree that, if people in Scotland were then told, “There is a hiatus at the moment, but we, the Westminster Parliament, are going to single out one or two issues, which we know are divisive, and deal with them, but we will not deal with the other issues,” there would be extreme frustration and anger?

Paul Masterton: I would be incredibly frustrated by that. I will come on to the point about cherry-picking, which the hon. Member for Belfast East made last night. I do not pretend to be an expert on Northern Ireland just because I lived there for a bit and I still have friends there, but my strong instinct is that the people of Northern Ireland are not convinced that devolution is coming back any time soon, and that they do not particularly care who makes the decisions, as long as the decisions are made. We heard the list of 67 issues from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report. I am frustrated with myself because, had I properly thought about this, there might have been good reason to table 67 discrete amendments—keyhole surgery amendments—to give Ministers incredibly limited powers, strictly for the purposes of doing certain things, such as implementing some of the strategies that have been gathering dust and making some changes to legislation. People in Northern Ireland want and need those changes now, but they do not particularly care who enacts them.

The point about cherry-picking is right. These are the wrong issues to use as test cases. What we are doing is messy, divisive and emotive but, by the same token, I do not think it is wrong to do it. Therefore, I will support new clause 1 and amendment 9. I think that they have been neatly and carefully drafted, to continue, as far as possible, the optimism that there will be a restored Executive and Assembly. If there is, those provisions will fall away. I will not support new clause 10 because—as my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) and others set out—it goes too far in making underlying changes to legislation.

I will sit down and shut up now. I will just add that I find the whole situation in Northern Ireland completely unconscionable, but not because I am a dyed-in-the-wool Unionist, who bizarrely wants to roll back devolution—I am not. We have to accept that this is the United Kingdom’s sovereign Parliament. Allowing Northern Ireland to effectively wither on the vine only serves the interests of Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin is the blockage to getting the Assembly up and running. I can see no evidence that that situation will change, certainly not in the next few months. Unless we change the underlying structure of how the Executive and Assembly are formed, it will be open to Sinn Féin to collapse them at any point in the future. At one point or another, we in this place must say that we will stand up in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland, whichever side of the community they are from, and, in certain discrete measures, neatly and tightly drafted, introduce the effective change that they need and are crying out for.

We shall be back here in six months’ time, and I hope that a large number of those 67 issues will be up for consideration. I also hope—this is directed at the Government Front Bench—that we will deal with the legislation properly and will not try to rush it through in two days, which has led to all the issues of scrutiny that have been raised by Opposition Members.

I think that this is a bit of a dog’s breakfast, but we are where we are, and I shall be supporting a couple of the amendments today. Let us hope that my negativity and pessimism are misplaced and that by the end of October we will have a brand-new shiny Executive, but I suspect that I will not be holding my breath.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I rise to support new clause 1, along with amendment 9, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), and new clauses 10, 11 and 12, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy).

The reality facing women in Northern Ireland is that, under current legislation, they can be sent to prison for life for ending a pregnancy. Abortion is not available to women in Northern Ireland in cases of fatal foetal abnormality, rape or incest. That is not a situation that we would tolerate for any of our own constituents, and we should not be tolerating it for UK citizens in Northern Ireland. The UK Supreme Court takes the same view, and has stated that the lack of access to abortion for women in Northern Ireland is a breach of their human rights.

I think it very unfortunate that the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) sought to undermine committees of the United Nations and CEDAW to try
to make points that should not be made in the context of this very important issue. I think that that was unacceptable, and that all of us in the Chamber should be upholding the UN’s findings and supporting all the reports and recommendations from CEDAW.

It is not even as if the legislation in Northern Ireland actually prevents women from having abortions. It prevents some women from having abortions—those who, for a variety of reasons, such as poverty or a set of family circumstances, are not able to travel to England. That is an appalling situation for women in Northern Ireland, and we must do something about it.

I thank all those who have campaigned for many decades in Northern Ireland to change the law relating to abortion. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull North and for Walthamstow, who have done so much in continuing to raise the issue in Parliament and with the Women and Equalities Committee. I suspect, however, that I am the only Member in the Chamber to have campaigned against the abortion laws in Northern Ireland for decades.

I began campaigning with a group of women for the Abortion Act 1967 to be applied to Northern Ireland. We thought, even back then, that it was important for women throughout the UK to have the same access to abortion, wherever they lived, and for their human rights—although I doubt that was the language we used at the time—to be upheld uniformly.

Diana Johnson: I commend my hon. Friend on her perseverance over all these years of campaigning for this. Hopefully, we will see some change shortly, but it is important to recognise that there have been decades of campaigning by so many strong, brave women and men.

Dr Blackman-Woods: I thank my hon. Friend for those comments.

I want to address some of the comments made by Members in the Chamber, particularly those representing Northern Ireland constituencies. They will know that I do not often speak on Northern Ireland matters because I respect the fact that they are the elected representatives for the area. Nevertheless, as we have seen demonstrated today, the issues we are discussing are about upholding human rights right across the UK.

I, too, honestly wish that the issue of abortion rights and extending them to Northern Ireland was being addressed by an enlightened Assembly in Northern Ireland, but unfortunately, as we all know, the Assembly is not sitting and is not likely to sit for some time, so we have a decision to make this afternoon: do we sit on the Assembly until we have a reform Assembly that can legislate? We cannot get a solution to this problem through the current devolved Assembly. What we have to do instead is wake up to the opportunity that we all have to stop women in Northern Ireland having to travel to England for an abortion and to enable them to access safe abortion services the way any other woman can in the UK. It is also wrong to say that this will open the floodgates to unregulated abortion; we heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull North and for Walthamstow about the frameworks that have been set out to deliver regulated abortion services in Northern Ireland.

This is not an issue that has been delayed for two-plus years while the Assembly has not been sitting; it has been an issue for four decades, if not longer, and we must act now to protect the women in Northern Ireland.

4 pm

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to support new clauses 9, 10, 11 and 12 and to speak in favour of new clause 1 on the issue of same-sex marriage. I begin by placing on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), who really is the very best example of an LGBT ally; I will come on to talk more about that in a moment. He is no longer in his place, but I am sure he will be back shortly.

Quite frankly, this issue has gone on long enough. We know the arguments. The Northern Ireland Assembly has already voted in favour of same-sex marriage, and that enjoys overwhelming public support. The historical anti-LGBT legislation in Northern Ireland came from this place, and the major advances on LGBT rights in Northern Ireland have happened when this place has legislated. We are not trampling over devolution, because there is no devolved government, and new clause 1 would allow until October for Stormont to get up and running again before these changes took effect. It would be so much more preferable for LGBT people in Northern Ireland to be able to look upon their Government in Belfast with pride as the Assembly finally got this wrong and delivered equality, but if it is not able to do that, people in Northern Ireland should rightly be looking at their other Government here in London to do what is necessary.

As my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North mentioned, this is personal for me. I am married to an Irishman and our marriage is not recognised where he is from. We can get on a plane in Glasgow as married men and arrive in Belfast as civil partners, despite never having left the UK, so it has been a great source of frustration and, at times, bemusement to me that, for the last two years, I have had to contend with the DUP talking about how much it does not want any regulatory divergence between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. But even if I was not married to a man from Northern Ireland, I would see it as my duty to stand side by side with LGBT people, no matter where they lived, and it just so happens that they live in the same country as me. The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) could not take my intervention last night, but I am genuinely pleased that the SNP has decided to allow a free vote on this issue, because being an LGBT ally means action.
On that point, I want to mention the Government, because I do not think it is good enough for Ministers to stand at the Dispatch Box and offer warm words about equality and call themselves allies. No one is in any doubt that this Government are perfectly legally entitled to introduce same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland; they are just refusing to do so. On the issue of LGBT rights, I am afraid that the Government and the Northern Ireland Office are just letting people down in Northern Ireland. Recently, I asked the Secretary of State what her Department was doing and, in particular, why it had spent only £318 in recent years on advancing LGBT rights. She responded by telling me that it was “not the role of the Northern Ireland Office, nor the Government, to develop a framework or strategy to advance the rights of LGBT people in Northern Ireland.”

Page 3 of the Government’s LGBT action plan says: “This ‘LGBT Action Plan’ explains how we will advance the rights of LGBT people both at home and abroad, and improve the way that public services work for them.” It actually says “at home and abroad”. There is an entire section on the UK’s international obligations on this issue. We know that £5.6 million has been made available for programmes to be delivered through civil society organisations to advance the legal equality and rights of all Commonwealth citizens, regardless of gender, sex, sexual orientation or gender identity, yet just £318 has been spent on Northern Ireland and we have a Secretary of State who thinks that LGBT equality in that part of the world is nothing to do with her.

Over the weekend, we had a fantastic celebration of Pride in London. We had the Government’s GREAT Britain campaign tweeting out a reminder that in more than 20 countries where gay marriage is not legal, British embassies and consulates perform marriages for same-sex couples where one partner, or both partners, is a British national. What about Northern Ireland? What a kick in the teeth that is for people in Northern Ireland: just a friendly reminder on Pride weekend in London that people in other countries can get married in British consulates, but they cannot. These are not the actions of an ally.

This Government have within their gift the power to act. When they refuse to do so, they cease to be an ally and become an obstacle. Obstacles are something that we are all well used to in the LGBT community. They have included, “We can’t decriminalise sex between two men because it is perverse and sinful,” as well as, “We have to ban the promotion of homosexuality in schools; otherwise, people will think they have an inalienable right to be gay,” and, “We can’t have civil partnerships because that might lead to marriage, and we can’t have marriage because everybody knows that marriage is between a man and a woman.” In that context, “We can’t have marriage because of devolution,” is a pathetic excuse. People in Northern Ireland are not asking this Government for action; they are demanding it. It is 50 years since LGBT people stopped waiting patiently for things to change and started fighting back. We are not going to start waiting patiently now.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It will come as no surprise that I cannot support these amendments. I say that with respect to all those who have spoken or will speak afterwards. I ask hon. and right hon. Members to respect my point of view, which might be very different from the views of others in this Committee. The reason is twofold. First, I say unequivocally that, in every word I utter, I do not judge how anyone chooses to live their life. I am a man of faith, as others will know. I believe God almighty will judge every one of us in this Committee, and I will have enough trouble explaining what I have done, never mind anybody else.

I believe the Bible is the inspired word of God, and I do not believe it can or should be altered. I believe what it says is true, and many of my constituents feel and think the same. They have spoken to me about it, and I have been contacted by many decent people who question the need to change the definition of marriage when civil partnerships provide more protection than is available for common law marriages. These people—my constituents, myself and others—are not homophobic and do not hate others. They treasure the word of God and have a right to their opinion that there is no legal reason or moral obligation to change the definition.

We have heard from the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), and I sat on the Public Bill Committee that considered the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013. Four members of that Committee—three Conservatives and me—opposed the Bill, and we secured a Government amendment that ensured the Northern Ireland Assembly would make a decision on this matter. The amendment was unanimously supported by all parties—Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, everyone supported it. That is the way it happened.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), as a Finance Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly, made sure the proposal went through, so why is a change needed? This is a devolved matter and there is little doubt that, if Sinn Féin ever decide to act democratically and allow the Assembly to reconvene to discuss this redefinition, it would be one of the first items on the agenda. The devolved Assembly is the place for this decision.

It is simply inappropriate for this place to step in and help out with human rights when the rights to life and to education are threatened and in desperate straits. Members either believe in devolution or they do not. They either interfere in all things or they do not. It is not right to do this in this way.

It is right for the Secretary of State to introduce legislation to compel Assembly Members to take their seats and to break the Stormont Sinn Féin stalemate. It is right to force the institution to take its place and do its job, part of which is to discuss this matter. It is not right to take isolated decisions. I respect and work hard for every constituent, regardless of their age, race, gender, sexual orientation or faith, but I will not support new clause 1.

I cannot and will not support new clauses 10 to 12 on abortion. Like everyone else in this place, I am entitled to my firm opinion and, on behalf of my constituents, I make that very clear. I have listened to others with respect, and I believe that both lives matter. I have heard much about a woman’s right over her body, but I have not heard very much about the right of the little life within. The right of the unborn human offspring, from approximately the second week to the eighth week after
Mr Gregory Campbell: I assure my hon. Friend that many people in Northern Ireland will be glad to hear him refer to that, because very deep, profound and empathetic views have been expressed. That should be the case in such debates, but, all too often, we do not hear the case, to which he alludes, of the many millions of unborn children.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for what he says, which is exactly how I and many others feel. I am not afraid to use the term “baby”. I believe it is a life that has rights. Many Members have referenced the rights of the woman, and I believe in those rights, but not at the expense of another life.

As a father and a grandfather, my heart aches at the thought that anything would happen to any of my granddaughters that would foster thoughts of their rights being seen as being subservient to another life.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I seem to recall a campaign in Northern Ireland suggesting that 100,000 people were alive because the law on abortion in Northern Ireland had not been changed. Will the hon. Gentleman reflect on that?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and what he says is true—it is a fact. Those figures have not been refuted. Indeed, they have been endorsed. I thank him for reminding the House clearly of the 100,000 lives saved because of not having abortion on demand in Northern Ireland.

Last year, an abortion was carried out every two and a half minutes in England and Wales—that is of every hour, of every day of the week, with no holiday and no break. Was that the intention of the Abortion Act 1967? No, it was not, but it was the result. I heard the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) say that she is speaking for women from Northern Ireland as no one is speaking for them. I seek gently to remind her that I am here, speaking on behalf of my constituents.

As of Monday evening, my office had received 443 emails on this issue, the majority of which were from women in my constituency, and 412 of the emails opposed any attempt by this place to change abortion laws in Northern Ireland through external interference, with some even labelling this as an attack on devolution and democracy. Just 31 asked me to support these amendments. That means that 92.5% of my constituents—the people I am paid to represent in this House—have asked me not to accede to this amendment. Their reasons replicate mine: some are opposed to what brings about abortion on demand, and some are incensed that Members of this House will not “interfere” to bring about a resolution on urgent health and education matters, but will step in wherever our heads on a matter is of the last to be discussed at Stormont and to be voted against.

Members of this House cannot have it both ways to boost their own profile. Clearly, I speak for the majority of my constituents—I am happy to say that—and indeed for the 60% of those in national polls who would not be in favour of abortion on demand. I hope that I have spoken with gentleness and concern but am yet clear. The people of Strangford have been clear to me and we must also be clear: what is being asked here is not the desire of the people.

I end where I started, ever conscious of the time that you have allowed me, Dame Rosie, by saying that both lives matter and both rights must be upheld. This proposal protects neither, so I will not support new clauses 1, 10, 11 or 12. They do not represent the viewpoints of the majority of people in Northern Ireland.

Owen Smith: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who spoke, as he always does, with sincerity, conviction and gentleness. I will respect his request that we are respectful of the views of others in this place, even when we do not agree with them. I also respect the views of right hon. and hon. Members from Northern Ireland who today have expressed their frustration that we are not debating what I suppose many in Northern Ireland would feel is the primary political issue of the day: the restoration of the Executive and the political process that is ongoing there. I feel, as he doubtless does, that we spend too little time in this place debating issues that affect people in Northern Ireland. Arguably, we are becoming strangers in this place to many of the issues that affect people in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland, as this place becomes a rather more English-centred Parliament, often by accident.

I do not believe, however, that the clauses that have been brought forward today are an attempt to hijack this debate. They are in some respects—new clause 1 and amendments 9 and 5, and the issues they pertain to—a reflection of the fact that, as Ron Davies, a former denizen of this place observed, devolution is “a process” and “not an event”. As someone who served the most recent Labour Government as an adviser in both Wales and Northern Ireland and who as a parliamentarian has served as shadow Secretary of State for Wales and for Northern Ireland, I think our attitudes to devolution are changing. In some respects, although we cannot have a hierarchy of rights, this debate is about the sense that some rights must be seen as universal and must, indeed, supersede the right to devolution. Those rights are, in particular, the rights we are talking about today: reproductive rights for women and the right for the LGBT people of Northern Ireland to be treated equally to their brothers and sisters throughout the rest of the UK.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): On what trumps what and what is more important, issues with this cross-party support that the Northern Ireland Assembly should bring forward to the Northern Ireland Executive have already been identified, and they include the institutional abuse scandal. What gives Members the right to trump
those sorts of issues? Let us be honest: the passing of certain legislation here puts people’s lives at risk. I believe that the life of the unborn is a life. It is not a foetus; it is a life. There is the potential that legislation will pass and create a problem for the future.

Owen Smith: Let me agree with the hon. Gentleman partly. As I shall talk about in a moment, I do believe that this place should legislate on the late Sir Anthony Hart’s recommendations on historic abuse. I am loth to suggest that there is a hierarchy of rights, but there are certain inalienable universal human rights that should be observed and afforded to people in every part of the world, including Northern Ireland. We are increasingly mindful of the fact that we in this place cannot allow ourselves to be hamstrung by the fact of devolution when it comes to the failure to see those rights observed for and afforded to women and the LGBT community in Northern Ireland. That is why this place, with lots of reluctance on the part of some Members, such as me, who are Unionists but who also believe fundamentally in devolution, is coming to the view that there should now be not just reports but legislation in this place to put in place those rights for Northern Ireland.

I support new clause 1, which was spoken to excellently and eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), who has been a brilliant campaigner on the issue in recent years, and I also support the excellent work undertaken by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) and, indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) in respect of women’s reproductive rights in Northern Ireland. However, I wish to concentrate on two other issues that have not been spoken about much today but that are addressed in the series of new clauses and amendments: first, the pension for victims of the troubles in Northern Ireland; and secondly, the victims of the historical sexual abuse in care homes in Northern Ireland, which the hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) mentioned a moment ago. When I was the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, I spoke from the Front Bench on these issues and devoted a lot of my time to them, and I shall simply repeat what I said from the Front Bench about what I think we ought to do.

Let me illustrate and humanise the issue of a pension for severely physically disabled victims of the troubles—those people in Northern Ireland who were injured through no fault of their own, of whom there are around 500—by talking a little about the case of a man I have met on many occasions and whom I greatly admire: Peter Heathwood. In 1979, Peter was in his flat in Belfast when loyalist gunmen broke in, dragged his wife down the hall by her hair, and shot Peter twice, paralysing him for life. The configuration of the building in which they lived meant that when the ambulance men arrived, they could not put Peter’s damaged, broken body on to a stretcher, so he was put into a body bag. He was carried down the steps of his flat in the body bag. His father, Herbert, arrived at the scene thinking that his son, Peter, had died, and collapsed of a heart attack and died. Peter has been paralysed and in a wheelchair since 1979, unable to work, and surviving on benefits. He is a perfect, awful and tragic illustration of the reality of the lives of some 500 members of our community, our country, in Northern Ireland who were injured during the troubles. He is a perfect illustration of why this Government—any Government in Northern Ireland or in this place—need to act with compassion and speed to help those people and to offer them a victim’s pension, as has been talked about for so long, to give them the extra support that they need.

Many right hon. and hon. Members, particularly from the DUP, quite rightly point to the difficulty that is at the heart of the reason why this has not been done. It is that, among that 500, there are perhaps 10 people who were injured by their own hand, who, in the course of commissioning acts of terrorism, blew themselves up or shot themselves. The consideration, as always, has quite rightly been that it would be invidious if those people, having tried to perpetrate violence against the state and against innocent victims, were then supported by the state. I completely understand that, but I simply say that people like Peter are getting older. They will die at some point; many people have died in the intervening period. It was back in 2014, at the signing of the Stormont House agreement, that the state in our country effectively decreed that we should be offering this support to those people.

Bob Stewart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Owen Smith: Let me finish this point then I will gladly give way.

My simple plea is that we must not let the perfect be the enemy of the good in this place. We should legislate to provide for these people. I think that that will happen, and I am pleased about that, but I urge the Secretary of State to get on with it.

Bob Stewart: It should not be beyond the wit of man to devise a system where someone who has actually caused damage to himself is not part of this scheme. Peter requires to be compensated as much as possible and as quickly as possible. It may well be that we will be bringing further measures back to the House, because, frankly, it does not look to me like we will get the Northern Ireland Executive to legislate without the intervention from this place; many people have died in the intervening time period, and it is time for us to take some action to support people in Northern Ireland.

Owen Smith: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman. It should not be beyond the wit of man to create some sort of process and a mechanism to do this, but, to date, it has been beyond the wit of the men and women in this place and in Northern Ireland to do so. That is because of the thorny issue of how we define a victim in Northern Ireland. I understand that that is a complex area from which there would be many ramifications, but we really must legislate on this.

Finally, on the victim’s pension, I want to pay tribute to the work of the WAVE group in Northern Ireland, which has been quite brilliant in supporting the victims of the troubles and in pressing the case for a pension. It is doing great work, and I know that the Secretary of State is a great fan of all that it has done. I also wish to pay tribute to Sir Anthony Hart, who, I was shocked to learn in the Chamber today, died just this morning. Sir Anthony was a very distinguished judge who took on a very difficult task in 2012 on behalf of the Assembly to undertake a review into the historical abuse in 22 homes run by the Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland and...
Barnardo’s in Northern Ireland between 1922 and the 1990s. It was the biggest such inquiry ever undertaken in the UK, and it found that there had been grievous abuse of boys and girls in these homes over a very long period, and he found—he undertook harrowing work—that there should be compensation to the tune of £7,000 to £100,000 paid out to those victims. Sir Anthony died this morning with his work unfinished, with the legislation not passed either by the Assembly or by this place, and that is a badge of shame for politicians in Northern Ireland and in this place. We desperately need to act on this, too, because those victims deserve it; they deserve Northern Ireland’s politicians to do it, but if those politicians cannot, they deserve us in this place to take our responsibility and to legislate here.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith). I rise to speak in support of new clauses 1 and 10, and the string of amendments, especially amendment 9, which is a very important compromise amendment when it comes to what we are trying to do today. I will start with the issue of equal marriage.

It will not have escaped us all that it was London Pride just this weekend, and we had a message from the Prime Minister to the LGBT+ community across the UK, in which she said: “I will only be your Prime Minister for a few more weeks. But I will be your ally for the rest of my life.”

As other hon. Members have mentioned, an ally is not simply someone who stands up and says, “I’m with you.” An ally is someone who stands up and does something. In successive Prime Minister’s questions, we keep hearing the word “legacy”, and what a legacy this would be for the Prime Minister. When she was Home Secretary, she helped—pushed by my dear friend Baroness Featherstone, the former Member for Hornsey and Wood Green—to put through the equal marriage legislation, and she could be the Prime Minister who allows that legislation to apply across the UK. I sincerely hope that is where we get to today.

I hear the worries about our having to take these decisions, but the fact is that there is no devolved legislature for us to supersed it right now; the Northern Ireland Assembly has not sat for two years. I contacted Members of that body this morning to say, “We’re doing this. Is there any particular message that you would like me to send to my fellow Members of Parliament?” Stephen Farry—an MLA for our sister party, Alliance—said that he would obviously much prefer it if MLAs were able to implement such measures themselves, but wanted to convey the following message: “Don’t be frightened”. They are behind what we are trying to do.

We forget that the democratically elected Northern Irish MPs who sit here, very rightly expressing the views of their constituents, represent just one of many parties in Northern Ireland, the majority of which support equal marriage, as was shown in the vote in 2015. The Alliance party has been challenging and requesting amendment when it comes to what we are trying to do. We know that that is not enough—that such provision needs to be closer to home.

4.30 pm

Some have quoted polls suggesting that 64% of people in Northern Ireland do not want Westminster to legislate on abortion. The advantage of speaking last is that I have been able to look at that up. The poll conducted was of 1,013 people. It was indeed the case that 64% of people agreed that this place should not legislate, but no mention was made of the fact that there was not a working Stormont. In a similar poll—Members can read it for themselves online and look at the numbers—the question made the position clear by asking whether, if Stormont was not working, Westminster should legislate on the issue, and 66% said that we should do so.

Eddie Hughes: My memory might be vague, but my recollection is that the Northern Ireland Assembly itself voted on this issue in 2016. That feels very recent consideration, regardless of that poll and its validity.

Layla Moran: That is the point—at the moment, the legislation cannot be pushed through. The Assembly voted and was then unable to do anything about it. Given the human rights abuses that have been identified by the Court, and given that this place has the power to uphold our international human rights obligations, it is entirely right that we take this issue on. That vote was in 2016, but the High Court rulings are recent, and we know that one is coming down the line that will probably end up putting this to bed.

I genuinely think that amendment 9 is a good compromise, with its sunset clause that makes the provision disappear as soon as power-sharing can resume. To those who say that we absolutely should not do this and that no one wants us to do so, I say that that is not true. If they cannot go as far as to support new clause 10, I suggest that they consider amendment 9, which does...
have that sunset clause and simply gives the Government the right to find a way through. That, surely, we can all support.

Lady Hermon: The hon. Lady is of course absolutely right. We do not have a functioning Assembly. We have not had one since January 2017 and there is no prospect of it any time soon. It is absolutely unacceptable that last year over 1,000 women had to leave Northern Ireland, their homeland, to seek an abortion in England, Wales or Scotland. That cannot be right. It should be done closer to home—that is, it should be made available. It is not compulsory; it is about making it available. It is entirely a woman’s choice.

It is not compulsory; it is about making it available. It is done closer to home—that is, it should be made available. Wales or Scotland. That cannot be right. It should be not had one since January 2017 and there is no prospect of it any time soon. It is absolutely unacceptable that last year over 1,000 women had to leave Northern Ireland, their homeland, to seek an abortion in England, Wales or Scotland. That cannot be right. It should be done closer to home—that is, it should be made available. It is not compulsory; it is about making it available. It is entirely a woman’s choice.

I thank the hon. Lady deeply for her intervention, and for her tireless work on this issue.

In the end, this comes down to what is the right thing to do. We have polls that point in two different directions and voices here from different parts of the spectrum, but the question is what would we want for our own constituents—what is the right thing to do? It is surely wrong, particularly in cases of fatal foetal abnormality, rape, incest—things for which I did not realise women could not get abortions for anywhere in the western civilised world—that even in our own United Kingdom there are women who have to travel hundreds of miles to another country altogether, across the water, to access such provision.

We have an immense opportunity to right some really, really awful wrongs. I think that most people in this country would consider this a no-brainer. It should have already happened, but it has not because of process. Please let us not allow process to get in the way of doing what is right.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): This has been a difficult debate because it has laid bare some fundamental differences in approach. It has been, predominantly, a respectful debate between people who have strongly held and highly principled views on opposite sides of some very important and tricky cultural issues, but it has laid bare some fundamental differences of opinion and divisions in our society, in the Chamber and in parts of Northern Ireland at the very least.

There have been some barnstorming speeches, including from my good friend, my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), whose speech was outstanding, and the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen), who made a passionate argument. I will not embarrass Members by going through them all, but I mentioned others when concluding the Second Reading debate. We also heard some rather quieter but equally respectful and careful comments and arguments from people such as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who gave a measured and careful exposition of why he and his constituents feel the way they do, and my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who spoke in a similar vein. It illustrates the care with which everybody has had to approach these issues. I am grateful for all the contributions that Members have made.

This is an important Bill, and we need to get it right; that was made clear on Second Reading yesterday. I will attempt to take the amendments in this group in a sensible order and will be glad to give way when Members wish to probe the Government’s position further.

In opening my remarks, I want to make clear the Government’s view that many, if not most, of the amendments before the Committee relate to devolved matters. As many Members have said this afternoon, those devolved issues should rightly be the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Our constitutional settlement for Northern Ireland is based on the fact that Parliament has devolved responsibility for these matters to local politicians. While Parliament retains its sovereignty in relation to these areas, we must tread extremely carefully.

However, the Northern Ireland Assembly is not sitting and has not been sitting for more than two years. That is a source of huge frustration not only to those of us here today, but to people in Northern Ireland and the country at large. That frustration is starting to boil over. Patience is wearing thin, and people are increasingly unwilling to wait much longer. The result is the long list of amendments before us, which would expand and lengthen in a whole range of areas a simple, straightforward Bill that only seeks to change two dates—that is all it seeks to do.

First, there are amendments on issues of conscience—same-sex marriage and abortion—on which there are traditionally free votes in Parliament. I would like to take this opportunity to confirm that my party does not intend to break that important principle today. These votes will be up to everyone’s individual consciences, and I think I am right in saying that I have heard that from a number of other parties.

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): For the avoidance of any doubt whatsoever, the position is the same on our side.

John Penrose: That is a rare intervention from an Opposition Whip. I am delighted to hear that, as I am sure Labour Members are too.

There will be free votes on issues of conscience on both sides of the House. As I will set out, the Government are willing to accept some of the amendments on reporting commitments where Members do not wish to withdraw their amendments. However, most of those amendments ask the UK Government to report on devolved matters. As I said, those are not technically matters for us, and I hope the Committee will therefore tread carefully and think carefully about the way it uses those powers today.

The other broad category of amendments relates to requirements to debate certain matters, often the reports requested in other amendments. The Government would prefer not to accept those amendments, but we are happy to commit to making an oral statement to accompany and respond to the reports that are required under clause 3 of the Bill and which may be amended to be expanded. That oral statement, I hope, will provide the House with ample and proper set-piece opportunities to debate the issues raised by those reports for as long as the Speaker sees fit. I suspect, given prior performance, that those debates could go on for some time.

Lady Hermon: I am most grateful to the Minister for giving way so early in his speech. In the light of the untimely and shocking death of Sir Anthony Hart this
morning, will the Minister give a firm commitment that the Government—the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is present in the Chamber—will implement at the earliest opportunity Sir Anthony’s recommendations, which he made after very thoughtful and careful consideration? We are the losers without him, and it would be a wonderful testament to him and his legacy if the Government gave that firm commitment today.

John Penrose: If the hon. Lady will possess her soul in patience, I will come to that important point later; I want to take matters in the order in which they arose in the debate, but I will come to that—I am sure that she will pull me up if I do not.

I hope that a proper oral statement is an acceptable alternative to appropriating large swathes of parliamentary time to debate individual issues and reports separately.

On new clause 1, which proposes regulations for introducing same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland, I should start by saying that there are fiercely held and strongly principled views on both sides of the issue, as we have heard during the debate. Whether we are in favour of or against same-sex marriage, and whether we believe that devolution should trump human rights, or that human rights should trump devolution, I hope that we can all agree that this is a significant legislative proposal, in terms of its importance and complexity, and that therefore it must not be delivered without careful consideration and analysis of whether we are getting it right.

Personally, on a free-vote issue, I appreciate and sympathise with what the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) is trying to achieve, and I appreciate that many people in Northern Ireland are tired of waiting for their rights to be recognised on an equal footing with those of friends, family and neighbours across the rest of the UK. However, I also appreciate that that view is not universally held across Northern Ireland, as outlined by numerous Members, including the hon. Member for Strangford.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The Minister talks about human rights versus the devolution settlement. Does he agree that what came across in the debate, and hopefully it will be held not just here in Great Britain but in Northern Ireland, is that it is the careful selection and cherry-picking of some human rights issues but not others that causes the frustration?

John Penrose: Yes, I absolutely accept that there is great concern that by creating one list of amendments today we will, by omission, leave out some very important things indeed. I am afraid that is inherent in the frustration, which I referred to at the start of my remarks, about the fact that the Northern Ireland Assembly has not sat for well over two years now. I am afraid that frustration will only grow as that period lengthens. That is why the original purpose of the Bill, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State explained yesterday on Second Reading, is very simply to give a little more time for the Stormont talks to bear fruit. While those talks still have breath and life in them, I hope that everybody here will support that opportunity and wish the talks well.

Although I appreciate and sympathise with what the hon. Member for St Helens North is trying to achieve, I must at the same time issue a note of warning to anybody considering voting for it. It is a technical note of warning, rather than one of principle, because the principles have been debated extensively during our discussions this afternoon—because this is a free-vote issue, the Government will not be putting across a principled view, one way or another. The technical point, which needs to be made to ensure that everyone is aware, is that, due to the current drafting of new clause 1, the changes that would need to occur before the first same-sex couple could legally marry in Northern Ireland are probably not achievable, just as a practical matter, by October. There are many policy questions to be worked through that have not yet been properly considered for the Northern Ireland-specific context, which might require a different response from the one in England, Wales and Scotland.

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Given the tightness of time, I shall move on, as I want to make sure that I cover everything. There are other abortion amendments, notably new clause 10, tabled by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), and amendments 11 and 12, which are associated proposals that deal with statements and bits and pieces. What I want to say about new clause 10 is similar to what I said about new clause 1—different topic, same point. Regardless of how Members are minded to vote on the underlying principle, there are real and genuine concerns about the technical effectiveness of new clause 10, so I issue the same technical note of warning to anyone wishing to vote for it if they have made up their mind on the basic points of principle that have been debated extensively.
Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Can I check that, despite the technical warnings, which the Minister is probably quite right to issue, the Government would honour the result if new clauses 1 and 10 were accepted? Would they facilitate those requirements?

John Penrose: Absolutely. This is also a free-vote issue, so if this passes a vote it will go into law and become part of primary legislation. Ministers would be bound by it and Government would proceed. People should be aware that many of the same concerns that I expressed about new clause 1 apply to new clause 10, so there may be issues.

Vicky Ford rose—

Emma Little Pengelly rose—

John Penrose: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), and then to the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly), but then I must make progress.

Vicky Ford: New clause 10 says that the Government should implement the full CEDAW recommendations. The first recommendation in the CEDAW report is to repeal sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act. Does he agree that repeal would affect all of the UK, including England as well as Northern Ireland?

John Penrose: I am not sure that I have time, but I could go through other technical concerns. That is only one of the potential issues—there are broader points that would need to be fixed. But the question is whether or not the House is interested in the principle here, I suspect, on a free vote.

Emma Little Pengelly: Is it not the case that the way in which new clause 10 is drafted is very broad and covers all the recommendations? There are many technical issues in those recommendations and there are many policy questions that need to be asked. It is wholly inappropriate that that should happen by regulation, with no scrutiny or process to decide what the policy should be on each and every recommendation.

John Penrose: As I mentioned in my response to new clause 1, it is entirely probable that it would not be possible to achieve this by October at all and, when we made those changes more broadly for the rest of the UK in previous years, that was done by primary legislation, not secondary legislation. The hon. Lady makes a valid point. I want to make sure, as people reach principled decisions on an issue of conscience, on a free-vote issue on both sides of the House, that they are aware of the technical concerns so they are making an informed principled choice as well.

I will move on to new clauses 4 and 8; I am trying to pick up speed so that I do not run out of time. These new clauses would oblige the Government to schedule a debate on the issue of progress towards meeting international obligations in relation to the reproductive rights of women, and on the issue of progress towards implementing marriage for same-sex couples in Northern Ireland. I have already mentioned that the Government intend to make an oral statement to accompany the report under clause 3. I hope that people will be comfortable with that and that the Opposition Front-Bench team will feel able not to press those amendments.

I will now move on to victims’ pensions. Amendment 10 and new clause 2 commit the Government to publishing a report on progress towards preparing legislation implementing a pension for those seriously injured in the troubles, and for that report to be debated in Parliament. This is a very important issue and the UK Government take it very seriously. That is why the Secretary of State requested updated and comprehensive advice from the Victims’ Commissioner, which we have recently received. The completion of that advice represents an important step in taking forward a pension for victims of the troubles. The Northern Ireland Office is therefore undertaking detailed work on the next steps, based on that advice, with factual input and support from the Northern Ireland civil service. We will keep the House fully updated on progress and we will therefore be accepting amendment 10 to provide a report on those issues.

Sir Edward Leigh: Will the Minister confirm what I understand from his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford): on a very narrow Bill, which is essentially about setting dates for the Northern Ireland Executive, we are going to change the entire abortion law of the entire United Kingdom?

John Penrose: No, I think I can probably reassure my right hon. Friend on that, but I would reaffirm to him that there are real technical concerns about the new clause and that those will have to be fixed. He is broadly right on the broader point that a very simple Bill, which is only supposed to change two dates, has ended up with a very large number of other amendments attached, so he has a broader underlying point at least.

Fiona Bruce: For the sake of clarification, the CEDAW report recommends the repeal of sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. Will that repeal affect the entirety of the UK, not just Northern Ireland? That is the question.

John Penrose: As I understand it, if we repealed that, yes it would. However, I think the point has been made elsewhere that that is not necessarily the route we have to go down because those sections have already been dealt with in different ways for the rest of the UK. I do not want to revisit the substance of this, particularly as it has been debated extensively already, so with everyone’s permission, I would like to move on—it being incredibly important—to the victims of historical institutional abuse. I express my sincere sadness at the death of Sir Anthony Hart. He was a dedicated public servant and a highly respected High Court judge. As chair of the historical abuse inquiry in Northern Ireland, he provided a comprehensive set of recommendations for redress to be delivered to victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse. I am sure our thoughts and condolences go to his family and friends after his unexpected and very recent demise.
I understand the frustration of victims and survivors of this terrible abuse. We absolutely must do everything we can to ensure that the victims and survivors get the redress that they deserve. Following recommendations by the Northern Ireland parties, the Executive Office is working with the Office of the Legislative Counsel to redraft the legislation required to establish the redress scheme. The Opposition propose that clause 3 include a requirement to publish by 11 September a report on the progress made in implementing the Hart report, including a compensation scheme under a redress board. Given the importance of the matter, the Government are happy to accept the amendment, and will report back to Parliament on that vital matter.

Many people have been concerned about the collection of amendments in this group. They have been concerned about its size, its length, its composition and the set of priorities that it seems to reveal. I would just say, on a broader point, that the concerns that were uncovered in yesterday’s Second Reading debate have become ever clearer and more specific during our debate and discussions in the Chamber today. The concerns are simply that, because people are getting worried about the failure of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Stormont Assembly to sit, there is a danger that the credibility of that Assembly, and with it the credibility of the Northern Ireland democratic settlement, will begin to be undermined — that it will begin to be eroded and, with that, we are starting down, potentially, an extremely dangerous slope, where the credibility of democracy, and of peaceful resolution of disagreements, is eroded in a historically bitterly divided society, and democratic solutions cease to be the obvious answer. That is something which we must avoid at all costs; to prevent that is an essential goal, which we must never lose sight of.

**Vicky Ford:** Many Members have come into the House who have not had a chance to listen to the longer debate. I wonder whether the Minister would clarify again which of the amendments that are related to ongoing reporting requests the Government accept.

**John Penrose:** Dame Eleanor, I had probably better not try your patience by going through them all. We have accepted a fairly large number of reporting requests and we are happy to report back to this House on that basis. With my hon. Friend’s indulgence, I will perhaps go through the individual amendment numbers with her separately afterwards. With that, I draw my remarks to a close.

**Conor McGinn:** I pay tribute to all those colleagues who have taken part in the debate; it was characterised by strongly held, sincere views, articulated in an environment and atmosphere of respect and understanding. Although I know that disagreement remains over the substance of the issues that we spoke about, it is my strong contention that new clause 1, which stands in my name, lends itself to be supported by the Committee of the whole House tonight and I will press it to a Division.

**Question put,** That the clause be read a Second time.

*The Committee divided:* Ayes 383, Noes 73.
Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill

9 JULY 2019

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill

Godsiff, Mr Roger
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Chris
Green, rh Umunna
Green, Kate
Greening, rh Justine
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Andrew
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Gymah, Mr Sam
Haigh, Louise
Hallon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hamilton, Fabian
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Carolyn
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, bart
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Heaton-Harris, Peter
Heaton-Jones, Gordon
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollob, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Jenkins, Andrea
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keeggan, Gillian
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kilien, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Knight, Julian
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Maclean, Rachel
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mak, Alan
Malhotra, Seema
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Masterton, Paul
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norris, Alex
O’Brien, Neil
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Opperman, Guy
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Penrose, John
Perce, Andrew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Philipson, Bridget
Philp, Chris
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Poulter, Dr Dan
Powell, Lucy
Pursglove, Tom
Quince, Will
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma (Proxy vote cast by Mr Pat McFadden)
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Rudd, rh Amber
Ryan, rh Joan
Sandbach, Antoinette
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Seely, Mr Bob
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheeran, Mr Barry
Shelbrooke, Alec
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Skidmore, Chris
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Sobel, Alex
Speller, rh John
Stamper, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevens, Jo
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomson, Ross
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Tomlinson, Justin
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Woodcock, John
Wragg, Mr William
Yasin, Mohammad
Zahawi, Nadhim
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Chris Elmore and Nick Smith

Amess, Sir David
Baker, Mr Steve
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blackman, Bob
Bone, Mr Peter
Braverman, Suella (Proxy vote cast by Mr Steve Baker)
Bridgen, Andrew
Brokenshire, rh James
Question accordingly agreed to.

New clause 1 read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

5.15 pm

More than four hours having lapsed since the commencement of proceedings, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, 8 July).

The Chair put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of business to be concluded at that time Standing Order No. 83D).

New Clause 2

Pension for victims and survivors of Troubles-related incidents: debate

"(1) A Minister of the Crown must, within the period of two sitting days beginning with the first sitting day on or after the day on which the report on progress made towards preparing legislation to implement a pension for seriously injured victims and survivors of Troubles-related incidents, and provides for the report to be debated in Parliament.

Brought up, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 6

Historical institutional abuse in Northern Ireland: debate

“(1) A Minister of the Crown must, within the period of two sitting days beginning with the first sitting day on or after the day on which the report on progress made towards implementing the recommendations made by the Report of the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse in Northern Ireland between 1922 and 1995 is published, make arrangements for—

(a) a motion to the effect that the House of Commons has approved that report to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Commons sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published, and

(b) a motion for the House of Lords to take note of the report mentioned in paragraph (a) to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Lords sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published.

(2) In this section—

"Commons sitting day" means a day on which the House of Commons is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Commons is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day);

"Lords sitting day" means a day on which the House of Lords is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Lords is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day).

This new clause is linked to amendment 3 on a report on progress towards implementing the recommendations made by the Hart Report of the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse in Northern Ireland between 1922 and 1995, and provides for the report to be debated in Parliament.

Brought up, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 10

International obligations

“(1) In accordance with the requirements of section 26 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 regarding international obligations, the Secretary of State must make regulations by statutory instrument to give effect to the recommendations of the Report of the Inquiry concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

(2) Regulations under this section must come into force by 21 October 2019, subject to subsections (3) and (4).

(3) A statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (1)—

(a) must be laid before both Houses of Parliament;

(b) is subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.

(4) If a Northern Ireland Executive is formed before 21 October 2019, any extant obligations arising under subsection (1) shall cease to have effect.”—(Stella Creasy.)

Brought up.
Question put, That the clause be added to the Bill.
Division No. 428]  [5.16 pm

A Y E S

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Heidi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Andrew, Stuart
Antoniazzii, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Atkins, Victoria
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Bebb, Guto
Becket, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Benyon, rh Richard
Beckett, rh Margaret
Bennett, Rh
Bennett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hiliary
Beckley, James
Beckley, Jonathan
Bellingham, Tracey
Belle, rh Alistair
Berkeley, rh
Berger, Luciana
Berger, Luciana
Benyon, rh Richard
Benn, rh Hilary
Benyon, rh Richard
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Bloor, Nick
Bowie, Andrew
Brabin, Tracy
Brady, James
Brady, James
Brady, Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Burton, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Collins, Damian
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David

Gyimah, Mr Sam
Haigh, Louise
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hamiton, Fabian
Hancock, rh Matt
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Hanriet
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Carolyn
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Herbert, rh Nick
Hill, Mike
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Holgrove, Mr Stephen
Holmes, Mr Julian
Howarth, Caroline
Howell, Alistair
Howell, Justin
Howe, rh Huw
Howes, rh David
Hoy, Stephen
Hughes, Vernon
Huhne, Chris
Humphries, Alan
Humphries, Alex
Hunt, Liam
Hunt, Jack
Hunter, Mr Andrew
Hunt, Therese
Hunter, Grahame
Hunter, Paul
Hyde, Michael
Hyde, Robert
Hyslop, Jack
Iain, Dwayne
Iain, Patrick
Iain, Stephen
Iain, Tristram
Illsley, Hettie
Ingall, Andrew
Ingall, James
Ipswich,engan
Isaacs, Alex
Isaacs, Ed
Issa, Ayesha
Ismail, Dr Ayesha
Ismail, Dr Faisal
Ismail, Dr Faisal
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Ismail, Dr Faisal
Ismia
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Shelbrooke, Alec
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Skidmore, Chris
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Owen
Smith, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevens, Jo
Stewart, Bob
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Thewlis, Alison

Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomberry, rh Emily
Tomlinson, Justin
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Western, Matt
Whately, Helen
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zahawi, Nadhim
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Chris Elmore and Nick Smith

Amess, Sir David
Baker, Mr Steve
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blackman, Bob
Bone, Mr Peter
Braverman, Suella (Proxy vote cast by Mr Steve Baker)
Bridgen, Andrew
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cardidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clarke, Mr Simon
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Cooper, Rosie
Courts, Robert
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Drax, Richard
Duguid, David
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark

Gale, rh Sir Roger
Girvan, Paul
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Grant, Peter
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Hair, Kirstene
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hermon, Lady
Hollonbe, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Hughes, Eddie
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Andrea
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kane, Mike
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Lamont, John
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewer, Andrew
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma

Lord, Mr Jonathan
Main, Mrs Anne
Maskell, Rachael
Maynard, Paul
Mills, Nigel
Offord, Dr Matthew
Paisley, Ian
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Pound, Stephen
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Raab, rh Dominic
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew

Ross, Douglas
Shannon, Jim
Simpson, David
Stevenson, John
Streeter, Sir Gary
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Tomlinson, Michael
Vickers, Martin
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Wilson, rh Sammy

Tellers for the Noes:
Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson and Gavin Robinson

Amess, Sir David
Baker, rh Mr Steve
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blackman, Bob
Bone, Mr Peter
Braverman, Suella (Proxy vote cast by Mr Steve Baker)
Bridgen, Andrew
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cardidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clarke, Mr Simon
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Cooper, Rosie
Courts, Robert
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Drax, Richard
Duguid, David
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark

Gale, rh Sir Roger
Girvan, Paul
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Grant, Peter
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Hair, Kirstene
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hermon, Lady
Hollonbe, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Hughes, Eddie
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Andrea
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kane, Mike
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Lamont, John
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewer, Andrew
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma

Lord, Mr Jonathan
Main, Mrs Anne
Maskell, Rachael
Maynard, Paul
Mills, Nigel
Offord, Dr Matthew
Paisley, Ian
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Pound, Stephen
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Raab, rh Dominic
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew

Ross, Douglas
Shannon, Jim
Simpson, David
Stevenson, John
Streeter, Sir Gary
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Tomlinson, Michael
Vickers, Martin
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Wilson, rh Sammy

Tellers for the Noes:
Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson and Gavin Robinson

Question accordingly agreed to.

New clause 10 added to the Bill.

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Ind): On a point of order, Dame Rosie. I know we have very important subjects that Members are keen to debate, so I do not want to detain you, but could you advise me how we can indicate our reaction to the grossly offensive attack by the President of the United States on Her Majesty’s ambassador, and indeed on Her Majesty’s Prime Minister? This afternoon, he has sent some messages that amount to gross discourtesy, and I am certain that many hon. Members want to indicate that the United Kingdom will not be bullied by anyone, not even the President of the United States.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. As I am sure he will appreciate, this is not really a matter for the Chair. Obviously, he has put his views on the record and he will be well aware that mechanisms are available to him whereby he might be able to pursue this matter further. I am sure the Table Office would advise him on that, not that he necessarily needs that advice.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): Further to that point of order, Dame Rosie. Have either you or Mr Speaker had any indication that the Government intend to make a statement about President Trump’s remarks and, in particular, whether they would take reciprocal action as to any reduction in our diplomatic activity in the United States by responding in kind towards the US ambassador in this country?

The Second Deputy Chairman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. The short answer is: no, I have not received any such indication. However, as I said, there are ways in which these issues can be raised in the House.

Clause 1

EXTENSION OF PERIOD FOR FORMING AN EXECUTIVE

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.
The subsection would include placing a duty on the Secretary of State to report on the definition of “victim” in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

Amendment 21, page 2, line 15, at end insert—
“(1A) The report under subsection (1) must include a report to be published on or before 4 September 2019 on progress made in Northern Ireland on—
(a) the law on gaming machines;
(b) the law on online gambling;
(c) the number of people who are seeking treatment for problem gambling;
(d) the services available to people seeking problem gambling; and
(e) the level of support from the gambling industry for problem gambling.”

The subsection would include placing a duty on the Secretary of State to report on various matters related to the law on gambling in Northern Ireland and support for those experiencing problem gambling.

Amendment 22, page 2, line 15, at end insert—
“(1A) The report under subsection (1) must include a report to be published on or before 4 September 2019 on progress on the use of discretionary powers to provide assistance and support under section 18(9) of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. The report must cover—
(a) how many times the Department has decided it is necessary to provide assistance and support for victims of human trafficking for whom there has been a conclusive determination that the person is a victim of trafficking in human beings;
(b) the reasons the Department has decided it is necessary to provide assistance and support for victims of human trafficking for whom there has been a conclusive determination that the person is a victim of trafficking in human beings; and
(c) the immigration status of those victims of human trafficking for whom there has been a conclusive determination that the person is a victim of trafficking in human beings who are receiving assistance and support beyond the relevant period.”

The subsection would include placing a duty on the Secretary of State to report on the assistance and support offered to victims of human trafficking in Northern Ireland from receiving a conclusive grounds decision.

Amendment 23, page 2, line 15, at end insert—
“(1A) The report under subsection (1) must include a report on progress made in preparing legislation to extend the reporting requirements of donations to political parties in Northern Ireland to all donations made after 1 January 2014”.

Amendment 24, page 2, line 15, at end insert—
“(1A) The report under subsection (1) must include a report on progress made in preparing legislation to make provision to recognise coercive control and stalking in Northern Ireland”.

Amendment 16, page 2, line 16, leave out “the report” and insert
“any report under this section”.

This is a consequential amendment.

Amendment 17, page 2, line 16, at end insert—
“(2A) A Minister of the Crown must, within the period of two sitting days beginning with the day on which a report under this section is published, make arrangements for—
(a) a motion to the effect that the House of Commons has approved that report to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of three Commons sitting days beginning with the day on which the report under this section is published, and
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(b) a motion for the House of Lords to take note of the report mentioned in paragraph (a) to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of three Lords sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published.

(2B) In this section—

“Commons sitting day” means a day on which the House of Commons is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Commons is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day);

“Lords sitting day” means a day on which the House of Lords is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Lords is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day).

This amendment would require progress reports to be debated.

Clause 3 stand part.

Clause 4 stand part.

New clause 11—International obligations: oral statement—

“In the absence of Northern Ireland Ministers to address the matters identified by the Report of the Inquiry concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland must make an oral statement to the House of Commons on progress on implementing recommendations made in accordance with section 26(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.”

New clause 12—Requirement on Secretary of State—

“If an Executive is not formed by 21 October 2019, nothing in this Act shall remove the requirement on the Secretary of State set out in section 26(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to direct action in the absence of ministers to ensure that all Northern Ireland departments comply with international obligations, and in particular the recommendations made by the Report of the Inquiry concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.”

New clause 15—Northern Ireland: Armed Forces Covenant—

“(1) The Secretary of State must make regulations to confirm the application of the Armed Forces Covenant in the provision of public services in Northern Ireland.

(2) Regulations under this section must be in force no later than 21 October 2019, subject to subsections (3) and (4).

(3) A statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (1)—

(a) must be laid before both Houses of Parliament;

(b) is subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.

(4) If a Northern Ireland Executive is formed before the regulations under this section come into force, any regulations made under this section and any extant obligations arising under subsection (1) shall cease to have effect.”

This new clause would require UK secondary legislation to amend the definition of “victim” in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

New clause 16—Armed Forces Covenant in Northern Ireland: debate—

“(1) A Minister of the Crown must, within the period of two sitting days beginning with the first sitting day on or after the day on which the report on progress made towards preparing legislation confirming the application of the Armed Forces Covenant in the provision of public services in Northern Ireland is published, make arrangements for—

(a) a motion to the effect that the House of Commons has agreed that report to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Commons sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published, and

(b) a motion for the House of Lords to take note of the report mentioned in paragraph (a) to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Lords sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published.

(2) In this section—

“Commons sitting day” means a day on which the House of Commons is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Commons is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day);

“Lords sitting day” means a day on which the House of Lords is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Lords is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day).”
This new clause is linked to amendment 19 on a report on whether the definition of “victim” in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 should be amended by UK secondary legislation.

New clause 20—Law on gambling and support for those experiencing problem gambling in Northern Ireland: debate—

“(1) A Minister of the Crown must, within the period of two sitting days beginning with the first sitting day on or after the day on which the report on gambling in Northern Ireland mentioned in section 3 is published, make arrangements for—

(a) a motion to the effect that the House of Commons has approved that report to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Commons sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published, and

(b) a motion for the House of Lords to take note of the report mentioned in paragraph (a) to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Lords sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published.

(2) In this section—

“Commons sitting day” means a day on which the House of Commons is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Commons is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day);

“Lords sitting day” means a day on which the House of Lords is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Lords is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day)."

This new clause is linked to the amendment 21 on a report on progress made on the law on gambling in Northern Ireland and support for problem gambling, and provides for the report to be debated in Parliament.

New clause 21—Assistance and support for victims of human trafficking in Northern Ireland: debate—

“(1) A Minister of the Crown must, within the period of two sitting days beginning with the first sitting day on or after the day on which the report on assistance and support for victims of human trafficking in Northern Ireland mentioned in section 3 is published, make arrangements for—

(a) a motion to the effect that the House of Commons has approved that report to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Commons sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published, and

(b) a motion for the House of Lords to take note of the report mentioned in paragraph (a) to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Lords sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published.

(2) In this section—

“Commons sitting day” means a day on which the House of Commons is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Commons is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day);

“Lords sitting day” means a day on which the House of Lords is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Lords is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day).

This new clause is linked to the amendment 22 on a report on progress made on the law on gambling in Northern Ireland and support for problem gambling, and provides for the report to be debated in Parliament.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): Thank you, Dame Rosie; it is a pleasure to participate in this debate and to raise with the Committee, at this stage, potential amendments to the legislation that I think are capable of improving it for Northern Ireland, as well as for our country as a whole.

I was a little bit startled when I read a tweet by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) in which she, first, described the amendments as “Shameful”, which is of course a matter of her opinion, and secondly, went on to say that I had no interest in Northern Ireland. All I can say is that, having been in the House for 22 years, I have acted as a spokesman on Northern Ireland matters when we were in opposition; I served for six years, I think, on the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body; I was chair of the Conservative Back-Bench committee on Northern Ireland in my early years in the House; I participate actively in the British-Irish Association annual conference; and I try to make myself as frequent a visitor to Northern Ireland as I can, sometimes to give talks and lectures, or, indeed, to visit people, and on a number of occasions I have been there on holiday. Whatever my views may be and however much my hon. Friend may think that they are erroneous, I can absolutely assure her that I have Northern Ireland at heart. I am a Unionist and it matters to me very much indeed.

The position on the amendments is fairly straightforward. There is provision in the Bill for a report to be made to the House on how progress is being made on setting up the Executive. I greatly welcome this measure. I apologise to my hon. Friend for the fact that I was not able to be present for the debate yesterday, but it was a debate on a principle that I entirely supported. However, the measure on the report does not go far enough. Quite apart from anything else, we are at the eleventh hour when it comes to the possibility of setting up an Executive, which I believe is massively desirable for the interests of the people of Northern Ireland. It therefore seems to me to be extremely desirable for Members to provide some further impetus and scrutiny for that process, which is why I chose in amendments 14, 15, 16 and 17, along with my right hon. and hon. Friends who support the amendments, to try to move and accelerate the process forward.

For example, amendment 14 would mean that, rather than the report coming back on 21 October, it would come back on 4 September. In addition, I chose to try to make provision for the close monitoring of the process thereafter by the House, by ensuring with amendment 15 that the Secretary of State would make “a further report under subsection 1 on or before 9 October 2019”, which is when we come back from the conference recess, and “at least every fourteen calendar days thereafter until either an Executive is formed or until 18 December 2019, whichever is the sooner.”

Amendment 16 is consequential to that.

Amendment 17 would provide that, in addition to what I have outlined, and so that the House may have an opportunity to indicate how it feels the direction of travel should go and to encourage the Government in their endeavours, there are opportunities within “two sitting days beginning with the day on which a report under this section is published” for “a motion to the effect that the House of Commons has approved that report to be moved”. 
There is a similar provision for the House of Lords, which their lordships will of course wish to consider in due course. I believe the amendments provide a sensible package that can help to facilitate the setting up of a Northern Ireland Executive, which I dearly want to see.

It has been raised with me, and I entirely accept, that Brexit also features in this matter, and so it should. Brexit threatens Northern Ireland more than almost any other part of the United Kingdom. It threatens it economically; it threatens it in terms of its security; and it threatens it in terms of its cohesion. For all those reasons, we should as a House—particularly, I might add, those of us who consider ourselves to be Unionists—be exceptionally troubled by the current direction of travel. In particular, I cannot escape the fact that I have listened with astonishment to a number of references from people who may be holding high office in the near future, one of whom appears to think that proroguing Parliament to achieve Brexit is an acceptable form of activity for the leader of the Executive, when in fact it is a constitutional enormity and a gross undermining of democracy.

I freely admit that one of the purposes of these amendments is to try to ensure that this extraordinary threat of really an unprecedented character made against this House that we should be prorogued can be banged on the head. Furthermore, the fact that we should be sitting in October to consider these grave matters in relation to Northern Ireland is, in my view, a good reason why these amendments should be supported. I am mindful of the fact that a further amendment, new clause 14, has, for perfectly understandable reasons, not been selected at this stage of the proceedings because of the nature of its scope. It would have effectively provided—I want to make this point very briefly—that Prorogation could not take place, because when these statements and motions should be made and passed, the House would have to be sitting. That is desirable, because as we approach the crisis that is impending on 31 October, if this House wishes to approve a no-deal Brexit, then so be it, but it should be here to do just that, and not pushed into the margins, as some have suggested in this entirely unconstitutional fashion.

Layla Moran: I am extremely grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. I pay tribute to him for bringing forward these amendments, but is there not a sense of irony here? This Bill is meant to bring back the ability to debate laws in Northern Ireland, yet at the same time this place faces being shut down by whoever becomes Prime Minister. There is a similar provision for the House of Lords, but is there not a sense of irony here? This Bill is meant to try to encourage a sound process, to prevent the House from being prorogued?

Mr Grieve: Yes, and I will tell my hon. Friend exactly why. First, the amendments work in their own right, so if we agree to them, they will provide a structured mechanism, which, short of Prorogation, will ensure that we have those opportunities to consider. If we enact these amendments, I have no doubt that, when the Bill goes to the other place, which is very familiar with the difficulties of our procedures, the Lords will include new clause 14, if they think it pertinent and right, and send it back to this House so that we can then consider it, which is exactly how our parliamentary processes work.

Steve Brine: I am sorry; let me phrase it in another way. Do these amendments, if moved and if passed, prevent the House from being prorogued?

Mr Grieve: If all the amendments, including new clause 14, were to be passed, yes, it would prevent this House from being prorogued, which is why I put them together as a package. I would like to emphasise that, even if we do not have new clause 14, my judgment is that it is worth having the other amendments in their own right. They send a clear signal about this House’s priorities. They lay down a perfectly clear timetable, which is relevant to Northern Ireland in itself. That is why I disagree so much with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes, who, as I say, rather startled me with her vehemence and her belief that I had some dreadful motives. My motives are twofold: first, they are in the interests of Northern Ireland and trying to get the Executive formed and, secondly, I freely admit that they are in the interests of trying to ensure that the worst dangers of Brexit are mitigated.

5.45 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The right hon. and learned Gentleman is absolutely right that the consequences for Northern Ireland of a no-deal Brexit are very serious. I am sure that he will be as astonished as I was that a survey of members of the Conservative and Unionist party found that a majority of his party members were actually willing to see the break-up of the Union and to see what could happen to Northern Ireland if that issue would stop Brexit. If he does not recognise his own party, in some ways he might not be alone. Can he give us any insight into how the Conservative and Unionist party has got to this place?

Mr Grieve: I find it very difficult to answer that question. I accept that, because of priorities in this House, it is often the case that insufficient attention is paid to Northern Ireland. During my career, I have had the inestimable benefit of having the views of large numbers of people in Northern Ireland imparted to me. I have been able to go, for example, to the annual conference of the Centre for Cross Border Studies, and
anybody who has gone to look at cross-border issues will realise just how catastrophic a no-deal Brexit would be. I would simply say to my hon. Friends that I appreciate that there are doubtless areas on which they are expert and I am most certainly not, and I do not claim to have the greatest expertise on Northern Ireland—I do not represent that place, although I love it very much—but it is a thing that matters to me very much and that should matter to every hon. Member in this House.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): May I just take my right hon. and learned Friend back to the question he was asked a moment or two ago about whether these amendments, in the absence of new clause 14, will prevent Prorogation? Would he agree that there is at least a perfectly serious argument that might run in the Supreme Court—that is, that statute law trumps prerogative even where it does not directly take the prerogative on, and that if that were argued successfully, these amendments would be sufficient to prevent Prorogation?

Mr Grieve: Yes, I agree. It is perhaps, as lawyers would say, a moot point, but my view is that because it specifies in statute particular days on which things should be happening in this House, it is arguable that it therefore replaces the prerogative because the Queen in Parliament has decreed that certain things should happen by law, and that, of course, replaces the royal prerogative as exercised by Ministers.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): As my right hon. and learned Friend knows, I have a great deal of sympathy with his position, but I am very concerned that we are giving problems to the judiciary that really should be resolved in this House. Does he agree?

Mr Grieve: Yes, I do. I agree entirely, and we should try to avoid doing that, but for the reasons that I have just given—before we start worrying about court challenges—the amendments that I have tabled, taken together, are worth having. After all, even if it does not go to court, it is a pretty clear signal to whoever is Prime Minister that this is what the House wants to be doing in October. I think that is worth having. Of course, we do at times hear that the rumours about Prorogation are completely misplaced and that nobody in their right mind would do it; in my judgment, nobody in their right mind should, so I very much hope that it will not happen, but these days one has cause at times to worry. For that reason, I think this is a very good series of amendments.

Of course, if the other place in its wisdom decides to look at the totality of our amendments, decides that new clause 14 would add value and places it in the Bill, this House would have an opportunity to consider that decision before the Bill goes through, and either to accept it or reject it.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I am very sorry for intervening again, but I think that it may be important later in the other place that this debate be brought out into the open here. Would my right hon. and learned Friend first agree that the reason why Mr Speaker quite rightly did not select new clause 14 is that it would not have been within the scope of the Bill as unamended, but that, if amended by my right hon. and learned Friend’s amendments, new clause 14 would probably be brought into scope? Secondly, does he agree that their lordships in the other place take a rather wider view of scope than is typically taken here, and therefore there is ample reason to suppose that, given the majorities we know to exist in the House of Lords, new clause 14 in some form is actually likely to be added to the package and therefore to be operative?

Mr Grieve: Yes, I do agree. That is certainly one of the reasons this should go to the other place. I slightly hesitate over the issue of scope, particularly because we have a ruling from the First Deputy Chairman that I would not seek in any way to impugn. It is perfectly clear ruling with a perfectly understandable base. I say no more about it than that.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): Amendment 17 suggests that a motion be debated in this House and approved. We have seen in the past what we might describe as daisy-chain motions taking root in this place, many under his name and some under the names of others. Is it my right hon. and learned Friend’s intention that we should have a similar daisy-chain amendable motion if such a motion comes back to the House in future under his amendment?

Mr Grieve: If we are seeking ways to find daisy chains, I can assure my hon. Friend that there are probably other ways in which they might be found. If the House wants to do something by resolution, a motion must be tabled. Therefore, either we will get to the point where we never, ever table a motion again—meaning, effectively, that our operation is completely brought to a standstill, which would be a total absurdity—or, I am afraid, he, like everybody else in this House, will have to live with the possibility that people may use a motion to raise matters that they want to raise. Of course, the question of the amendability of a motion, and all that, is not in our hands but those of Mr Speaker.

My hon. Friend brings me back to what worries me, because in what he said there is that little echo of the suggestion that it would all be so much better if this House could just disappear—vaporise—for the next three months so that whatever he thinks should happen is what ought to happen. As I was trying to point out, if we do not meet and debate and moderate each other’s views, we are not a working democracy, and that is what we should at all times strive to be. I commend the amendments to the Committee.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I rise to offer the SNP’s support for amendments 14 to 17, which stand in the name of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). I commend him for tabling these amendments and ensuring that there is a chance to debate this issue.

It is incredible that it has come to this—that this Parliament requires an amendment to legislation on the governance of Northern Ireland to stop the Executive riding roughshod over the democratically elected Chamber. More and more, the UK Government are like a Marx Brothers film, but without the laughs—a parade of wannabe comedians trying their best to recreate Freedonia in their own image, with the biggest joke of all reserved...
for when the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) enters No. 10, perhaps by zipslide. But at least Freedonia was fictitious.

Of course it would be easy for those on the Treasury Bench, now or at some point after the right hon. Gentleman takes his place, to fiddle the use of the royal prerogative to prorogue Parliament—that is the benefit of the uncodified, antiquated constitution we have—but there can be no shortcuts to democracy. There can be no running away from the mess the Government have created for themselves and for the country, and no attempt to silence democratically elected Members, no matter how much the Government of the day wish to do so. I wholeheartedly agree with the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield, who said:

“If you decide that parliament is an inconvenience, when in fact it is the place where democratic legitimacy lies in our constitution, and therefore it’s acceptable to get rid of it for a period because it might otherwise stop you from doing something that parliament would prevent, then it’s the end of democracy.”

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) has raised the issue of proroguing Parliament being unconstitutional, but is not the reality that it is very constitutional, as a rule of the present United Kingdom of Great Britain’s unwritten constitution, and that it was aped in Canada twice?

Gavin Newlands: My hon. Friend, as per usual, makes a very good point. Obviously, we in the SNP support a written constitution, and when Scotland secures its independence, that is the route we will be taking.

The very act of asking the Crown to prorogue Parliament would involve the constitutional monarch in a profoundly political question. Given the fact that a majority of MPs have expressed opposition to the prospect of the UK leaving without a deal, the prorogation of Parliament to get a no-deal Brexit through would be unconstitutional, undemocratic and entirely untenable. We cannot have the no-deal clock being artificially run down by the Executive while Parliament is ordered to extend its holiday. The catastrophic impact of no deal on Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK cannot be allowed to happen. For those reasons, we will support the amendments tabled by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield.

I said last night that we on the SNP Benches are not blind to the situation in Northern Ireland, and accordingly we operated a free vote on matters of conscience contained in new clauses 1 and 10. I would like to add, however, that we still hold the principle of devolution very dearly. In new clauses 1 and 10. I would like to add, however, we operated a free vote on matters of conscience contained for themselves and for the country, and no attempt to silence democratically elected Members, no matter how much the Government of the day wish to do so. I wholeheartedly agree with the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield, who said:

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To conclude, I congratulate the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) on securing potential equal marriage rights for LGBTQ couples in Northern Ireland. That is a very welcome development, and he has done extremely well.
[Dr Julian Lewis]
murders, they might well be given a life sentence, but under that legislation no one will ever serve more than two years of that life sentence in jail. That has sometimes been thought to be something that applied to paramilitaries and terrorists but not to the armed forces, but in repeated debates on this subject it has been established very clearly and unambiguously in ministerial statements from the Front Bench that it applies to everyone. That does not create moral equivalence between the people it applies to; it simply creates the same equivalence before the law that applies to every British citizen, whether virtuous or villainous.

6 pm

Emma Little Pengelly: We have just had the conclusions of the legacy consultation and the release of a summary of the findings. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that part of the confusion on a statute of limitations is that, due to the narrative around this, people do believe that this is an amnesty, but in fact it talks about limiting some circumstances, on the basis of fairness, which is very different from the principle of amnesty?

Dr Lewis: I am so grateful to the hon. Lady, and delighted that I gave way to her, because she has put that far better than I could.

What we are trying to come to here is a reasonable conclusion that would mean that, should compelling new evidence emerge—something that was overlooked and has now come to the fore, and that puts a completely different complexion on an allegation of a serious crime—indeed that would still be pursued, but where matters had been looked at previously, and where there was no compelling new evidence, a line should be drawn.

There is one more element that comes into this, which is the question whether such a qualified statute of limitations would conform to international law.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way, and I congratulate him and others on tabling the amendment. There are two issues here for me. First, on the point of fairness and equality, does he agree that it is deeply unfair that the state seems to be actively looking not to bring former terrorists to justice while actively looking to bring soldiers, who were there legally doing their job under the law, and protected by the law, to justice. Secondly—I talk to ex-service friends about this often—is he aware of the appalling signal it sends that the soldiers who were doing their job are not being protected by the law, either recently in Iraq or 20 or 30 years ago in Northern Ireland?

Dr Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend, who is an expert in these matters, for that perceptive observation. Certainly, on the differentiation between people who were lawfully armed, trying to preserve the peace and the good order of society, and those who went out unlawfully to try to disrupt that, I believe that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks will address that very point in some depth, because it goes to the heart of his amendment.

Lady Hermon: I am exceedingly grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who is being very generous indeed. I think that it would be very helpful if he, and indeed his colleagues, clarified how many members of the British Army have been investigated, re-investigated and prosecuted in Northern Ireland. I think the numbers would be very instructive and interesting.

Dr Lewis: I am not an expert on the subject, but I think that the numbers at the moment are very low, but the threat—the sword of Damocles—is hanging over a very large number of people.

That leads me rather neatly to the final point that I want to make, about conformity with international law, which does not require a prosecution but does require an investigation. That is why the Select Committee on Defence—we have a further report coming out that relates not just to Northern Ireland, but to the wider context of other campaigns—has always sought to combine the notion of a qualified statute of limitations with that of a truth recovery process. What might loosely be termed the Nelson Mandela solution means that we would satisfy the requirement for an investigation but remove the sword of Damocles hanging over someone’s head, because they would know that they would be required to say what they remembered of the events concerned, with an absolute assurance that no prosecutions would result. That would give the bereaved families the best chance of finding out the truth.

James Heappey: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Dr Lewis: Very well, for the last time.

James Heappey: My right hon. Friend is very kind. I instinctively agree with the amendment that he has tabled. I am concerned about a statute of limitation, because if case law were applied would the other side not claim access to the statute of limitation as well? I would be grateful for his thoughts on that.

Dr Lewis: I thought that by implication I had covered that point. The likelihood is that anyone before the law would be able to lay claim to the statute, but the reality is that what my hon. Friend calls the other side—with their letters of comfort, among other things—are the last people who need to be worried about the present situation. We must not get hung up on the terminology. The people we have to protect are those who the records exist, but to whom letters of comfort have not been given—our armed forces veterans.

In conclusion, I want to—

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP) rose—

Dr Lewis: How can I refuse the hon. Gentleman?

David Simpson: The right hon. Gentleman has made a good point about the letters of comfort. I have to say that the letters of comfort were given to republicans, but those who put on the uniform of the Crown forces are being pursued for doing their duty.

Dr Lewis: That confirms the very point that I was making, and it is why the main purpose of the amendment, although arguably it might be cited by people who are unlikely to be prosecuted, is to protect our service personnel, security forces and so on.
I would like to end—I really will end—by saying that I was encouraged in a debate in Westminster Hall on 20 May this year by the response of the Minister of State to points of the sort that I have made today. He said that I had “mentioned the Nelson Mandela approach; I will come back to that point, because it is central to any potential action and solution”.

He said that a solution “must allow not only the victims and the veterans, but the whole society in Northern Ireland, to draw a line.”

He said:

“There is not an exact comparison between Northern Ireland, which is a unique place, and South Africa, but there are many parallels. We must find some way of creating an approach that will allow people to get closure, truth and justice.”—[Official Report, 20 May 2019; Vol. 660, c. 248-250.]

That is what my amendment seeks to do, and I look forward to the Minister’s response.

**Nigel Dodds**

I want to speak to the amendments tabled in my name and those of my right hon. and hon. Friends, and by Government Members, in relation to the military or armed forces covenant and its application across the United Kingdom, and on the definition of victims, again on a UK-wide basis. In amendment 19, we refer to the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, but we believe that we need a definition of victims on a UK-wide basis.

On the armed forces covenant, our amendment 18 calls for the Secretary of State to publish a report “on progress made towards preparing legislation confirming the application of the Armed Forces Covenant in the provision of public services in Northern Ireland.”

This is important because, at the moment, despite the great service of so many in Northern Ireland in the armed forces of the United Kingdom over many decades, which has been recognised far and wide, and the dedication of Northern Ireland men and women in the services—and there are, therefore, many veterans—there is not the same application of the military covenant in Northern Ireland as there is elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

We have of course talked about this issue in relation to the confidence and supply arrangements, and I look forward to the Minister saying something when he winds up about how we might progress this.

To give an illustration of just how difficult things are, just the other day—on 28 June—the Chairman of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), received a letter from the head of the Northern Ireland civil service, David Sterling, in which he replied to a previous letter asking about representation from the Northern Ireland Administration on the ministerial covenant and Veterans Board. The head of the civil service said that, unless and until there is an agreed position on participation by the Northern Ireland Executive, he was not in a position to attend or even to send another representative. This is how appalling the situation is: we cannot even have Northern Ireland represented.

Even if the Executive were back, there is no doubt that Sinn Féin would block the covenant’s application in Northern Ireland across a host of services and a host of Departments, as it has done. Of course, as we know, the armed forces covenant is not about giving preferential treatment to veterans; it is about making sure that they do not lose out as a result of their service. By any stretch of morality and law, that should apply in Northern Ireland, as it does elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

We are looking for the Government to report on progress on that matter, and to ensure there is a legislative underpinning of the military covenant. Indeed, I notice today the campaign—I think it was in The Sun newspaper—for legislative underpinning of the military covenant. Indeed, I think I am right in saying that both the leadership contenders—certainly one—have signed up to it. I warmly welcome that, and we will certainly be sitting down to discuss, as part of the renewal of the confidence and supply arrangements, how we can actually move these things forward in detail.

The other amendment that I want to speak to very quickly is amendment 19 on the definition of a victim. I referred to this when debating the previous batch of amendments. The current problem in Northern Ireland is that the definition of victim applies equally to those who have been injured as a result of their own actions and in perpetrating terrorist atrocities. For instance, the Shankill bomber, who was injured—his co-terrorist was killed in a bomb explosion that killed many innocent people—is entitled, under the law as it currently stands, to be classified as a victim, and therefore eligible, under the proposals brought forward, for a victim’s pension. Innocent victims—those who were injured as a result of terrorist activities and the families of those who have been left bereaved—of course find that extremely agonising, and they want this appalling situation rectified. Our amendment asks the Government to bring forward a report on seeking to address this very pressing issue.

**Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con):** Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with me that this is part of an attempt at historical revisionism that is going on in the Province, and that at this really important moment we need to send a very clear message that this is not some game to satisfy one side or the other, but about fairness, decency and reflecting the truth about what happened?

**Nigel Dodds**

The right hon. Gentleman has put the matter extremely eloquently and concisely, and he is absolutely right. We are bringing forward a simple request to plead for justice, decency and fairness. It cannot be right that innocent victims are left without a pension because victims of their own terrorist actions may benefit as well.

We have to address, therefore, the issues of the military covenant and the treatment of our veterans, of our victims, and of our armed forces personnel, which the right hon. Member for New Forest East raised so well previously. These issues must be addressed; and if they are not addressed by this Government in their last two years, certainly they must be tackled, going forward. Justice demands it.

6.15 pm

**Emma Little Pengelly:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is deeply frustrating that we have made these arguments time and again and yet they have been rebuffed by the Government and others as too controversial? Are we trying to do is something very basic indeed—to put into law the dictionary definition of a victim. A victim is a victim of an act by another person. That is a dictionary definition; that should not be controversial.
Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill

Nigel Dodds: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, and I pay tribute to the work that she has done in this area over many years in Northern Ireland, grappling with those issues. It is frustrating that at times—I have to say this—certainly in the Northern Ireland Office, there has been a well of opposition that has served to obstruct these issues going forward. I do not speak about the current occupants of ministerial office; I am talking about a long record of institutionalised opposition to progressing some of these issues. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say, and I hope that, as a result of this debate, we will finally get movement on these important areas of justice and fairness for victims, our armed forces and our veterans.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): I hope that the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) will forgive me if I do not address his amendments directly, I thoroughly support them and hope that he feels encouraged after tonight to continue to pursue them when it comes to any further negotiation that may take place later in the year.

I shall speak to amendment 7, which stands in my name and that of my hon. Friends, although I should make it clear, as I think my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) did, that I fully endorse amendment 6 as well, both in respect of preventing the re-investigation of cases—sometimes more than once—and his suggestion that a time limit should be considered, rather than an amnesty.

My amendment is narrower in its focus. It is designed to encourage the Secretary of State and the judicial authorities in Northern Ireland to focus on the difference between the soldier and the terrorist—the soldier, who had a duty to the state, who had a duty to protect life and property; and the terrorist, who went out to kill or to maim. That difference, which we discussed in the Chamber a year ago and have already begun to discuss again tonight, seems to have been forgotten, swamped by a kind of moral equivalence. In my view, the distinction should be clear: armed troops are not civilians. They have a duty to the state. They must obey the chain of command. They are issued with lawful weapons. They are trained how to use lawful weapons, and indeed they are punished if they are found to be misusing them. They do not, unlike the terrorist, set out each morning with the intent to kill. The terrorist, by contrast, has at some point acquired an unlawful weapon—an illegal gun or a bomb—and would be doing that only if he or she intended to do harm with it.

In recognising the problem, which has been alluded to, of the convention on human rights and the difficulty of treating one group separately from another, I would like the authorities in Northern Ireland, and in particular the Attorney General for Northern Ireland, to think more deeply in approaching this issue about the presumption of intent. I would like the report we are asking for in this amendment to consider future prosecution guidance that would properly take into account whether or not a lethal weapon was involved and whether or not it had been legally authorised or acquired. It is a narrow amendment, but I think it would help the authorities to pursue this matter more clearly.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I rise very briefly to support the amendments moved by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), although I have to say I find it extraordinary that we are even having a debate about Prorogation. I hope that the very idea of proroguing Parliament to deny Members of this House the chance to express a view about the Brexit process at the vital moment—whichever side of the debate one is on, it will have enormous implications for the future of our country—will seem to many so outrageous, so underhand and so shocking. I cannot really understand why any Member, when presented with the proposition, would not say, “Well, that is completely out of the question.” It is a direct threat to our ability to have our say and to express our views.

The second point I want to make is that, if the new Prime Minister were to think, “I might be able to get away with it,” and Prorogation were to happen, it is important that he understands—I am confident of this—that there would be many Members of the House who would be determined to sit, meet, debate and express their view anyway. I do not believe that the House of Commons would be silenced in those circumstances. It would profit the Prime Minister nothing if he were to attempt to do that. I hope the idea will disappear into the dustbin of history where it belongs. If we do not succeed in putting the idea there by persuading the new Prime Minister finally to come forward and say, “Okay, I will never do that in any circumstances,” then voting for the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s amendments tonight will be a very important step in helping it on its way.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Let me begin by addressing the issues raised by the right hon. Members for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) and for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon). We will return to this theme, so they will forgive me if my response today may be more truncated than I would prefer if there were more time. There can never be a question of moral equivalence between a member of our armed forces and somebody engaged in terrorism on behalf of a paramilitary organisation. We need to make that very clear. Whatever our disagreements, the agreement over the lack of moral equivalence is absolute and we should not be drawn down that track. That said, I am extremely uneasy about the approach taken by both right hon. Members.

The right hon. Member for New Forest East referred to our international commitments. One of our commitments is as a state party to the International Criminal Court and the treaties thereof. Article 29 of the Rome statute makes it clear that crimes that fall within the jurisdiction of the Court cannot be subject to a state-imposed statute of limitations. That is an absolute condition of the Rome statute. The right hon. Gentleman looks puzzled. I invite him to check that.

Dr Julian Lewis: I am not a lawyer, but my understanding is that the ICC, having been set up long after the troubles, does not have retrospective application, even if the hon. Gentleman’s interpretation of the law is correct.

Tony Lloyd: I did not necessarily automatically assume that the right hon. Gentleman was looking for retrospective legislation. That is an interesting point. The reality, however, is that for this state to now adopt retrospectively something that is imposed would be in contravention of article 29 of that statute.
I pray in aid the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), who made a point about the role of the police. The role of the police and of the armed forces is very similar. George Hamilton, the outgoing chief constable of the PSNI, has made it clear that he does not believe in any form of statute of limitations. He said:

“There cannot be different rules for different citizens.”

That is a fundamental challenge. The Police Federation for Northern Ireland made the point that it would be an insult to police officers who were killed or injured on duty. This is the real point: in the end, we ask our armed forces to sign an oath to uphold the Queen and Her Majesty’s laws—except for the Royal Navy, ironically, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who served in the Royal Navy, knows. We are talking not about the massive and overwhelming majority who serve faithfully in our armed forces, but about the small minority who transgress the law.

The right hon. Member for Sevenoaks drew a distinction between terrorists and those who are lawfully armed, but those who are lawfully armed and misuse those arms do not deserve any protection. I say to the right hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Member for New Forest East that I am not minded to support their amendment, but we will continue to debate this.

The right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) raised an interesting question about the definition of victims, but it is probably too difficult to debate the whole point today. When I have spoken to victims of terrorism—for example, those in organisations such as WAVE—they have made it clear to me that they want to move on. They believe that, after this amount of time, pragmatism says, “Let’s get on and ensure that those who have been denied those pensions now receive them.” I have a lot of sympathy for that view. They have waited a long time for some form of recognition.

Emma Little Pengelly: The shadow Secretary of State started by saying that there cannot be moral equivalence between the perpetrators of terrorism and our armed forces. Will he take the opportunity to say, just as clearly, that there should never be moral equivalence between the innocent victims of the criminal acts of another, and people who went out to kill and murder, and ended up accidentally injuring or killing themselves? There cannot be moral equivalence between those two.

Tony Lloyd: I have no difficulty in agreeing with the hon. Lady. The Victims’ Commissioner has sought not to change the definition of victim, which was fixed in 2006, because she also wants to move on. I am sure we will return to that.

On the armed forces covenant, I have considerable sympathy with the arguments made by the right hon. Member for Belfast North. We need to see what a report can bring forward and how far that can be of use without causing other problems.

I must refer to the important amendments in the name of the right hon. and learned Gentleman that we cannot afford a no-deal Brexit. The Northern Ireland national farmers union, the CBI, Manufacturing Northern Ireland and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions are all of the view that it would be disastrous. Parliament must be here to protect the people of Northern Ireland, to debate their future, and, in particular, to say that if this House of Commons chooses to vote for a no-deal Brexit, it will have made a conscious choice. What we cannot allow is the House to be offered no choice at all, and the people of Northern Ireland to be held hostage to the ideological concerns of those who do not serve their interests.

160,000 of our fellow citizens. That is unconscionable. We need to see what a new Prime Minister appointed by as many as 253 254

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I ask the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd)—my hon. Friend—to think very carefully about the reality, rather than the legal methods that could theoretically be applied to people who have abused the system: the reality for hundreds of people in this country. Many are in their 70s and 80s, and some are in their 90s. Some will have dementia, and will have no idea what is going on around them. These are people whose families are trying to support them through this process and who, having simply signed up and served their country, have been caught up in a legal system that has totally failed them. We in this place can come up with plenty of calculations to justify not doing something about this, but it will only ever change—at some point—if we show a bit of courage, the sort of courage that they showed on operations on our behalf, and make clear whose side we are on.

No one has seriously suggested any equivalence, although it has been bandied about, between someone who woke up in Northern Ireland in the 1970s or 1980s and whose objective on that day was to take life, to take innocent life, and those young men and women—and they were young men and women, aged 17, 18, 19 or 20—who were asked to serve in a country that they did not want to go to and had never been to before, and to take part in an operation that they did not really believe in, and who ended up being involved in an incident over which they had very little control. There is no equivalence between those two scenarios, but the fact is that the first group have peace of mind and are leading their elderly lives in peace, while the second group are currently receiving letters asking them to contribute to the costs of very aggressive lawyers and the very aggressive inquests that are currently taking place in Northern Ireland.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman was right to say that nowhere would be as badly affected as Northern Ireland by a no-deal Brexit. I think he said that was “arguable”; it is actually unarguable. It would be catastrophic for security and the economy, and in its capacity to induce terrorism, as well as for the important question of identity. For many reasons, Northern Ireland needs us to prevent a crash-out Brexit. We had that debate yesterday, and I can think of few organisations in Northern Ireland that would disagree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman that we cannot afford a no-deal Brexit. The Northern Ireland national farmers union, the CBI, Manufacturing Northern Ireland and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions are all of the view that it would be disastrous. Parliament must be here to protect the people of Northern Ireland, to debate their future, and, in particular, to say that if this House of Commons chooses to vote for a no-deal Brexit, it will have made a conscious choice. What we cannot allow is the House to be offered no choice at all, and the people of Northern Ireland to be held hostage to the ideological concerns of those who do not serve their interests.

6.30 pm

Tony Lloyd: I have no difficulty in agreeing with the hon. Lady. The Victims’ Commissioner has sought not to change the definition of victim, which was fixed in 2006, because she also wants to move on. I am sure we will return to that.

On the armed forces covenant, I have considerable sympathy with the arguments made by the right hon. Member for Belfast North. We need to see what a report can bring forward and how far that can be of use without causing other problems.

I must refer to the important amendments in the name of the right hon. and learned Gentleman that we cannot afford a no-deal Brexit. The Northern Ireland national farmers union, the CBI, Manufacturing Northern Ireland and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions are all of the view that it would be disastrous. Parliament must be here to protect the people of Northern Ireland, to debate their future, and, in particular, to say that if this House of Commons chooses to vote for a no-deal Brexit, it will have made a conscious choice. What we cannot allow is the House to be offered no choice at all, and the people of Northern Ireland to be held hostage to the ideologies of those who do not serve their interests.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I ask the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd)—my hon. Friend—to think very carefully about the reality, rather than the legal methods that could theoretically be applied to people who have abused the system: the reality for hundreds of people in this country. Many are in their 70s and 80s, and some are in their 90s. Some will have dementia, and will have no idea what is going on around them. These are people whose families are trying to support them through this process and who, having simply signed up and served their country, have been caught up in a legal system that has totally failed them. We in this place can come up with plenty of calculations to justify not doing something about this, but it will only ever change—at some point—if we show a bit of courage, the sort of courage that they showed on operations on our behalf, and make clear whose side we are on.

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Sammy Wilson: Is it not even more grotesque that these former soldiers can be summoned to an inquest or some legal process and receive no legal back-up from these former soldiers can be summoned to an inquest or whether or not they get help should not rely on the whims, the bigotry and the hatred of a particular Minister from Sinn Féin in the relevant Department denying the rights and support that those soldiers need?

Johnny Mercer: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Ministry of Defence, and this country—our nation, our Government—have been woefully slow in supporting individuals who are going through this process. I urge my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale to think very carefully about the message sent by us—whichever party we are in, we ask these individuals to do our bidding on operations—before voting against amendments that do no more than request a report to start the ball rolling towards a place where there are protections for those who have served on operations in this country.

I will bring my hon. Friend back to the human case of just one individual in my constituency who I have raised time and again, and I make no apology for doing so once more. He has been diagnosed with liver cancer and has been charged; he has turned down treatment so he can fight the case and he will be dead before it comes to court. We are saying as a Parliament, “Thank you for your service,” but we do not quite have the courage to get that over the line and actually show whose side we are on by supporting two very basic but ultimately significant amendments tonight.

Gavin Robinson: It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), and I hope he and his colleagues the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) and for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) recognise that we will be supportive of their amendments.

I rise to speak to amendment 18. I will not refer to amendment 19; I have signed it so we can take as read that it has my support. Amendment 18 requires a report to be brought forward about the implementation of the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland. Members may remember that I brought forward a private Member’s Bill on 6 February. It was supported by Members of Parliament right across the Chamber and from right across the country, all of whom accept that the armed forces covenant is a national commitment to those who served us. It does not respect devolution; it does not respect borders. It was our way as a nation of saying the service that individuals have given and the sacrifice they themselves have made, and their families in support of them, is worthy of recognition. As has been outlined by my right hon. Friend, the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), it does not offer preferential treatment, but it ensures that those who served our country so well do not suffer any disadvantage: they are not precluded from accessing services because they have to move around, for example, or they do not lose out in their children's applications to schools because they were not living within the catchment area at the time of application.

It is fundamentally wrong, fundamentally immoral, fundamentally unacceptable that the armed forces covenant does not apply equally in Northern Ireland. If every Member of this House accepts that to be the case, it is incumbent upon us all to support this Government bringing forward legislation that will ensure no Minister in a Northern Ireland Executive has the opportunity or is given the freedom to abide by their political prejudice and frustrate the implementation of the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland.

Emma Little Pengelly: Does my hon. Friend agree that this provides a really good opportunity for the British Government to say very clearly to British soldiers from Northern Ireland that they are as valued as British soldiers from any other part of this United Kingdom, and whether or not they get help should not rely on the whims, the bigotry and the hatred of a particular Minister from Sinn Féin in the relevant Department denying the rights and support that those soldiers need?

Gavin Robinson: I agree absolutely, and Members who have followed my contributions on this issue over the past number of years will recall time and again that I have shared correspondence that was sent from Michelle O’Neill, the then Health Minister, on 15 December 2016, when she indicated, “I am sorry, the armed forces covenant does not apply here.” She is wrong, but for as long as we refuse to take action, she is allowed to get away with her prejudice infecting the virtue of the armed forces covenant. It is not right.

Time and again, we have had updates in this Chamber and through the Defence Committee, on which it is a privilege to serve, where we hear in armed forces implementation reports that everything is great and that each of the eleven councils in Northern Ireland has an armed forces champion. Yet nobody ever then seeks to realise that our councils in Northern Ireland have no responsibility for health, for social services, for housing or for education. Indeed, in all the operative Departments where there is a meaningful role to play and a meaningful gift to give to those who have served us so well, that responsibility falls to the Northern Ireland Executive. How bizarre!

My right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North has relayed to the Chamber the fact that the head of the civil service said in a letter that he was sorry he could not attend the Veterans Board, because it was not previously agreed by the Executive. We are discussing an amendment to the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill that says that if it is in the public interest, senior departmental officials can take decisions, yet Northern Ireland is left with a representative from the Northern Ireland Office, which has no ministerial responsibility for or operational involvement in our health, education, social services or schools—none—yet we rely on the Northern Ireland Office when we are discussing a Bill that gives a senior departmental official the ability to decide to attend. I think that that is clearly in the public interest.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I thank my fellow member of the Defence Committee for giving way. Like him, I believe that it is a particular privilege to serve on that Committee. Can he confirm that the decision by the permanent under-secretary at the NIO not to attend the Veterans Board was discussed at our Committee only today and that, to put it mildly, we took a rather dim view of his view?

Gavin Robinson: That is indeed correct. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his intervention, although it was not the permanent under-secretary at the Northern Ireland Office but the head of the civil service in Northern...
Ireland. Where the issue arises, the Northern Ireland Office does attend, but it has no involvement in the issues that matter most.

I want to put on record my disappointment yet again with the contribution from the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd). When considering amendment 19, he accepted that there was no moral equivalence between a terrorist and a victim, but when faced with an amendment that he could support this evening, rather than saying, “I accept there is no moral equivalence and therefore I am going to do something about it,” what was his response? He said that the victims wanted to “move on”. I think there is an opportunity for the shadow Secretary of State to reflect on that, given the comments that were made yesterday in this Chamber about the partisan nature of amendments that were considered in the earlier debate. Given Labour Members’ previous commitment always to play a constructive role when dealing with sensitive issues in Northern Ireland, they have doubled down this evening. That is hugely regrettable, and it is worthy of consideration and further reflection.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I just want to add to the point that my hon. Friend is making. We have heard a lot from Opposition Front Benchers today about rights and about the need to ensure that Northern Ireland citizens are treated the same as citizens in the rest of the UK when it comes to rights, yet surely we in this House all agree that veterans of our armed forces have the right not to be disadvantaged by virtue of their service. Opposition Front Benchers are not prepared to do anything to address the fact that veterans in Northern Ireland are disadvantaged by virtue of their service. They have to go to the end of the queue when they leave service, and that is not right. That is not what the military covenant says, and the Opposition should reflect on that and do something about the rights of veterans in Northern Ireland.

Gavin Robinson: I agree with my right hon. Friend, although in fairness, the comments that we were talking about attached to the amendment on victims’ definition, and the shadow Secretary of State did indeed indicate that he would look at the report brought forward by the Government. But time moves on, and this is not a new issue. Today and yesterday, we have talked about the implementation of rights, and if something is right for armed forces personnel and veterans who live in Rochdale, it should be right for those who live in East Belfast and across Northern Ireland. I am grateful for the time that you have allowed, Dame Rosie, and I will now take my seat.

Fiona Bruce: I rise briefly to speak to amendments 21 and 22, which are in my name. In relation to the report under clause 3(1), amendment 21 would place a duty on the Secretary of State to report on the law relating to gambling and on support for those experiencing problem gambling. Amendment 22, similarly, would place a duty on the Secretary of State to report on the assistance and support offered to victims of human trafficking in Northern Ireland.

6.45 pm

John Penrose: I should probably start by formally begging to move that clauses 1 to 4 stand part of the Bill. If I do not say that, bad things will probably happen and we will not get to the important part of our proceedings.

I begin with the four amendments tabled by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), which would require the first progress report under clause 3 to be made on 4 September, not 21 October. As he mentioned, fortnightly reports would then be required from 9 October until 18 December if an Executive had not been formed. Any report under clause 3 or any regulations under clause 2 would be subject to an approval motion in this House and a “take note” motion at the other end of the corridor.

The Government agree that Parliament must be kept closely informed of progress towards restoring an Executive in Northern Ireland, which is precisely what clause 3 provides for, and we are willing to consider or accept various other reporting obligations, as I made clear in response to the earlier group of amendments. I continue that good will and positive approach under this second group of amendments.

Given the fundamental importance of these issues, I am happy to confirm that we accept my right hon. and learned Friend’s amendment 14, on the progress report to Parliament on or before 4 September. However, I have to disagree with him and oppose his other amendments.

The requirement for regular fortnightly reporting throughout the autumn, subject to a vote on each occasion, would simply be an excessive and unnecessary procedure. I also note that the requirement for fortnightly reports and motions would attach to many of the other reporting obligations on different topics that hon. and right hon. Members seek to add to clause 3. The amount of parliamentary time we booked up throughout September and into the autumn, should the Executive in Stormont not have been created, would start to mount.

I appreciate that what lies behind my right hon. and learned Friend’s amendments is not solely a concern to keep abreast of the progress towards restoring the devolved Government in Northern Ireland. He is very clear that his interests are a great deal broader and are primarily motivated by concerns about Brexit. We happily accept amendment 14, but, for the reasons I have laid out, I hope he will understand that we are not minded to accept his other three amendments, which I hope he will not press after he has had a chance to consider my remarks.

I thank my right hon. Friends the Members for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) and for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) for tabling amendments 6 and 7 on veterans. There is broad agreement, after a couple of urgent questions and a couple of debates in Westminster Hall and in the House over the past month, that the current legacy system is not working well for pretty much anyone. The system has to change, and it has to provide better outcomes. The system has to ensure that everyone is treated fairly, particularly the armed forces and police officers.

The draft Bill on which we consulted last year would require a new body investigating legacy cases to do so in a fair, balanced and proportionate manner. We have just finished consulting, and we have published the responses in the past week. Interestingly, there were strong and widespread views against either an amnesty or immunity from prosecution, and both my right hon. Friends were keen, and rightly so, to make clear the difference between those two proposals and the ideas proposed in their amendments.
There is widespread concern about former soldiers being pursued by vexatious and unfair court cases 40 or 50 years after they finish serving. Amendments 6 and 7 would require the Secretary of State to report on progress towards introducing a presumption of non-prosecution, and they would require the Attorney General for Northern Ireland to produce guidance on legacy cases with a presumption in favour of prosecution in cases where a weapon had been unlawfully obtained. That is a worthy attempt to make a distinction and to unravel the tendency in some cases for people to try to create moral equivalence between terrorists and Her Majesty’s armed forces.

It is important to be clear that the specifics of the particular or associated issues that are being proposed here did not form part of the Stormont House agreement. They were not recommended or supported widely in the responses to the consultation either. There are also some other technical concerns about whether the UK Government can direct the Attorney General for Northern Ireland— I think that is problematic. In principle, however, the point is this: I intend to take the two amendments in the spirit in which I think they are intended. I think they are intended to be a valid and sincere attempt to move this issue forward.

It is time and past time that a solution was found to this issue. Whether or not the precise details of these specific proposals are approved of in all their details in the report or approved of only in part and other things perhaps brought forward instead is beside the point. The important thing is that these two reports could serve as a way to advance that cause, identify solutions and move this forward. It is overdue that we do so and I am delighted to support the amendments.

I now move on to the points made about the armed forces covenant, which several right hon. and hon. Members, particularly from the Northern Ireland Benches, put eloquently and with great passion. I am dealing here with new clauses 15 and 16, and amendment 18. As we have heard, the armed forces covenant is hardly a new policy and it has always extended, in principle, to Northern Ireland. We continue to need to strengthen the delivery of the covenant in Northern Ireland. We have heard today some concerning and sometimes shocking examples of occasions when it could and should have been applied but had not been. The principle of the covenant was formalised in the Armed Forces Act 2011. In accordance with the Act, the Secretary of State for Defence is legally obliged to publish an annual report, which sets out the key deliverables under the covenant. This report incorporates progress in delivering the covenant across the whole UK, including Northern Ireland. We also ensure that covenant delivery is kept on track through a number of committees and boards.

Everyone in this House has, as our Government and our Democratic Unionist party confidence and supply partners certainly have, consistently demonstrated a commitment to upholding the principles and universality of the covenant, which is evident in the work reported in each of the annual reports laid in the House. We will continue to report progress to Parliament, we recognise our commitment to our confidence and supply partners to have full implementation of the armed forces covenant across the UK, and we are committed to looking at further legislation if that is required.

Amendment 19 and new clause 18 relate to the definition of a “victim” and stand in the name of the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds). The definition of a victim is laid down in legislation—the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, which is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Assembly. As a devolved matter, any change to this definition would need to be agreed with the parties in the Executive and, ultimately, by the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Government recognise that the definition of a victim is something that a number of right hon. and hon. Members have campaigned on for a number of years, and we commit to looking UK-wide at how we can make sure the victims are duly recognised and protected in law. I hope that, with this commitment and the one I made previously, the right hon. Gentleman is willing not to press his amendment.

Emma Little Pengelly: It is important to highlight what I believe is not an accurate description of the legal position. The 2006 order refers only to matters pertaining to the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors in Northern Ireland. There is no general definition of victim, and our argument is that a victim in Northern Ireland is the same as a victim across the UK. Sadly, there are many victims of terrorism across the UK, and this should rightly be a matter for the British Government, to be legislated on here.

John Penrose: I hope that the commitments I have just made and the words I was able to adduce have reassured the right hon. Member for Belfast North and his colleagues, and that on that basis they will be willing not to press their amendments. I think we are in agreement on the issue, but I am sure they will intervene on me if not.

Finally, let me turn to amendments 21 and 22, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) spoke briefly and eloquently late on in our proceedings. The amendments would require reports on gambling and the progress towards looking after gambling addicts, and on people who were victims of human trafficking. On the basis that we have been willing to consider other reports, I am of course willing to respond to that request and to accept the amendments.

I hope we have managed to dispose of the various amendments in reasonably good order, that everybody will treat the Government’s approach to those amendments in as constructive and positive a way as possible, and that we will therefore be able to dispose of the remaining business in Committee easily and straightforwardly. I therefore wish to do something quite unusual for a politician, which is to draw my remarks to a close, stop talking and sit down.

Question put and agreed to.
Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.
Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3

Progress Report

Amendment made: 14, in clause 3, page 2, line 13, leave out “21 October” and insert “4 September”.—[Mr Grieve.] This amendment would bring forward the date for a progress report to 4 September 2019.
Amendment proposed: 6, in clause 3, page 2, line 15, at end insert—

“(1A) The report under subsection (1) must include a report on progress made towards protecting veterans of the Armed Forces and other security personnel from repeated investigations for Troubles-related incidents by introducing a presumption of non-prosecution, in the absence of compelling new evidence, whether in the form of a Qualified Statute of Limitations or by some other legal mechanism.”—(Dr Julian Lewis.)

The subsection would include placing a duty on the Secretary of State to report on the options available to ensure that veterans of the Troubles would be able to assist in a truth recovery process, for the benefit of bereaved families, without fear of prosecution.

The Committee divided: Ayes 308, Noes 228.

Division No. 429] [6.57 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Ainley, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Archer, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella (Proxy vote cast by Mr Steve Baker)
Breerton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cauns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishiht, Rehaman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hafon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoey, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Sir Bernard
Jenkin, rh Andrew
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Macklinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, rh Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paton, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Perry, Andrew
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, rh Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, rh Sir Nicky
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Ryan, rh John
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe (Proxy vote cast by Jo Churchill)
Smith, Henry
Smith, rhJulian
Smith, Rhos, Mr Adrian
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Ali, Rushanara
Abrahams, Debbie
Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Coaker, Vernon
Chapman, Jenny
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Carden, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Rhian
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross

Throup, Maggie
Turhurt, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevylen, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vara, Mr Shaileh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Rhodri
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

**Tellers for the Ayes:**
Matt Warman and
Michelle Donelan

Flint, rh Caroline
Forbes, Lisa
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnc, Stephen
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Malhotra, Seema
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison

McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherinere
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mears, Ian
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Mordan, Layla
Moran, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Graham
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamar, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma (Proxy vote cast by Pat McFadden)
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodd, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Savville Roberts, rh Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Starmer, rh Keir
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streering, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
More than six hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, 7 August).

The Chair put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83D).

Amendment 6 agreed to.

Amendment 7, in page 2, line 15, at end insert—

“(1A) The report under subsection (1) must include a report on progress made towards developing new prosecution guidance for legacy cases of Troubles-related incidents by the Attorney General for Northern Ireland to take into account whether or not the person who allegedly committed an offence had the means to do so because that person had been lawfully supplied with a deadly weapon, with a presumption in favour of prosecuting in cases where a person who has allegedly committed an offence had the means to do so because that person had been unlawfully supplied with a deadly weapon.”—(Sir Michael Fallon.)

The subsection would place a duty on the Secretary to State to report on progress made towards a new prosecution guidance taking into account whether or not the person who allegedly committed an offence had been lawfully armed.

Amendment 9, in page 2, line 15, at end insert—

“(1A) The report under subsection (1) must include a review of the current legal framework on abortion in Northern Ireland with an analysis of how that framework could be amended by the current legal framework on abortion in Northern Ireland between 1922 and 1995, including the establishment of a publicly funded compensation scheme under an HIA Redress Board, distinct from the Northern Ireland Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme 2009.”—(Tony Lloyd.)


Amendment proposed: 15, in page 2, line 15, at end insert—

“(1A) Before making a report under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must publish a report on or before 4 September 2019 on progress made towards implementing the recommendations made by the Report of the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse in Northern Ireland between 1922 and 1995, including the establishment of a publicly funded compensation scheme under an HIA Redress Board, distinct from the Northern Ireland Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme 2009.”—(Tony Lloyd.)

This amendment would require fortnightly reports to be made after the conference recess until an Executive was formed, or until the December recess.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 294, Noes 293.

Division No. 430

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane  Brennan, Kevin
Abrahams, Debbie  Brock, Deidre
Ali, Rushanara  Brown, Alan
Allen, Heidi  Brown, Lyn
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  Brown, Mr Nicholas
Amesbury, Mike  Bryant, Chris
Antoniazzi, Tonia  Buck, Ms Karen
Ashworth, Jonathan  Burden, Richard
Bailey, Mr Adrian  Burgon, Richard
Bardell, Hannah  Butler, Dawn
Barron, rh Sir Kevin  Byrne, rh Liam
Bebb, Guto  Cable, rh Sir Vince
Beckett, rh Margaret  Cadbury, Ruth
Benn, rh Hilary  Cameron, Dr Lisa
Berger, Luciana (Proxy vote cast by Mr Gavin Shuker)  Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Betts, Mr Clive  Carden, Dan
Black, Mhairi  Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Blackford, rh Ian  Champion, Sarah
Blackman, Kirsty  Chapman, Douglass
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  Chapman, Jenny
Blomfield, Paul  Charalambous, Bambos
Boles, Nick  Cherry, Joanna
Brabin, Tracy  Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon

Noes

Bennett, rh Lord Tony  Brennan, Kevin
Bennett, Mr Rupert  Brokenshire, Rosie
Bennett, Ms Janet  Brown, Alan
Bennett, Dr Sarah  Brown, Mr Nicholas
Bennett, Ms Lisanne  Browne, Jimmy
Bennett, rh Lord Jimmy  Browne, Przemyslaw
Bennett, Mr Tristram  Browne, Mr Robert
Bennett, Mr Peter  Brown, Mr William
Bennett, Mr Stephen  Buck, Ms Karen
Bennett, Ms Tracy  Burden, Richard
Bennett, Ms Yvette  Burgon, Richard
Bennett, Mr Matthew  Butler, Dawn
Bennett, Mr Robert  Byrne, rh Liam
Bennett, Mr Stephen  Cable, rh Sir Vince
Bennett, Ms Therese  Cadbury, Ruth
Bennett, rh Nigel  Cameron, Dr Lisa
Bennett, Ms Victoria  Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Bennett, rh Fiona  Carden, Dan
Bennett, Ms Fiona  Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Bennett, rh Lord Julian  Champion, Sarah
Bennett, rh Mrs Joanna  Chapman, Douglass
Bennett, rh John  Chapman, Mr Jack
Bennett, rh Tony  Charalambous, Bambos
Bennett, Mr James  Cherry, Joanna
Bennett, Mr Alun  Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Bennett, rh James  Clwyd, rh Ann
Bennett, rh Mrs Evonne  Coaker, Vernon
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Question accordingly agreed to.

Amendment 15 agreed to.

Amendments made: 18, in page 2, line 15, at end insert—

“(1A) Before making a report under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must publish a report on or before 4 September 2019 on progress made towards preparing legislation confirming the application of the Armed Forces Covenant in the provision of public services in Northern Ireland.”
The subsection would include placing a duty on the Secretary of State to report on the preparation of legislation confirming the application of the Armed Forces Covenant in Northern Ireland.

Amendment 19, in page 2, line 15, at end insert—

“(1A) Before making a report under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must publish a report on or before 4 September 2019 on whether the definition of “victim” in Article 3 of the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 (Order No. 2953 (N.I. 17)) should be revised to apply only to a person who is injured or affected wholly through the actions of another person.”

The subsection would include placing a duty on the Secretary of State to report on the definition of “victim” in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

Amendment 21, in page 2, line 15, at end insert—

“(1A) The report under subsection (1) must include a report to

(a) the law on gaming machines;
(b) the law on online gambling;
(c) the number of people who are seeking treatment for problem gambling;
(d) the services available to people seeking problem gambling; and
(e) the level of support from the gambling industry for problem gambling.”

The subsection would include placing a duty on the Secretary of State to report on various matters related to the law on gambling in Northern Ireland and support for those experiencing problem gambling.

Amendment 22, in page 2, line 15, at end insert—

“(1A) The report under subsection (1) must include a report to

(a) how many times the Department has decided it is necessary to provide assistance and support for victims of human trafficking for whom there has been a conclusive determination that the person is a victim of trafficking in human beings;
(b) the reasons the Department has decided it is necessary to provide assistance and support for victims of human trafficking for whom there has been a conclusive determination that the person is a victim of trafficking in human beings; and
(c) the immigration status of those victims of human trafficking for whom there has been a conclusive determination that the person is a victim of trafficking in human beings who are receiving assistance and support beyond the relevant period.”—(Nigel Dodds.)

The subsection would include placing a duty on the Secretary of State to report on the assistance and support offered to victims of human trafficking in Northern Ireland from receiving a conclusive grounds decision.

Amendment proposed: 16, in page 2, line 16, leave out “the report” and insert “any report under this section”.—(Mr Grieve.)

This is a consequential amendment.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 289, Noes 292.

Division No. 431] [7.40 pm

AYES

Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Bebb, Guto
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana (Proxy vote cast by Mr Gavin Shuker)
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Bolso, Nick
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burton, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambo
Cherry, Joanna
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Craigby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Craddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
Davies, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Djankogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Heidi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amer, Mary
Antoniuzzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Aylett, Sam
Ayerst, Bill
Ayres, Chris
Ayre, Miranda
Baker, Bill
Bagby, Steph
Baker, Julie
Bakewell, Ruth
Balfe, John
Balle, Miss Dido
Bannister, Vicky
Bankhead, Kate
Barnes, Justin
Barry, Stephen
Barr, Chris
Barrington, Oleena
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Barry, John
Beale,fe, Cllr
Beckett, rh Margaret
Bedford, Sarah
Benn, rh Hilary
Bennett, Emily
Bennett, Sir James
Bennett, Kate
Bennett, Stephen
Bennett, Tim
Bennett, Tom
Bennett, Vicky
Bennett, Mr Mark
Bennett, Miss(table-cell:vertical-align:middle) Benn, rh Hilary
Bennett, Jonathan
Bennett, John
Bennett, Tom
Bennett, Vicky
Bennett, Mr Mark
Bennett, Miss(table-cell:vertical-align:middle) Benn, rh Hilary
Bennett, Jonathan
Bennett, John
Bennett, Tom
Bennett, Vicky
Bennett, Mr Mark
Bennett, Miss(table-cell:vertical-align:middle) Benn, rh Hilary
Bennett, Jonathan
Bennett, John
Bennett, Tom
Bennett, Vicky
Bennett, Mr Mark
Bennett, Mis...
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Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinlock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leslie, Mr Chris
Levin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Malhotra, Seema
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Meams, Ian
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O'Nn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmine
Raysh, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma (Proxy vote cast by Mr Pat McFadden)
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Roddta, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ryan, rh Joan
Sandbach, Antoinette
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweetney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Theliss, Alison
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel
Tellers for the Ayes:
Chris Elmore and Nick Smith

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella (Proxy vote cast by Mr Steve Baker)

Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleaverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donnies, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doeyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard

Dudbridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freer, Mike
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Ms Helen
Gray, James
Graying, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffiths, Andrew
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Halls, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoey, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollowbone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Hulldeleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
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Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mrs Theresa
Liddell-Granger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McFarland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Millng, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Miller, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Paisley, Mark
Pannick, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philip, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quin, Nicholas
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rossindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Sheilbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe (Proxy vote cast by Jo Churchill)
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, rh Sir Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Ian
Stewart, rh Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Watling, Giles
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Matt Warman and
Michelle Donelan

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment proposed: 17, page 2, line 16, at end insert—

“(2A) A Minister of the Crown must, within the period of two sitting days beginning with the day on which a report under this section is published, make arrangements for—

(a) a motion to the effect that the House of Commons has approved that report to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of three Commons sitting days beginning with the day on which the report under this section is published, and

(b) a motion for the House of Lords to take note of the report mentioned in paragraph (a) to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of three Lords sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published.

(2B) In this section—

“Commons sitting day” means a day on which the House of Commons is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Commons is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day); “Lords sitting day” means a day on which the House of Lords is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Lords is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day).”

This amendment would require progress reports to be debated.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 289, Noes 293.

Division No. 432]  [7.54 pm]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Heidi
Allen-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Bebb, Guto
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana (Proxy vote cast by Mr Gavin Shuker)
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Boles, Nick
Brabin, Tracy
Brady, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyra
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bamboos
Cherry, Joanna
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Reynolds, Emma (Proxy vote cast by Mr Pat McFadden)
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Ryan, rh Joan
Sandbach, Antoinette
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Slaughter, Andy
Smeth, Ruth

NOES
Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Africa, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Baron, Mr John
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wilson, Phil
Wisart, Pete
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Chris Elmore and Nick Smith
Harris, Rebecca
Harper, Mr Mark
Hands, Mr Greg
Hammond, Stephen
Hall, Luke
Halfon, Mr Robert
Hair, Kirstene
Griffiths, Andrew
Hair, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, Mr Sir John
Heald, Mr Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hebert, Nick
Hinds, Mr Damian
Hoey, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
Javid, Mr Sahaj
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Mr Damian
Johnson, John
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Richard
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kendal, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, Mr Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, Mr Mark
Latham, Mr Pauline
Leading, Mr Andrew
Leffroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Mr Sir Edward
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, Mr Brandon
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lewis, Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, Mr Richard
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mr Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
May, Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, Mr Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, Mr Ms Esther
Merton, Johnny
Merrett, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, Mr Mrs Maria
Millington, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, Mr Anne
Mitchell, Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Mr Penny
Morgan, Mr Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, Mr David
Murray, Mrs Sherry
Murrison, Mr Dr Andrew
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Mr Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, Mr Prithiviraj
Paterson, Mr Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, Mr Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, Mr Chris
Pincher, Mr Christopher
Poulter, Mr Dan
Prentis, Mr Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursegrove, Tom
Quin, Mr Jeremy
Quince, Ms, Wilt
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, Mr John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mr Gavin
Robinson, Mr Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Mr Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, Mr Rhys
Rutley, Mr David
Scully, Mr Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Mr Jim
Shapps, Mr Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, Mr David
Simpson, Mr Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Mr Jamie
Smith, Mr Henry
Smith, Mr Julian
Smith, Mr Rosston
Soames, Mr Sir Nicholas
Spelman, Mr Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mr Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Mr Bob
Stewart, Ivan
Stewart, Mr Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, Mr Rhel
Sturt, Mr Graham
Sturdy, Mr Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, Mr Sir Desmond
Swire, Mr Sir Hugo
Sym, Mr Sir Robert
Thomas, Mr Derek
Thomson, Mr Ross
Throup, Mr Maggie
Thurston, Mr Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Mr Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trelveryan, Mr Anne-Marie
Truss, Ms Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Mr Tom
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, Mr Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, Mr David
Watling, Ms Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Ms Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, Mr Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, Mr Gavin
Wilson, Mr Sammy
Wood, Mr Mike
Wrags, Mr William
Wright, Mr Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Matt Warman and
Michelle Donelan

Question accordingly negatived.
Clause 3, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 20

Law on gambling and support for those experiencing problem gambling in Northern Ireland: debate

“(1) A Minister of the Crown must, within the period of two sitting days beginning with the first sitting day on or after the day on which the report on gambling in Northern Ireland mentioned in section 3 is published, make arrangements for—”
Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill

(a) a motion to the effect that the House of Commons has approved that report to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Commons sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published, and

(b) a motion for the House of Lords to take note of the report mentioned in paragraph (a) to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Lords sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published.

(2) In this section—

“Commons sitting day” means a day on which the House of Commons is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Commons is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day);

“Lords sitting day” means a day on which the House of Lords is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Lords is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day).”—(Fiona Bruce.)

This new clause is linked to the amendment 21 on a report on progress made on the law on gambling in Northern Ireland and support for problem gambling, and provides for the report to be debated in Parliament.

Brought up, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 21

Assistance and Support for Victims of Human Trafficking in Northern Ireland: Debate

“(1) A Minister of the Crown must, within the period of two sitting days beginning with the first sitting day on or after the day on which the report on assistance and support for victims of human trafficking in Northern Ireland mentioned in section 3 is published, make arrangements for—

(a) a motion to the effect that the House of Commons has approved that report to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Commons sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published, and

(b) a motion for the House of Lords to take note of the report mentioned in paragraph (a) to be moved in that House by a Minister of the Crown within the period of seven Lords sitting days beginning with the day on which the relevant report mentioned in section 3 is published.

(2) In this section—

“Commons sitting day” means a day on which the House of Commons is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Commons is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day);

“Lords sitting day” means a day on which the House of Lords is sitting (and a day is only a day on which the House of Lords is sitting if the House begins to sit on that day).”—(Fiona Bruce.)

This new clause is linked to the amendment 22 on a report on progress made on the law on gambling in Northern Ireland and support for problem gambling, and provides for the report to be debated in Parliament.

Brought up, and added to the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill, as amended, reported.

Bill, as amended in the Committee, considered.

Question put forthwith (Order, 8 July). That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time and passed.
It is extremely disappointing that the Immigration Minister has no time to meet me to discuss this matter further. This decision to force Lizanne to leave the UK by Friday 12 July is cruel and unnecessary, and it robs a rural community of one of its highly esteemed members, to no good purpose or benefit to anyone. It is not done in the name of these 16,069 and counting petitioners. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Home Office to reconsider this decision without delay and grant Lizanne leave to remain in the UK, so that she can continue to contribute to the Isle of Arran community.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of North Ayrshire and Arran,

Declares that we are deeply concerned by the UK Home Office's decision to refuse Lizanne Zietsman leave to remain in the UK; further that Lizanne has settled on the Island of Arran with her Scottish-born husband and has built a successful business employing local residents; further that she is a valued and respected member of the Arran community which is bewildered and dismayed that the UK Home Office has rejected her application to stay in the UK; and further that an online petition on this matter has received over 16,069 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Home Office to reconsider this decision without delay and grant Lizanne leave to remain in the UK, so that she can continue to contribute to the Isle of Arran community.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

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The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Home Office to reconsider this decision without delay and grant Lizanne leave to remain in the UK, so that she can continue to contribute to the Isle of Arran community.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
Intentional Unauthorised Development

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

8.15 pm

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): In my constituency of North East Hertfordshire, there have recently been intentional unauthorised developments of caravan sites on land bought by Travellers. This is becoming more common nationally and has been increasing locally.

It is important that the rule of law is upheld. To local residents who abide by the law, it just seems wrong that planning law can be flouted and treated with disdain. If planning permission is needed, it should be applied for in advance. My constituents are concerned that there should be a level playing field for the planning system. Unauthorised sites are frequently a source of tension between the travelling and settled communities. Although councils have some powers to deal with unauthorised sites, deliberate unauthorised development remains a significant issue.

In July 2018, there were 3,093 caravans on unauthorised sites nationally, of which 2,149 were on land bought by Travellers. The number of caravans on unauthorised sites increased by 17% between July 2017 and July 2018. So, what is going on? In a typical case, it seems that a Traveller will buy land where there would be little or no prospect of someone obtaining planning permission for a home. In my constituency, examples have included land in the green belt and land in a conservation area—I believe that all the sites were ones where planning permission to build a house or to develop a business had previously been refused.

On some occasions, on the Friday evening of a bank holiday a fleet of lorries, caravans and building equipment has arrived on a site, and people have started to lay internal roads and hard standing on the site without planning permission. In some instances, children are brought on to sites. This could be coincidental, or it could be designed to be used in later legal proceedings to demonstrate a family life for Human Rights Act purposes. Where notices are served by the council for enforcement or an injunction, they are ignored. As council enforcement proceeds, with a good deal of development already on site, retrospective planning permission is applied for. The process is delayed, with the inevitable inertia of court or planning inquiry proceedings, and the scope for applications for adjournments, so months can pass into years. Perhaps a personal permission is eventually obtained on appeal. Then, I am told, more unauthorised development might take place for a family member here or a living room there. Over a period of years, the initial failure to apply for planning permission has been rewarded with a full caravan site. That might help to explain why the number of caravans on unauthorised sites has increased by 17% in the past year.

If a site is intentionally developed without permission, should it not be put back into the state that it was in before, and then a planning application could be made? Should not the enforcement notices all be followed, and then, from the position of anybody else applying in advance, we should have that proper process?

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): As the Minister is aware, I have had considerable difficulty in my constituency. Some of the sites have been fought over for 14 to 18 years. I have a very aggressive one at the moment. Perhaps the Minister might consider enabling the local authority to put a stop order on any development at all, emphasised and backed by the courts.

Sir Oliver Heald: That is a very constructive proposal and I would be interested to hear how the Minister responds to it. At the moment, if a site is intentionally developed without permission, there does not seem to be much of a disincentive to ignore planning law in the first place. The Government’s planning policies and requirements for Gypsy and Traveller sites are set out in “Planning policy for traveller sites”, which must be taken into consideration in preparing local plans and taking planning decisions. In theory, that encourages local authorities to formulate their own evidence base for Gypsy and Traveller needs and to provide their own targets relating to pitches required, which is a good thing. Where planning authorities are unable to demonstrate a five-year supply of deliverable sites, that in turn might make it more difficult for them to justify refusing planning applications for temporary pitches. However, where a council does what is suggested, that does not provide the certainty for the council or the local residents that is intended.

In preparing its local plan, East Hertfordshire District Council undertook a thorough process to establish Traveller needs. That was scrutinised by the planning inspector as part of the public examination of the draft plan and, after due consideration, the plan was approved by the Secretary of State and adopted in November 2018. Yet within weeks, it was being argued successfully on a retrospective planning appeal before another planning inspector that this did not adequately reflect Traveller need in the district because it did not include the appellant, who was not actually living in the district at the time of the council survey a few months earlier. Surely the local plan should have more force than that. There should be a period from adoption of the plan within which it is not possible to reopen issues such as that of need. The plan should be determinative—at least for a reasonable period.
In a welcome January 2014 written ministerial statement, the Government sought to re-emphasise existing policy that “unmet need, whether for traveller sites or for conventional housing, is unlikely to outweigh harm to the green belt and other harm to constitute the ‘very special circumstances’ justifying inappropriate development in the green belt.”—[Official Report, 17 January 2014; Vol. 573, c. 35WS.]

I asked the Minister whether that still applied.

In September 2014, the coalition Government published “Consultation: planning and travellers”. This made intentional occupation of land without planning permission a material consideration in any retrospective planning application for that site. Will the Minister confirm that that remains the case?

The guidance “Dealing with illegal and unauthorised encampments: a summary of available powers” was published in March 2015. Since then, there have been a number of debates in which hon Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), have highlighted these issues. On 9 October 2017, the then Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), said that the Government expected local authorities and the police to act and announced a review of the effectiveness of enforcement against unauthorised encampments, and made the point that this was not a reason for local authorities and the police not to use their existing powers.

On 12 October that year, the then Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), reiterated that the law must apply to everyone and agencies should work together to deal with wrongdoing. In April 2018, the Government launched a consultation and published their response in February this year. In it, the Government set out their intentions for further action on unauthorised developments and encampments, including:

- Practical and financial support for local authorities including new good practice guidance and funding for planning enforcement to support local authorities to deal with unauthorised encampments more effectively...Supporting traveller site provision through planning policy and the Affordable Homes Programme...Support for the travelling community to improve life chances.

Many Gypsies and Travellers now live in settled accommodation—mostly in bricks and mortar—and do not travel, or do not travel all the time, but they do consider travelling part of their identity. The number of Traveller caravans is on the increase. In July 2018, the figure was 22,662—an increase of 29% since July 2008. There are concerns expressed by Select Committees of the House that this is leading to unsatisfactory conditions in unauthorised sites. It is also worth making the point that Travellers have the worst outcomes across a wide range of social indicators, so work to improve their life chances is welcome.

The Government have said that they will consider writing to local authorities that do not have an up-to-date plan for Travellers, to expedite the requirements of national planning policy and highlight examples of good practice. But this may be ineffective if the general view of councils becomes that, even if they prepare a plan and it is approved as part of the local plan by the inspector and the Secretary of State, such a plan can still be impugned within weeks in a retrospective planning appeal. I understand that the Government intend to publish further consultations on options for strengthening policy on intentional unauthorised development, but action is needed now to uphold the rule of law, provide a level playing field, and remove the stress and tension caused to local communities by intentional unauthorised developments.

8.27 pm

**The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse):** I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) on securing this debate. He has been a persistent and formidable champion for his constituents, and has raised this issue with me on a number of occasions. I am pleased that we are now able to address it in the open air.

The Government take unauthorised encampments extremely seriously, and a lot of work is ongoing in this area. Both I and the Secretary of State have listened extensively to views from across the House on this highly important issue, and recognise the strong feelings and concerns that have been raised in recent debates and discussions. As both I and the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), have stressed before in this Chamber, the Government are listening and taking action. We have listened to concerns raised in debates, discussions and correspondence, and we have sought evidence on the issue through consultation.

In February this year, we published the Government’s response to the “Powers for dealing with unauthorised developments and encampments” consultation, working with the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice. Since then, ministerial colleagues and officials have been working together closely towards delivering on the commitments made in that response. Among the concerns that have been raised by colleagues in the House and members of the public, there were particular concerns over fairness in the planning system, illegal activity and the well-being of travelling communities. Indeed, I can understand the frustration that is felt when it appears that the law does not apply fairly to all. We want to ensure that the system is fair, so we must take into account the concerns being raised—whether those concerns are from the travelling community or members of the settled community. This means ensuring that all members of the community have the same opportunities and are free from the negative effects of those who choose to break the law.

The responses we received to our consultation on unauthorised development highlighted several aspects that we need to improve on in order to address this issue. Our response put forward a package of measures, including consultation on stronger powers for the police to respond to unauthorised encampments, practical and financial support for local authorities to deal with unauthorised encampments, support for Traveller site provision and support for the travelling community to improve their life chances. My colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks), recently provided a summary to the House on some of the work that the Government will be undertaking as a result. For the benefit of everybody here today, I will briefly reiterate some of these points, with consideration to what has been brought up by my right hon. and learned Friend.
First, let me address the concerns raised by my right hon. and learned Friend about intentional unauthorised development, and, in particular, how this type of development is taken into account when planning permission is sought retrospectively. The Government do want to ensure that fairness and confidence exists in the planning system, and I believe that this can be partly achieved through the strengthening of policy in this area. In 2015, the Government introduced a policy that made intentional unauthorised development a material consideration in the determination of planning applications and appeals. As set out in our response, we are concerned that harm is caused by the development of land that has been undertaken in advance of obtaining planning permission. We will therefore consult on options for strengthening our policy on intentional unauthorised development so that local authorities have the tools to address the effects of such developments. I hope that my right hon. and learned Friend will contribute to that consultation.

We know, however, that this is not only about having the necessary policies and regulations in place, but about local authorities having the powers and resources to enforce them. There is already an extensive range of powers in place, as set out in the 2015 guidance, to allow local authorities to clamp down quickly on unauthorised encampments. The Government expect authorities, working with the police as necessary, to use these powers to take swift and effective enforcement action. The responses to our consultation on unauthorised developments and encampments demonstrated that local authorities generally believe that the powers available to them under sections 77 and 78 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 are adequate. Local authorities have extensive planning enforcement powers under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. The Government believe that, if used effectively, these are sufficient to tackle unauthorised development and reduce the risk of it occurring.

We note, however, that some local authorities may deal with unauthorised encampments less frequently than others, and the Government have heard that it can be difficult to develop expertise and good practice in all areas. We recognise that resourcing, training and skills are a concern in relation to planning enforcement. That is why we have committed to practical and financial support for local authorities, including new good practice guidance and funding for planning enforcement to support local authorities to deal with unauthorised encampments more effectively.

Sir Paul Beresford: There has recently been a meeting of every single local authority in Surrey. The Chancellor set it up and a number of other MPs went there. They would disagree totally with the Minister that we think that the legislation is adequate. It is inadequate.

Kit Malthouse: I hear my hon. Friend’s view of the legislation, but, as I say, it is not the generally accepted view that came through in the consultation. I am more than happy to take a submission from the local authorities in Surrey if they believe that there are lacunae in their powers that mean they are unable to enforce successfully. However, there are local authorities across the country that do successfully enforce in this area. I would be more than happy to put his local authorities in touch with those local authorities who are successful in this regard, particularly the one that is always held out as an example—Sandwell in the west midlands, which has a particularly assertive and successful policy in this area, and might, I am sure, be able to offer some tips and tricks on what is available in the armoury of legislation for local authorities to use.

We want to ensure that local authorities use their powers to full effect and, as I say, draw on good practice across the country, at county or district level, in the ways that they can work more effectively with police and neighbouring authorities.

Sir Oliver Heald: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way and for the discussions we have had. However, what about the point that a person who is in breach of an enforcement notice is still able to apply for retrospective planning permission? Surely, he should remedy the breach before he is allowed to do that. What about the point on the local plan where a council goes to the trouble of surveying the need and getting the thing looked at by the planning inspector, it is signed off by his boss and the Secretary of State, and then, two or three weeks or a month later, it is being argued that it does not adequately reflect the need?

Kit Malthouse: On my right hon. and learned Friend’s first point, those are very pertinent issues that should be submitted as part of the consultation on how we can strengthen measures against intentional unauthorised development. I am very focused on this issue. In particular, during the Department’s work, I was keen that we should enforce against that, because I agree that people need to have confidence in the planning system and know that there is a level playing field. If someone intentionally breaches the rules, there should be a higher bar for them to pass. However, we should be in mind that a planning system with too much rigidity can often cause problems for those who stumble across the line or did not necessarily understand the rules in the first place, which can happen with ordinary domestic planning applications. I would be more than happy for him to submit that as part of the consultation. His second point has slipped my mind.

Sir Oliver Heald: It was about the local plan having considered need, been approved and then, within weeks, been impugned.

Kit Malthouse: I will come on to this in a moment, but, as my right hon. and learned Friend will know, along with all elements of a local plan, five-year supply is often the subject of legal challenge and challenge through the planning appeals process. I have consistently said to local authorities on all types of housing that if they want to be bulletproof on planning, they should aspire to a supply beyond five years. Too many authorities spend a lot of time in court arguing about whether they are at 5.1 or 4.8, but if they plan their area with authority and perspective—even as far out as 10 or 15 years—there is no argument to be had, particularly if it has been evidenced through the local plan process and supported by a planning inspector.

We want to ensure that local authorities use their powers to full effect and draw on good practice across the country and at county and district level. That can include ways in which public bodies can more effectively
work with the police, neighbouring authorities and the travelling and wider communities—for example on welfare issues and clarifying roles and responsibilities, to move unauthorised encampments on efficiently and successfully.

We will in due course create a power to place this guidance on a statutory footing, to ensure that all local authorities are following this advice and using their powers effectively. Our package of support for local authorities includes a commitment to make up to £1.5 million of funding available to local authorities to support planning enforcement. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will publish details of the fund and how to bid shortly. Alongside that, the Government will continue to keep local authorities’ powers in this area under review, following the proposals to reform police powers where there are deliberate and repeated breaches of planning.

While we acknowledge that Government still have work to do on the issues associated with unauthorised encampments, I would like to reiterate the importance of appropriate levels of site provision provided by local authorities. The planning policy for Traveller sites requires local planning authorities to produce their own assessment of needs for Traveller sites in their area, to meet the needs and expected needs of the travelling community in the same way they would for the settled community, as my right hon. and learned Friend pointed out. However, when assessing the suitability of sites in rural or semi-rural settings, local planning authorities should ensure that the scale of such sites does not dominate the nearest settled community. The Government have committed to produce guidance on the concentration of sites and have made clear that the Secretary of State will be prepared to review cases where concerns are raised that there is too high a concentration of authorised Traveller sites in one location.

I would like to relay to the House our ongoing work on enforcement against unauthorised encampments, as I am aware that this has been an area of particular concern to many Members across the House, including those who have attended previous debates. As I mentioned, the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks), has outlined this in previous debates, so I will try to keep my summary brief.

From listening to our consultation responses on the matter, we have identified a set of measures to extend powers available to the police, to enable unauthorised encampments to be tackled more effectively. Those include our commitment to seek parliamentary approval to amend sections 61 and 62A of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. The Home Office will soon launch a public consultation on the specific nature of these measures, to take the proposals forward.

Sir Oliver Heald: The Minister is being very generous in giving way. I was on the Committee in 1994 that considered the Bill, which introduced the five caravan rule. That has been excellent, and the Government might want to reduce it to three. But of course, that is all about moving on trespassers in encampments that are unauthorised for that reason. This debate is about land that is owned by the developer where all the planning laws are being ignored. Is there anything more he can say about toughening up on that and ensuring that people cannot drive a coach and horses through the planning laws?

Kit Malthouse: As I said earlier, I am keen for us to strengthen the measures that can be taken against intentional unauthorised development, on which my right hon. and learned Friend is very focused, and rightly so, but the process by which we get there means that we have to go through a consultation, which we will be doing shortly. I hope that both he and my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) will submit to that consultation whatever measures they think are appropriate.

I think it fair to say that on this issue, given the interest of a large number of Members, the Government have listened and announced a comprehensive package, which will be implemented over the next few months—as my right hon. and learned Friend will know, the wheels of Government often grind slowly—so that in time for next summer, when there will be an uptick in activity, we will have measures in place that will not only allow local authorities to enforce sensibly, but encourage them to provide more transit sites to which Traveller communities can legitimately be moved.

Sir Paul Beresford: As part of the consultation, will the Minister take it from me that we would like him to consider the ability for local authorities to step in quickly and put in place a legally binding stop notice on the development as the trucks are driving in, the caravans and kids are arriving and the green belt is being destroyed?

Kit Malthouse: I certainly share my hon. Friend’s aspiration for local authorities to be able to move extremely quickly in these circumstances, and a lot of the measures that we are putting in place are intended to encourage them to do exactly that, with authority and in the safe knowledge that they are acting within the law. However, it is also critical that they have a legitimate place to which they can move Traveller communities, so in my view the provision of transit sites is one of the key issues. In my constituency, where we have the same issues—not necessarily with encampments, but certainly with summer visitors—unfortunately we do not have a transit site, and I have talked to my local authority about providing one so that those people who do arrive in Andover every summer can be moved somewhere legitimately and swiftly. I think that the two issues go together.

I would like to end by briefly updating Members on the work that the Government are doing on outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, which my right hon. and learned Friend quite rightly raised. We are committed to continuing to address the serious disparities faced by these communities. On almost every measure, those communities are significantly worse off than the general population. The Government have been working to improve their outcomes, but we recognise that we need to go further. That is why we recently announced that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will lead the development of a cross-Government strategy to improve their outcomes. We will work closely with other Departments, including the Race Disparity Unit within the Cabinet Office, the Department for Education, the Department of Health
and Social Care and the Home Office, to develop the strategy. The strategy will seek to tackle the inequalities faced by these communities across a range of outcomes highlighted by the race disparity audit, including housing, education and health.

I would like to conclude by thanking those Members who have participated in this important debate. The Government have listened to Members’ concerns and are progressing on the commitments made in our response to the consultation and on the wider issue of unauthorised development and encampments. I hope that over the next few months all those Members will participate in the various consultations that will appear, so that we can reach a settled policy around which we can unite in solving the problem, while improving the lives of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

*Question put and agreed to.*

8.43 pm

*House adjourned.*
The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The National Cyber Security Centre is providing advice and practical guidance on how to improve standards of cyber-security to organisations in both the public and private sectors.

Mr Sharma: The Minister will know that the cyber-defence of the Government and industry is stronger when the best skills from around the country are deployed. With that in mind, what is he doing to encourage women and those from a black and minority ethnic background in the UK to develop their mathematical and IT skills from an early age, and to enter the cyber-security field, to protect our country and businesses?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We do need to improve our cyber-skills capacity. I am very pleased that more than 55,000 young men and women have now taken part in the CyberFirst and Cyber Discovery schemes that the NCSC helps to organise, but he is right that we need to make a particular effort with under-represented groups, including bright young men and women from our ethnic minority communities.

Stephen Doughty: Given the shocking leaks we have seen from the National Security Council and of diplomatic telegrams, can the Minister for the Cabinet Office give some reassurance to our civil servants on the cyber-security of crucial confidential documents and their ability not to be compromised by foreign states or insider jobs?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman would not expect me to comment on individual cases, but he is right about the need both for the highest possible levels of technical cyber-security in protecting those systems, and for the highest standards of discipline and respect for the confidentiality of advice on the part of everybody who has access to such material.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Cyber-security is one of the biggest threats facing not only the Government, but our major and smaller companies. What will my right hon. Friend do to ensure that the private sector has access to the ability of state services?

Mr Lidington: The great strength of the NCSC is that it makes available the expertise developed by our agencies, in particular GCHQ, in a way that permits open access by private sector companies and third sector organisations. I held a roundtable in recent months with directors of FTSE 350 companies to highlight concerns and challenges, and to learn from their experience. There is a range of materials targeted particularly at small and medium-sized enterprises.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What assessment have the Government made on whether the leaking of Kim Darroch’s statements was the result of a cyber-attack by a foreign Government?

Mr Lidington: I hope my right hon. Friend will understand that I cannot make any comment about an inquiry that is in progress. I will say, however, that I hope the person or persons responsible will be found out and that they will be subjected to all appropriate disciplinary and, if necessary, legal sanction.
Strengthening the Union

3. Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to strengthen the Union. [911850]

11. Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to strengthen the Union. [911860]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Our commitment to continued work to strengthen the Union can be seen in practice through such initiatives as scrapping the Severn tolls, delivering city deals across Scotland and the entire United Kingdom, and investing in digital connectivity in Northern Ireland.

Giles Watling: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the long-standing and hugely successful Union, which has seen the Welsh, Scottish, Irish and English standing shoulder to shoulder and taking on the world for generations, should not be trashed by those in other regions of this great country who seek to pursue their own populist and secessionist ends? We are stronger together, are we not?

Mr Lidington: Every part of the United Kingdom gains from the membership of each other member nation of the United Kingdom. It is important that those in Government now and those who will be in Government in the future work for an outcome that respects the devolution settlement and is confident about the United Kingdom and the great strength that that collective endeavour brings.

Bill Grant: A number of my constituents have expressed concern that Scottish National party colleagues will use our departure from the European Union to justify their agenda of breaking the country apart. Can my right hon. Friend assure this House that everything is being done to anticipate potential devolution consequences of Brexit, in order that the SNP cannot exploit it to shore up its own narrow agenda of breaking up the United Kingdom?

Mr Lidington: Part of any departures from the membership of each other member nation of the United Kingdom. It is important that those in Government now and those who will be in Government in the future work for an outcome that respects the devolution settlement and is confident about the United Kingdom and the great strength that that collective endeavour brings.

Mr Lidington: There is no doubt that the success of the SNP agenda of separation would do enormous damage to businesses and living standards in Scotland. I can reassure my hon. Friend that there has been good co-operation on frameworks to ensure that the United Kingdom single market continues to function after we leave the European Union, but also that it is in the interest of every part of the United Kingdom that we leave the EU in an orderly fashion, in a way that protects jobs, living standards and investment in our country.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Regional Ministers right across England—not only in areas such as that covered by the northern powerhouse—were a successful initiative before 2010 and could be introduced virtually immediately. Will the Minister look at that idea, perhaps supplemented by regional Select Committees in the House of Commons?

Mr Lidington: I am always happy to look at evidence that is brought forward on how we can improve our arrangements further. As I have said before, both the devolved nations and individual areas within each of the four nations of the United Kingdom have a lot to contribute.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I have a lot of time for the right hon. Gentleman, but these answers are a disgrace. While he is giving us these platitudes, both Tory leadership contenders are willing to sell the rest of the country down by prioritising a no-deal Brexit over the rest of the Union. Will the Minister now give us the assurance that he has previously given, that no deal will cause potentially fatal damage to the Union and that he will fight against it?

Mr Lidington: I have been very clear in a number of public statements that I believe that a disorderly no-deal exit from the European Union would not only cause significant economic harm in all parts of this country, but place further strain on the Union. I believe it is in the interest of everybody in every party in this House and in every part of the UK that we deliver on the referendum result of 2016, but do so in an orderly fashion that protects jobs, investment and living standards.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): My right hon. Friend told The Times last week that he feared that what he called “English indifference”, if I recall correctly, was something of a threat to the Union. The reports that my Committee has produced about devolution and Brexit have called, with the support of the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments, for much more concrete machinery to exist between the Government of the United Kingdom and the devolved Governments, and for there to be inter-parliamentary machinery. I must say that I have found the response of the Government to be slow and somewhat indifferent. I appreciate that he is battling on many fronts at the moment, but can he speed up his enthusiasm for dealing with these issues?

Mr Speaker: And in the process, we will try to ensure that the hon. Gentleman’s Committee’s reports become bestsellers. That is the ambition.

Mr Lidington: Much of the work of the UK and devolved Governments in the last year and a half has involved making practical arrangements for Brexit through the completion of work on the UK frameworks on the various matters that will come back from Brussels and intersect with devolved competence. I would have hoped that my hon. Friend, given his views on Brexit, would welcome that. It is important that we and the next Government press forward with work on the intergovernmental review. I would welcome efforts by this Parliament to work more closely with devolved Parliaments in the future.

Devolution

4. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the merits of devolution over the last 20 years. [911851]

8. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the merits of devolution over the last 20 years. [911855]
The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): I have recently participated in events to celebrate 20 years of devolution, which has transformed the constitutional landscape of the United Kingdom. Devolution has successfully brought decision making on key public services closer to the people who use them while keeping the benefits that arise from the strength of our United Kingdom.

Patrick Grady: It is nice to hear the Minister say it like he means it. The Scottish Government are launching an innovative, engaging and participatory programme of citizens' assemblies to look at where the devolution settlement in Scotland might go in. By contrast, this Government have appointed Lord Dunlop, an unelected peer, to review devolution. Does that not tell us everything we need to know about this Government's attitude to devolution? They never really wanted it in the first place.

Kevin Foster: Dearie me! The SNP need to stop misrepresenting the review. A key part of its terms of reference states that it will “need to respect and support the current devolution settlement”. It is about how the UK Government can work better with the devolved Assemblies and Governments. The SNP should be welcoming the review, instead of trying to foster yet another false grievance.

David Linden: The Scottish and Welsh Governments recently wrote to the Minister expressing disappointment that 15 months on a review about intergovernmental relations has stalled owing to the Government's unwillingness to make reforms. Will the Minister commit to addressing in detail each of the points in that letter, including the one on a strengthened dispute resolution process?

Kevin Foster: Constructive discussions continue on the intergovernmental review and its structure, although it has been slightly hamstrung by the lack of a Government with the devolved Assemblies and Governments. The SNP should be welcoming the review, instead of trying to foster yet another false grievance.

Kevin Foster: I do not recognise the shadow Minister's description, not least given that we have been driving forward devolution settlements and devolving power to combined authorities in England, as well as what we have seen happen in devolution in the nations. Only this week, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales met those in the potential great western powerhouse to see how that could be taken forward. I find it ironic, however, to be lectured on control from the centre by a party whose leader wants to take control of the entire economy from Whitehall.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): We understand that the Dunlop review is to look at the organisation of Departments and whether they are optimised for devolution. Do the Government have any plans or intention to review policy with regard to the constitution that underpins the Union and to the devolution settlement in particular?

Kevin Foster: As I said a few moments ago, the review will need to take into account and support the current devolution settlement.

I wish that, in my assessment of devolution, I could have said that it had produced better education standards in Scotland. In fact, however, Scottish schools have fallen in international rankings, and a smaller percentage of Scotland’s most deprived children go to university than in any other part of the United Kingdom. It is not devolution that is at fault; it is the Scottish National party.

Innovative Technologies: Public Services

5. Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): What progress the Government have made on using innovative technologies to deliver public services.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): Last month I launched the Government’s technology innovation strategy, which sets out how we will approach the use of emergent technologies in future. I also launched an artificial intelligence guide which will help Departments to build on areas in which artificial intelligence is already being used effectively across Government—for example, to improve MOT inspections and prison safety.

Gillian Keegan: Chichester Careline is the only telecare monitoring centre in West Sussex. It operates Mindme, a service that GPS-tracks vulnerable people, usually those with dementia, so that families, friends, carers and Careline staff can locate them 24/7. It has saved
lives, and countless hours of worry. Will the Minister look into how innovative technology of that kind can be used across Government to support the most vulnerable in our society?

Oliver Dowden: It is very important to highlight that sort of work. It is just another example of the impact that innovative technology can have in improving people’s lives. The purpose of the GovTech Catalyst challenge is to explore the use of technologies for adult social care, and the Geospatial Commission is helping the Government and the private sector to make better use of GPS data.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Any innovative technology is welcome if it is applied appropriately, but will the Minister ensure that when such systems are being considered, account will be taken of whether or not they make a service less personal than it is already?

Oliver Dowden: Experience of innovative technology suggests that it can make services more personalised and more tailored to individual circumstances. However, it is important for us to continue to make services accessible to everyone, which is why they will always be available in a non-digital format as well.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that while our country has always been at the forefront of innovation, to allow businesses to thrive and flourish we need a sound and successful economy, which would then result in innovative public services?

Oliver Dowden: As ever, my right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. It is only because we have a strong economy that we are able to invest in innovative technologies, which is why we have such a great track record.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Let us have a single-sentence inquiry from the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron).

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Will the Secretary of State oversee the innovative technology in radiotherapy that will be needed to meet the NHS long-term plan to diagnose more patients earlier?

Mr Speaker: Excellent.

Oliver Dowden: I regret to say that I am not a Secretary of State; I am but a junior Minister. However, I will be looking into the matter that the hon. Gentleman has raised. I am working closely with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health examining precisely those issues, and the Government have set up NHSX, which oversees the use of innovative technology for that very purpose.

Devolution

6. Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to mark 20 years of devolution in Scotland.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): Speaking at the Law Society of Scotland’s conference entitled “20 years of devolution and Scotland’s parliament”, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster set out the Government’s clear vision of a union of strong devolved Parliaments within a strong United Kingdom, and of Scotland’s two levels of government working together to deliver for its citizens.

Douglas Ross: Devolution means that Scotland’s two Governments can work together to deliver more, and city and growth deals are an example of that. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will visit Moray tomorrow, and we are eagerly awaiting news of the Moray growth deal. Will the Minister urge him to use his visit as an opportunity to confirm the UK’s commitment to a deal that will transform our area?

Kevin Foster: As we mark 20 years of devolution, the UK Government are committing more than £1.36 billion to support economic development in Scotland through city and growth deals. All Scotland’s seven major cities now have deals, and heads of terms are expected to be agreed for Moray very soon, thanks to my hon. Friend’s tireless campaigning.

Contaminated Blood Inquiry

9. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on the NHS contaminated blood inquiry.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): I am pleased that the inquiry is now hearing evidence. Sir Brian Langstaff is right to put those who have been infected, and affected, at the heart of his inquiry, and I am glad that their voices are being heard. They have been waiting for too long.

Diana Johnson: The Minister is absolutely right, but with one victim dying every 96 hours and compensation still not being paid, I wrote to the Prime Minister, along with seven Opposition party leaders, to ask for compensation to be paid now. The Prime Minister has refused. I then wrote to the two Conservative party leadership candidates on 21 June, because they are making huge spending commitments, but I have not had the courtesy of a response. Perhaps the Minister could help me with that.

Mr Lidington: I am happy to try to prompt a response to the hon. Lady’s letter. She will know that the Department of Health and Social Care has announced a major uplift in the financial support available to beneficiaries of the infected blood scheme in England, and talks are now going on with the devolved Governments about trying to get a UK-wide agreement. Questions of legal liability fall therefore to compensation and are expressly a matter for the independent inquiry.¹

Mr Speaker: The Minister’s power and charm will achieve the desired effect, I have no doubt.

¹[Official Report, 22 July 2019, Vol. 663, c. 12MC.]
Topical Questions

T1. [911862] Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Last week the Government responded to Lord Holmes’s independent review of access to public appointments for disabled people. We have accepted in principle all of Lord Holmes’s recommendations and will use them to update our diversity action plan, which is aimed at increasing the number of people from under-represented groups on the boards of public bodies right across the United Kingdom.

Scott Mann: Cornish minority status was granted in 2014. The Minister will be aware that the Office for National Statistics is resisting giving Cornish people the ability to recognise as Cornish on the census. The six Cornish MPs will be submitting an amendment to the census Bill. Will the Minister apply pressure on the ONS to ensure that Cornish people can recognise as Cornish?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): I recognise the passion with which Cornwall’s champions in this House put the county’s case, but the Government will be guided by the ONS’s recommendations to Government and Parliament regarding the demand for particular questions in the next census.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): This morning’s Committee on Climate Change report should make stark reading for the Cabinet Office, which has a responsibility to co-ordinate the cross-governmental response to climate change. What steps is the Department taking to meet the climate change demands on the country?

Mr Lidington: As the hon. Lady knows, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy leads within Government on climate change matters, but the Government have a good record of delivery, having overseen a cut in emissions of more than 42% since 1990 and with the United Kingdom being the first member of the G7 to sign up to a legally binding net zero target.

T2. [911863] Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): The Committee on Climate Change today sent a stark warning to Government over their abject failure to take urgent action and cut emissions fast enough. As Greenpeace said, the fire alarm has been sounded, but the Government have gone back to sleep. So when will the Government get on, show that they are serious about this, and take urgent action across every single Department on this matter?

Mr Lidington: I just wish that the Labour party had been less grudging in its response to the net zero target, which was a historic step by the Government, endorsing explicitly a recommendation from the independent Committee on Climate Change. I was in south Wales just over a week ago, and I talked there to businesses and scientists who are working at the sharp end to deliver emissions reduction technologies that will make a real difference. We should all, regardless of our politics, get behind that work, welcome the achievements we have made so far and commit ourselves to future change too.

T3. [911864] Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): According to the recent Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission report on elitist Britain, there has been a 4% increase in privately educated permanent secretaries. With the civil service already massively unrepresentative of society, does the Minister agree that that figure should be going down rather than up?

Mr Lidington: I think the most important thing is that we encourage as many people as possible from the most diverse backgrounds as possible to enter the civil service and that we mentor them through, but at the end of the day it should be ability to do the job that wins out. Frankly, that matters more to the public interest than which school somebody’s parents sent them to.

T4. [911865] Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster explain what plans the Government have to increase support for small and medium-sized enterprises through Government procurement?

Mr Lidington: The Committee on Climate Change today sent a stark warning to Government over their abject failure to take urgent action and cut emissions fast enough. As Greenpeace said, the fire alarm has been sounded, but the Government have gone back to sleep. So when will the Government get on, show that they are serious about this, and take urgent action across every single Department on this matter?

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T5. [911866] David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): We shall be leaving the European Union on 31 October. May I therefore ask the Constitution Minister if he will update the guidance on the flying of flags so that the European Union emblem no longer takes precedence over the national flags of Canada, America, Australia and New Zealand?

Mr Lidington: I think the most important thing is that we encourage as many people as possible from the most diverse backgrounds as possible to enter the civil service and that we mentor them through, but at the end of the day it should be ability to do the job that wins out. Frankly, that matters more to the public interest than which school somebody’s parents sent them to.

Mr Speaker: One sentence. Michael Fabricant.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The 5G testbed in the west midlands is working with the car industry in Coventry and with the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham. Will my right hon. Friend commend the work of the Mayor of the West Midlands, who brought the 5G testbed there, and visit the system?
Mr Lidington: I am delighted to congratulate Andy Street, the Mayor of the West Midlands, on that initiative. It is a telling example of the importance of business and academic professionals working closely together, and I would be delighted to accept my hon. Friend’s invitation.

T4. [911865]2002 Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The Department’s response to the cross-party Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport report on electoral reform does not display the level of urgency required. Will the Minister convene an urgent cross-party meeting to discuss the reform of electoral law?

Kevin Foster: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be delighted to hear that I was in the other place only last week, meeting Members there on a cross-party basis to discuss electoral funding issues. We have already announced a consultation paper on this, and we will look to achieve what broad cross-party consensus we can.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): On the subject of strengthening the Union, does my hon. Friend share my determination to deliver Brexit and provide a sea of opportunity for fishermen across Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland?

Kevin Foster: We look forward to the powers that will be coming back from Brussels and going to Scotland’s Parliament. Of course, there is one party that opposes that and wants those powers to stay away from the devolved level of government, and that is the Scottish National party.

Mr Speaker: Last but not least, and never forgotten: Laura Smith.

T6. [911868]Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Can the Minister assure the House that the proportion of businesses certified for the Government’s cyber essentials standard is higher than the dismal 4% reported in 2018?

Mr Lidington: I am happy to write to the hon. Lady with the latest figures as we have them, but I can assure her that the work that has been put in place on achieving higher Government cyber-security standards and on outreach to the private and public sectors is having a demonstrable impact on improving our resilience.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [911832]Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 10 July.

The Prime Minister: In fact, we have an excellent record on dealing with climate change as a Government. We outperformed on our first and second carbon budgets, from 2008 to 2017; we are on track to meet the third, and the latest projections suggest that we are on track to deliver more than 90% of our required performance for the fourth and fifth carbon budgets; and we are the first major economy to legislate for net zero emissions by 2050. The UK is leading the world on climate change; I want other countries to follow our example.

Q6. [911837]Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): North Staffordshire used to have one of the most extensive rail networks in the world, but now people in Stoke-on-Trent often have to rely on their cars. Will the Prime Minister join me in my petition to reopen Meir station in my constituency, as the next step to improving our local transport?

The Prime Minister: I know my hon. Friend has been campaigning on this matter for some time and has met Ministers to discuss it. I understand that the area is about to benefit from refurbished modern trains on the Crewe to Derby line from December this year, as part of the new east midlands rail franchise. The Department for Transport will have heard my hon. Friend’s call to reopen the station at Meir, and I know that he will continue to campaign on behalf of all his constituents.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I too regret the resignation of Sir Kim Darroch. I think the comments made about him are beyond unfair and wrong. He has given honourable and good service, and he should be thanked for it. The whole House should join together in deeply regretting his feeling that he has to resign.
I join the Prime Minister in passing condolences to the family of Tammy Minshall, who died providing emergency services to our people.

Many people welcomed the powerful points the Prime Minister made when she was first appointed about burning injustices in Britain. Does she agree that access to justice is vital in order to tackle burning injustices?

**The Prime Minister:** There are many burning injustices and they can be tackled in a variety of ways. That is the action I have taken not just as Prime Minister but as Home Secretary. I will give the right hon. Gentleman one example: the race disparity audit, which shines a light on inequality in public services, is enabling us to put into place action that helps to ensure that people across this country, whatever their background, have access to the public services they need.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** This year marks the 70th anniversary of the Legal Aid and Advice Act 1949. That Act, introduced by the post-war Labour Government, gave all people access to justice, not just the rich, and was an essential pillar of a welfare state and a decent society. The Tory-Lib Dem coalition slashed legal aid in 2013 and the results are clearly very unfair. The number of law centres and other not-for-profit legal aid providers has more than halved, and there are now legal aid deserts across the country. Does the Prime Minister think that has helped or hindered the fight against burning injustices?

**The Prime Minister:** The point I was making to the right hon. Gentleman, which he seems to fail to recognise, is that the whole question of burning injustice is not about just access to the legal system. It is about how we support those who have been denied basic dignity.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Some people have very short memories; the Tory-Lib Dem coalition cut legal aid but also brought in fees for employment tribunals. The then Minister for Employment relations, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), piloted that through the House. Since that time, my union, Unison, took the Government to court and won, and, as a result, employment tribunal fees were cancelled. The cuts to legal aid affect people such as Marcus, a 71-year-old on pension credit, a leaseholder who is threatened with being evicted. He says:

“I’ve paid taxes and national insurance all my life. How is it right that when I’m being bullied and threatened with homelessness, the state won’t protect me?”

He goes on to say:

“I’ve been working to 2 am every night for the past six months collecting evidence… I’ve got no idea if I’ve prepared my evidence correctly.”

Doesn’t Marcus, trying to save his own home, deserve legal aid, in order to get proper representation in a court and be fairly heard?

**The Prime Minister:** Obviously I recognise the concerns that Marcus has about taking his case, but the right hon. Gentleman might reflect on the fact that a quarter of the Ministry of Justice’s budget is spent on legal aid. We spent £1.6 billion on legal aid last year. We are committing to ensuring that people can access the help they need into the future, but that is only one part of the picture. We have published a plan for legal support, to maintain and improve access to support for those in need, and we are conducting a fundamental review of criminal legal aid fee schemes, which will consider criminal legal aid throughout the life cycle of a criminal case. So there are aspects of this issue that we are indeed looking at, but it is important that we ensure that we are careful with the provisions we make for legal aid, and as I say, a quarter of the MOJ budget is spent on legal aid.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Just so that everyone is aware of this, Labour is committed to restoring legal aid funding for family law, housing, benefit appeals, judicial review preparation and inquests, and real action on immigration cases. And, as we announced yesterday, we will end the leasehold scandal.

The Department for Work and Pensions is failing disabled people. The MOJ has spent tens of millions of pounds each year defending appeals, over two thirds of which were won by the claimants. Rather than spending millions defending incorrect and often immoral decisions, would that money not have been better used increasing poverty-level benefits and providing legal aid to disabled people wrongly denied their basic dignity?

**The Prime Minister:** I am not going to take any lectures from the right hon. Gentleman on what this Government have done for disabled people. We are committed to tackling the injustices facing disabled people, so that everyone can go as far their talents will take them. Our spending on support for disabled people and people with health conditions is at a record high. We are seeing many more people—over 900,000 more disabled people—in work as a result of what this Government have done. If he is really interested in tackling injustices, let me tell him that the biggest injustice he should tackle is in his own Labour party—he should deal with antisemitism.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** My party is totally committed to eliminating racism in any form and antisemitism in any form. While the Prime Minister is about the lecturing, how about the investigation into Islamophobia in her party?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Mr Bowie, you are as noisy as your illustrious late namesake, David Bowie, but, sadly, nothing like as melodic, my dear chap.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** This is one lecture the Prime Minister might not want to take from me, but she might care to listen to what the United Nations said when it condemned the UK Government for their “grave” and “systematic violations” of the rights of disabled people. The Windrush scandal has resulted in the Government having to allocate £200 million in compensation to people wrongly deported from this country and denied services, with their lives totally pulled apart. These are people who have given their life to this country and our services. Does she think that scandal would have happened if legal aid had not been slashed by the Government and so many of those people had not been denied any representation in court?
The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman really needs to think rather more carefully about his arguments. Let us look at the issue of people of the Windrush generation. I have apologised for what happened to people of the Windrush generation. I have been very clear that they are British, they are here and they have a right to be here, and that these things should not have happened. We have apologised for the mistakes that have been made.

The right hon. Gentleman raises issues relating to people who were incorrectly deported. The initial historical review looked at around 11,800 detentions and removals and identified 18 people who were most likely to have been wrongly deported or removed. Of those, six were removed or detained under the last Labour Government.

The way the right hon. Gentleman talks, we would think he was a man of principle, but what do we actually see from him? Labour policy is to ban non-disclosure agreements, but his staff have to sign them. He was an anti-racist; now he ignores antisemitism. He has been a Eurosceptic all his life; now he backs remain. He is truly living up to the words of Marx: “Those are my principles, and if you don’t like them, well, I have others”.

Jeremy Corbyn rose—

The Prime Minister: I know the right hon. Gentleman is keen to get to the Dispatch Box when the name Marx is mentioned. I was merely going to point out to him that those were the words not of Karl but of Groucho.

Jeremy Corbyn: Coming from the Prime Minister who created the hostile environment that brought about the Windrush scandal, who ordered “Go home” vans to drive around London, who refuses to acknowledge Islamophobia in her own party, and whose party consorts with racist and antisemites in the European Parliament and sucks up to those Governments across Europe, we do not need those kinds of lectures.

One legal aid firm said:

“We see people more desperate and in more extreme need than they were five years ago, and there is nowhere to send them. Those people are invisible to the system.”

That is a denial of people’s basic rights. The United Nations says that legal aid cuts have

“overwhelmingly affected the poor and people with disabilities”. Without equal access to justice, there is no justice. Today, in modern Britain, millions are denied justice because they do not have the money. Isn’t that a disgrace? Isn’t that a burning injustice?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman may do his best to ignore the antisemitism in his party, but I think—[HON. MEMBERS: “Answer the question!”] I think he should listen to the words of the former Labour party general secretary, the noble Lord Triesman, who said:

“We may one day be the party of anti-racism once again but it certainly isn’t today.”

The right hon. Gentleman has asked questions about injustice; let me tell him about an injustice. It is an injustice when you force people who are working hard day and night to earn an income for their family to pay more taxes because of a Labour party economic policy in government that led to the destruction of our economy. What do we see from the Labour party? You earn more; they want you to pay more tax. You buy a home; they want you to pay more tax. You want to lease something to your children; they want you to pay more tax—Labour’s £9 billion family tax. Labour used to have a slogan of “Education, education, education”; now, it is just “Tax, tax, tax. Injustice, injustice, injustice.”

Q8. [911839] Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I am a Unionist with every fibre of my being, which is why I was so aghast to hear Nicola Sturgeon’s colleagues talking about their wish to railroad through an independence referendum without a section 30 order—at a time when public services in Scotland are mismanaged and need that desperate resource, and with an economy that has stagnated. They are continually pursuing policies that cut off the circulation of our United Kingdom at Berwick, and not because they are in the interests of Scotland. Will the Prime Minister join me in condemning this illegal referendum approach and push the SNP to prioritise the areas that are actually in the interests of the people of Scotland?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The SNP promised people in Scotland in 2014 that the independence referendum was a once-in-a-generation vote. Now it is laying the foundation for another vote in just 18 months’ time. SNP Members often claim—they stand up and claim it here in this House—that Scotland is being ignored. It is being ignored by an SNP Government, obsessed with another referendum against the wishes of a clear majority of Scots. I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend that people in Scotland want a Scottish Government who focus on improving their schools, improving their health service and improving their economy—not one obsessed by separation.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I must say, every time the Prime Minister speaks in Scotland, our vote goes up.

Today is Srebrenica Memorial Day. I trust that everyone in this House will want to recognise the unbelievable sacrifice that so many faced. Yesterday, I met some of the survivors of genocide. We must do all we can to make sure that we call out the genocide-deniers, and that we learn the lessons from man’s inhumanity to man that we witnessed in the continent of Europe. Never again should that happen in Europe, or anywhere else.

May I join the Prime Minister in her words to Kim Darroch? It is a pity that the former Foreign Secretary, the candidate for leadership of the Tory party, did not stand up for our leading diplomat in the United States yesterday.

I also pay tribute to Winnie Ewing, who has her 90th birthday today. She is the only parliamentarian to sit in this House, in the Scottish Parliament and in the European Parliament. We remember the words of Winnie:

“Stop the world, Scotland wants to get on.”

Mark Carney has said that the UK economy does not appear to be growing. Danny Blanchflower, one of the few to predict the financial crisis in 2008, has said:

“The early evidence suggests the UK is already in a recession.”
The dark clouds of Brexit are with us. Will the Prime Minister continue to ignore all the warning signs of recession?

The Prime Minister: First, in relation to Srebrenica, I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Every time we see a massacre of this sort, we hope that humanity will learn from it. Sadly, all too often we see that that is not the case. I was at the Western Balkans summit last Friday in Poland, working with the countries of the western Balkans, encouraging them and working with them to find peaceful ways of working together so that we can ensure that those countries see political stability and prosperity for their people in the future.

The right hon. Gentleman then talked about the state of the UK economy. I am very pleased to see that we actually have the best record in the G7 in terms of growth. We have the longest period of growth of any of the countries in the G7. We also have record numbers of people in employment, a record low in unemployment, and investment in our economy. This is an economy that is doing well, but it could really take off, and it would have done if the right hon. Gentleman had actually voted for Brexit and voted for the deal that we put to this House.

Ian Blackford: Perhaps we should look at the facts: we have record food bank use; Ernst and Young tells us that the Brexit bill so far for financial services companies alone is as much as £4 billion; foreign investment projects into the UK have dropped 14%, the lowest level in six years; car production fell 15.5% in May, the 12th straight month of decline; UK retail sales have experienced their worst June on record; and the near stagnation of the services sector in June is one of the worst performances we have seen over the past decade. We have the evidence. Prime Minister, on how your legacy will be driving the UK economy over the next four years—under a SNP Government in Scotland.

The right hon. Gentleman would have done better to reflect on the facts of the United Kingdom's economy over the past decade. We have the evidence. We have record numbers of people in employment, record low in unemployment, and investment in our economy. This is an economy that is doing well, but it could really take off, and it would have done if the right hon. Gentleman had actually voted for Brexit and voted for the deal that we put to this House.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about the car industry; I am sorry that, in referencing that industry, he did not reference the fact that in the last week we have seen the announcement by Jaguar Land Rover that it is going to manufacture electric vehicles in Castle Bromwich, preserving 2,700 jobs at the plant. We have also seen BMW announce that it is going to manufacture the electric Mini in its Oxford plant, preserving 5,000 jobs in that plant.

The right hon. Gentleman knows that he could have taken no deal off the table by voting for the deal. But if he wants to talk about economic forecasts and the future of economies, perhaps he should give a little more reflection to the fact that the forecasts for Scotland show that its economy will grow more slowly than the rest of the United Kingdom over the next four years—under an SNP Government in Scotland.

Q9. [911840] Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Cross-party work can be immensely beneficial, especially when delivering on the people's priorities. Does my right hon. Friend agree that an excellent example is Farnworth and Kearsley First’s work with the Bolton Council leadership—which is now Conservative—to win an award for a future high streets fund? We can all agree that our high streets are the keystone of our local communities.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an absolutely excellent point. What we have seen in the example that he has cited is the benefit of cross-party working. This can be immensely good—immensely positive—for local communities. I am delighted to hear that Bolton Council’s bid for Farnworth town centre has been successful in progressing to the next phase of the future high streets fund. My hon. Friend is right: we believe in our high streets—that is why we have created the high streets fund. This cross-party working by Conservative-led Bolton Council has shown what can be achieved.

Q2. [911833] Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Children as young as seven have been groomed and exploited to commit crimes, such as placing drugs inside their bodies to move them across the country, yet they are often treated as criminals, not victims. There is also a sad lack of support for them: two thirds of councils have no plan for tackling this kind of exploitation and just half collect the data on those at risk.

If the Prime Minister wants to secure any legacy on tackling modern-day slavery, will she instruct the Home Secretary to develop a cross-departmental strategy to tackle this despicable crime and end the criminalisation of these vulnerable youngsters?

The Prime Minister: We are indeed continuing our work on tackling modern slavery, I was pleased that the Government responded yesterday to the independent review of the Modern Slavery Act; we have taken on board the majority of the recommendations from that independent review. That includes, of course, looking at the independent child guardians—a concept that we created—and how they can give support.

The issue that the hon. Gentleman references of the criminalisation of those forced to undertake criminal activities was addressed in the Modern Slavery Act when it was put through this House, but we continue to look at what more we can do to ensure that we are bringing an end to that crime—not just in the UK, but internationally as well.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Due to extreme pressure on services across Cornwall, leaders of our health and care services have declared a critical incident. The pressure has impacted on the Royal Cornwall Hospital in particular. That is extremely worrying for all families across Cornwall who rely on Treliske. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that she will do everything she can to enable Health Ministers to support leaders in Cornwall to resolve the situation as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, this is a very important issue for my hon. Friend and her constituents. We are aware of the issues at the Royal Cornwall Hospital, and we know that the hospital is taking steps to rectify them. Of course, last winter Cornwall Council was supported with over £2 million of additional funding to help alleviate the pressures on the local NHS trust, but I can assure my hon. Friend that my right hon. Friend the
Secretary of State for Health is going to meet MPs to discuss this matter and recognises the importance of this issue for my hon. Friend’s constituents.

Q3. [91834] Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): In the run-up to the 2010 general election, the Conservatives in my constituency claimed that no children’s centres would close, and yet, within a matter of months, they were closing them and downgrading those that remained. Now Suffolk County Council is proposing to close half of those that remain, leaving just four full-time children’s centres in Ipswich out of the original nine. So will the Prime Minister tell us what sort of guarantees the Government can give on any future policies that they want the British people to believe?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, we recognise the importance of ensuring that children have access to high-quality care. We have been putting extra money into social care, including for children. But it is also about the sorts of services that are delivered. It is important for us that we have taken a number of steps to improve the facilities that are available for looking after children in communities where those children require that—for example, the standards we have set for social workers. We do see the number of children’s services that are rated “outstanding” growing across the country. I think that is important; that is a Government who are actually looking at the issues that matter to parents and to children.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): My right hon. Friend may be aware that the live animal export season out of Ramsgate port is, shamefully, in full swing, with a further shipment due out tomorrow. Does she agree that long-distance live animal exports, particularly across the channel to an unknown future, should not form part of any future post-Brexit agricultural policy, when we can be free of single market strictures that treat animals as mere goods?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, my hon. Friend has raised an issue that I know is of concern to a lot of people. We are committed to maintaining our high standards on animal welfare, and food standards, once we have left the European Union. We will be replacing, of course, the EU’s common agricultural policy. What we will be doing is enabling ourselves, by being outside the European Union, to take decisions for ourselves, so we will be able to determine needs. That is an important first step towards a better future for farming—for our natural world. It is important for us to be able to do that and to maintain the high standards and quality standards for which we have a very good reputation across the world.

Q4. [91835] Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Head teachers and parents in Bristol South tell me that the lack of schools funding is impacting significantly on children with special educational needs, in addition to the wider impact on teaching across schools. Both the Prime Minister’s potential successors now acknowledge that schools are underfunded and have promised more money. Does she agree that that welcome new funding should be targeted at our most vulnerable children?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady knows, we are already putting more money into our schools. We are already putting more funding into special educational needs. I recognise the importance of ensuring that special educational needs are properly catered for, and that the needs of those children can be properly supported. That is why I am proud of the fact that we have been putting more money into our schools. What is also important, of course, for schools is what standards of education are provided within those schools—[Interruption.] Well, the hon. Lady talks about teaching. Yes, teaching is an important element of that, and we thank all our teachers, both in mainstream schools and in special educational needs schools, for the work that they do, day in and day out. I am pleased that we are seeing improved standards in our schools. That means more young people, whether they are in mainstream schools or with special education needs, having an opportunity to go far in life.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): The consequences of not leaving the European Union are profound, from the loss of trust in our democracy and institutions to the economic impact of civil unrest. Can my right hon. Friend help to dispel the myth peddled by some in this House that we could simply go back to the way things were, and could she share what assessment the Government have made of these risks?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that it is imperative for this House to deliver on the vote of the British people in 2016. I have said that on many occasions, standing at this Dispatch Box and elsewhere. I think it is important that we do that. We could already have done that—I am sorry, but I am going to return to this theme. We could already have done that, had this House supported the deal. It will be up to my successor to find a way through this to get a majority in this Parliament, but I agree that it is important that we do deliver trust in politics by saying to people, “We gave you the choice, you told us your decision, and we will now deliver on it.”

Q5. [91836] Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Vauxhall Motors in my constituency has a future if we can avoid crashing out of the EU without a deal, but my constituents are very concerned to hear in recent weeks the Prime Minister’s potential successors talk up the prospects of a no-deal Brexit. Will she tell them both in no uncertain terms that if they pursue that option, they will consign thousands of jobs in my constituency and beyond to history?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman could have voted to save jobs in his constituency—[Interruption.] It is no good Labour MPs trying to deny this. They had the opportunity three times to vote to leave with a deal, and three times they rejected it.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Many of my constituents deeply oppose the Mayor of London’s plans to build over station car parks at High Barnet, Cockfosters and Finchley Central. Will the Prime Minister urge the Mayor to drop those plans, which would only make life harder for long-suffering commuters who just want to get to work and provide for their families?
The Prime Minister: I am sure my right hon. Friend appreciates the emphasis that the Government have put on more homes being built. We want to meet the ambition for 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s—it is a top priority for us—and London is a crucial part of achieving that. While it is important to get the homes built, it is also vital that the impact on the local community is properly assessed when planning decisions are made. We want to see more homes. They need to be built in the right place, and local concerns need to be properly taken into account.

Q7. [911838] Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The all-party parliamentary group on electoral campaigning transparency is fairly new, but it is already very clear to us that something is rotten in the state of UK. The Prime Minister is legacy-shopping, so let me help. Will she commit to a clean-up of our election campaigning, as a truly dignified legacy upon leaving office? She has refused to reveal her Government’s spending with Cambridge Analytica and AggregateIQ. Before she leaves, will she change tack and start a new era in which elections and referendums cannot be so easily rigged?

The Prime Minister: I have answered the question in relation to Cambridge Analytica on a number of occasions, and it has been answered in writing to the hon. Lady by the appropriate Minister. Elections in this country are not rigged, as she puts it. The referendum was not rigged. These are the views of the British people who go to the ballot box and put their votes forward. If she is so interested in ensuring that democracy is respected, she needs to ensure that she votes for a deal, so that we can deliver on the 2016 referendum.

Robert Courts ( Witney) (Con): The Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust is an academy schools trust that operates across the Witney and Maidenhead constituencies. Will the Prime Minister join me in celebrating its success, such as at Holyport Primary School in her constituency and “outstanding” rated Brize Norton Primary School in my constituency? Does she agree that that is an example of how academisation can really work in rural constituencies like ours?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust on its success. I am also happy to congratulate Holyport Primary School on the recognition it has received as a good school and Brize Norton Primary in his constituency, which was rated outstanding. It shows that smaller schools in rural areas can provide an excellent quality of education and that the academy movement can provide for those schools and those children. It goes back to the point I made earlier: what matters is the quality of education our children receive, and in Holyport and Brize Norton they are receiving a first-class education.

Q10. [911841] Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): This week, the Stoke-on-Trent Hardship Commission published its report, which demonstrated that income, education and employment were the driving factors of poverty in our city. I have sent the Prime Minister a copy, and I invite her to read it. Will she use her authority to ensure that further education colleges properly and raising the national living wage for under-25s, so that collectively we can deal with the root causes of poverty?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raised a number of issues. As he will know, I believe that universal credit is a better system than the legacy system we inherited from the last Labour Government. It helps people into the workplace and ensures that, as they earn more, they are able to keep more of that money. On the back of the Augar review, which looked at post-18 education, I have indicated that I think it is important that we ensure that our further education colleges are funded and are able to provide an alternative route through education for those young people for whom that is right.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in commending the hard work and dedication of staff at West Cumberland Hospital, the Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, the working together group and my fantastic community for their innovation and commitment, which, in addition to the over £100 million of investment from this Conservative Government, mean that consultant-led maternity services will be staying open for future generations?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend: I know she has been campaigning long and hard on that issue on behalf of her constituents. We welcome the clinical commissioning group’s decision to retain those consultant-led services in west Cumbria. Better Births has established that personalised care means safer care, and greater choice should be made available to women accessing maternity services. They should be able to make decisions about the support they need during birth, and where they would prefer to give birth. I think that a good decision has been taken, and I once again congratulate my hon. Friend on the campaign she has run.

Q11. [911843] Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s Government have once more lost in court to a public sector union, the Fire Brigades Union, over pensions. While fighting this case, the Government penalised all public sector workers by suspending pension valuations, meaning poorly paid frontline civil servants, many in the Public and Commercial Services Union, are not only being denied the money they are owed, but are making monthly pension overpayments of 2%. When will the Prime Minister give these loyal workers the money that is rightfully theirs?

The Prime Minister: Of course, as the hon. Lady has made clear, there has been a case recently in the courts in relation to public sector pensions—on particular aspects of public sector pensions. We will of course have to look at the implications of that judgment across public sector pensions, and it is right that we take our time and that the Government make their decisions based on that careful consideration.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I am extremely proud to represent a constituency with world-leading defence manufacturers that underpin our country’s credibility as an ally and strategic partner. Does my
right hon. Friend agree with me that, as we contemplate our fantastic future role in the world as an independent, self-governing and sovereign nation, the UK must continue to be a credible partner and ally in an increasingly dangerous world? Does she also agree with me that her successor should commit our country to a fully funded defence budget, so that we can remain a tier 1 military power?

The Prime Minister: I commend our world-leading defence manufacturers. They are an important industry, not only in creating and supporting jobs here in the United Kingdom, but in terms of significant exports. It is important that, as that independent, self-governing, sovereign nation, we are a good partner and ally in an uncertain world. We always have been that, and we will continue to be that. We continue to meet the NATO requirement of spending 2% of our GDP on defence. We are one of the few NATO countries that does that. We are the biggest European contributor to NATO, and we are the second biggest contributor to NATO. We are a leading military power, and we will remain a leading military power.

Q12. [911844] Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): During the right hon. Lady’s premiership, we have marked 100 years since the armistice of the great war, 100 years of women’s suffrage, 70 years of the NHS, the treaty of Rome and the universal declaration on human rights, and 20 years of devolution, and a week after landing, one of the greatest human endeavours ever accomplished. In 50 or 100 years’ time, will history not judge Brexit and her legacy to have been one giant leap backwards for the people of these islands?

The Prime Minister: No.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): The Eden Project wants to come to the north of England—to Morecambe. I would like to have a meeting with the Chancellor and the Prime Minister to talk about putting Eden into Morecambe to make sure it is the jewel in the north-west that it should be.

The Prime Minister: I was not previously aware that the Eden Project wanted to come to Morecambe. I am happy to arrange suitable conversations for my hon. Friend so that he can make that case.

Q13. [911845] Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): A dental practice in my constituency has this week been forced to close due to unfair NHS dental contracts, leaving yet another neighbourhood without any dental service at all. Residents who urgently need care have had to get treatment from Dentaid, a charity set up to provide dental services in the world’s most deprived countries. Does the Prime Minister accept that the real decay is in the values of a society that does not provide free healthcare to all of its citizens, and that it is her Government who are responsible? When will she keep her promises to my constituents, and guarantee that all of them, wherever they live, can access NHS dental care when they need it?

The Prime Minister: My understanding was that the CCGs have a responsibility for ensuring the provision of dental care in their area, but I will ask the Department of Health and Social Care to look at that specific case.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I commend the Prime Minister for her leadership in ensuring that this Government have legislated on the net-zero carbon emissions target for 2050. I am sure she would agree that the next step is to make sure we improve our economy and our living standards, rather than destroying them. I am hosting a conference in my constituency to talk about this issue. Will she agree to be the guest speaker?

The Prime Minister: First of all, I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that such initiatives at a local level are an important part of the wider work we are doing on climate change and on making sure we leave the environment in a better state for the next generation.

I thank my hon. Friend for his invitation, and I will look to see how busy my diary is in the autumn. [Interruption.] Well, you never know. I may have a bit more free time in the autumn. This is an important issue, and I commend him for taking this initiative at a local level, because raising awareness of climate change at a local level is important for all of us.

Mr Speaker: It is certainly an innovative approach to the issue of invitations, upon which the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) is doubtless to be complimented.

Q14. [911846] Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): There are nearly 50 dog attacks on UK postal workers every week, which is why I back the Communication Workers Union’s dog awareness week campaign this week. I hope the Prime Minister will join me in both supporting dog awareness week and in recognising that the law is not currently fit for purpose.

Will the Prime Minister support Royal Mail and Parcelforce postal workers by launching an independent review of the effectiveness of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 and of dog control more widely?

The Prime Minister: A number of steps have been taken over the years to legislate in relation to dangerous dogs, and we all recognise the problems that some postal workers face, including being subjected to attacks by dogs when they are just going about their business—going about a job that is of benefit to the people of our constituencies.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): This week has been a game changer in the politics of Northern Ireland, with this place legislating on devolved issues and with the sad death of Sir Anthony Hart. Sir Anthony chaired the historical institutional abuse inquiry, which investigated the rape and sexual abuse of thousands of the most vulnerable children in Northern Ireland between 1922 and 1995. Some were raped over a period of months, and some over decades.

Will the Prime Minister commit to bringing forward legislation before the summer recess to compensate those victims and to give them the justice they deserve?

The Prime Minister: First, I would like to pass on my condolences to the family and friends of Sir Anthony, who did an excellent job in the Hart inquiry of shining light on some horrific incidents that took place in Northern Ireland. Obviously, this issue was addressed
by an amendment made to the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill last night. As the Bill passes through Parliament, the Government will look carefully at these issues.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Prime Minister’s last major duty will be to recommend her successor. How does she plan to satisfy herself that the next leader of the Conservative party will command a majority in the House of Commons?

The Prime Minister: The next leader of the Conservative party will be an excellent Prime Minister, whichever candidate wins, and they will ensure that they take this country through Brexit, deliver on the 2016 referendum, ignore the attempts by the right hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends to try to go back on the democratic vote of the British people, and lead us forward to a brighter future.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): Early diagnosis is key to further improvements in the survival rates for breast cancer. With that in mind, is the Prime Minister aware of the change and check campaign being run by Helen Addis, a member of the ITV show “Lorraine” team, and will she join me in congratulating Helen on that excellent initiative, which is already saving lives, especially at a time when she is going through her own breast cancer journey, as she describes it?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue and I recognise the work that he has done on it. I will look carefully at the specifics of the issue that he has raised and respond to him in writing.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): A Nottinghamshire woman whose husband is in prison for her attempted murder was yesterday served with a letter from his lawyers demanding £100,000 as a settlement in their divorce. She would have to sell her family home to give him that money, and it is simply wrong. Would the Prime Minister support a change in the law to remove automatic entitlement to joint assets in such cases?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady invites me to comment on a matter that is currently before the courts and will be determined through our justice system. We have careful legislation on divorce and the associated arrangements, and it is right that this is a case that is obviously, as she says, going through the courts.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): North Dorset is predominantly an agricultural constituency. Does my right hon. Friend agree that were we to leave on WTO terms, it is likely to be RIP for British agriculture?

The Prime Minister: It is incumbent on all of us as we look to the future to ensure that we take into account the needs of all parts of our country, of all industries and of all sectors of employment. I continue to believe that the deal that was negotiated, which would indeed have ensured the continuation of our agricultural sector, was the right way forward. Post Brexit we will be able to establish our own rules in relation to support for the farming industry in the United Kingdom, which will be to our benefit.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): My constituent Lizanne Zietsman, who has made her home on the island of Arran with her husband, has been told by the Home Office that she must leave the UK by Friday 12 July. Arran residents are understandably angry and upset at the prospect of losing a valued member of their community and a petition has garnered more than 16,000 signatures in a few days. Will the Prime Minister urgently intervene and instruct the immigration Minister to meet me so that we can ensure that Lizanne can continue to contribute to, live and work on the island of Arran?

The Prime Minister: We have a set of immigration rules and it is right that the Home Office enforces those immigration rules, but I will ensure that the immigration Minister responds to the hon. Lady on the particular case.
Universal Credit Fraud

12.53 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) (Urgent Question):
To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to make a statement on the universal credit fraud that has been uncovered by the BBC.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): Universal credit is now in all jobcentres, with around 2 million people claiming this benefit. In accordance with our approach to test and learn while rolling out universal credit, we have made several changes to the advances claimants may receive while they wait for their first payment. If they need it, people can now claim an advance from day one of their claim. They can apply in person, by phone or online—a facility we introduced in July 2018. On Monday, the BBC published an article that described cases where fraudulent applications had been made to acquire advance payments. The figures quoted are unverified.

Those who defraud the benefits system take taxpayers’ money from the poorest people in society. We have a dedicated team of investigators working on this issue, and are working with the Crown Prosecution Service to ensure that, where appropriate, perpetrators will be prosecuted; we have in fact already secured our first successful prosecution. We frequently raise awareness among frontline staff to be vigilant to fraud risks, and raise concerns where appropriate.

I remind hon. Members, and their constituents, that DWP staff will never approach a claimant on social media, or in the street, to discuss their benefit claim. Claimants should never give out personal or financial information to a third party unless they are certain they are working on behalf of claimants, while at another jobcentre to be vigilant to fraud risks, and raise concerns where appropriate.

Neil Gray: I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to Mr Speaker for granting the urgent question. I am also grateful to the BBC whose investigative journalism uncovered this scandalous situation. The cases we have seen in the news are truly alarming and heart-breaking. The Minister says that the figures are unverified, but according to the BBC the figures come from a member of his jobcentre team, who released them to the BBC. One jobcentre reported that a third of all claims are the result of such scams by criminals operating on behalf of claimants, while at another £100,000 a month is being lost to criminals and not going to claimants who actually need it.

Those people already desperately need help. They have been pushed into serious debt by the actions of those appalling scammers and it is clear from the leaked communications that staff, and perhaps Ministers, in the Department for Work and Pensions were aware that the scams were happening. It is also worth pointing out that, from the cases that we have heard about, claimants have been doubly hit by their money being stolen by the scammers and then having to pay back the advances on which they felt, as we all know—is in fact a loan. The SNP has consistently condemned the system of advance payments and feels that it is counterintuitive. The advance payment needs to stop being a loan.

The BBC has uncovered what we have been talking about for years—people being left in desperate straits by cuts to universal credit, which have seen increased food bank use and, now, people being driven unwittingly to criminals to help them to get the money they need to survive. The cases highlight the failure of universal credit to protect those who most desperately need the support that it is supposed to offer. Can the Minister not see that until universal credit is properly fixed, such desperation will continue?

The DWP says that it has already secured its first conviction, so it already knew about this situation. The Minister was quoted in a BBC article on 20 May about another heart-breaking individual case. Why did the Department not identify the loophole and attempt to correct it sooner? Why was a statement not made to the House so that we could have helped to advise our constituents? What is the scale of the fraud? When were Ministers informed? Has this activity gone unnoticed or unchecked because of the 21% cut in staff numbers reported by The Independent? Of course, Social Security Scotland has a clear commitment that when an error or fraud occurs that is not the fault of a claimant, they will not be penalised or out of pocket. Will the Minister follow that lead for the people who have been affected?

The Government’s initial response, and the Minister’s response today, has put the onus on the claimants, and that is wrong. They cannot wash their hands of this responsibility. What will the Minister now do to ensure that those affected are not left out of pocket, those who have ripped them off are brought to justice and practices are put in place to ensure that it cannot happen again?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who has taken a proactive approach to this important issue. I share his comment that it is alarming. These are criminal actions by what are, frankly speaking, parasites who target some of the most vulnerable people in society. I give the House an assurance that the Department will do everything in its power to protect those vulnerable people, and I am sure that all hon. Members would support that.

There have been 4.4 million universal credit claims and, as it stands, 42,000 staff referrals for fraud have been made, which is less than 1% of all universal credit claims. That said, each and every one of those has the potential to be a serious case. We take them seriously, they are all fully investigated and, where appropriate, we will take action. We are in talks with the CPS on several cases and, as I have said, we have already had a successful prosecution. We will look at each of the cases raised and, where it is clear that the claimant is an innocent victim who has been targeted, there would be an expectation that they would not pay the money back.

I refute, however, the broader point about universal credit. We will spend £2 billion more than the legacy system, and I very much welcome the introduction of the help to claim scheme to provide an independent additional tier of support across the jobcentre network, provided by Citizens Advice.

We are actively making improvements to the system. We are using more real time information. We are working with data suppliers. We are using more data matching. We are using the DWP landlord portal to verify housing costs and we are developing risk models to help to assess confidence in information that is provided. There
is a balance, however. In debates we have had in recent years, hon. Members have rightly pushed to make advance payments available as quickly as possible. It is the balance between being able to support people who need funding—under current rules, a vulnerable claimant in need of financial assistance can access that funding on the first day of their claim—while ensuring that we have 100% confidence that the money goes to the right person.

We are not complacent. We take this matter very seriously. We have a team of 120 staff dedicated to working on advanced payments. As I said, every case referred to us is taken very seriously and we will use the full force of the law where appropriate.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): There are people offering help to those applying for benefits in exchange for a cut of what they subsequently receive—sometimes a very big cut. Will my hon. Friend consider outlawing that activity, and consider a public awareness campaign to warn people against this harmful exploitation and to signpost people to free, qualified benefits advisers such as Citizens Advice?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend, who works tirelessly in this area. This is yet another example of a really helpful, constructive and proactive suggestion. I know the Secretary of State is very keen to see that brought forward, so that is a big yes from us. In terms of raising awareness, we are increasing training and guidance for frontline staff. Working in partnership with Action Fraud, we will be doing further national and regional press releases, social media and stakeholder engagement to raise awareness of the potential risk of fraud and of how to report it as quickly as possible.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The Government claimed that universal credit would reduce social security fraud and error by £1.3 billion. Now we know that they are clearly failing to do that, just as they are failing to protect people from poverty. The Government’s own figures show that the rate of fraud in universal credit is far higher than the rate of fraud in the benefits it is replacing. According to the BBC, fraudulent applications for advances are leaving claimants scammed and at risk of destitution, costing millions of pounds of public money.

Labour Members have repeatedly highlighted the hardship that the five-week wait for an initial payment causes, pushing many people into debt and rent arrears or forcing them to turn to food banks to survive. The Government’s stock answer is that people can apply for advances—indeed, on 28 March, the Secretary of State said that he felt the system of advances was working well. What does she think of it now?

When the National Audit Office highlighted delays in paying people last year, the right hon. Lady’s predecessor claimed that they were largely due to the need to verify identity. In June 2018, she said:

"Verification is a necessary part of any benefits system...We need to make sure we are paying the right people the right amount of money."

How is it, then, that advances have been made to claimants with names such as Lisa Simpson, Bart Simpson and Homer Simpson?

Will the Minister tell the House how much the Government estimate this fraudulent activity is costing the taxpayer? How does that cost compare with the cost of abolishing the five-week wait? What action are the Government now taking to make sure they verify correctly the identity of people who request an advance? What action are the Government taking to support claimants in financial hardship who have clearly been the victim of a scam?

It is clear from this report that advances are not the answer to the five-week wait; they are loans that have to be paid off by claimants—in this case, the victims of scams. The Government must finally listen to the evidence and stop the roll-out of universal credit.

Justin Tomlinson: I am afraid there was a bit of a muddle, mixing the difference between the verification process with advance payments and the main claims for universal credit. As a Government, we take the issue of fraud, error and overpayments seriously. We anticipate that by the time we have full roll-out of universal credit, there will be a reduction of over £1 billion.

Margaret Greenwood: How did Bart Simpson get in there?

Justin Tomlinson: Be patient. I am answering the questions. I can only address one point at a time.

The legacy benefits system was complex. Claimants had to deal with local authorities, HMRC and the DWP. The majority of welfare issues that led to fraud, error or overpayment related to failing to provide information on changes of circumstances. Under the legacy benefits, there was an increased likelihood that people would fail to report changes of circumstances. Universal credit, however, with a single point of contact on a digital interface, makes it easier for claimants to report changes once, and it is easier for us to proactively identify when there are changes. The Government are still on target to see, with the full roll-out of universal credit, a reduction of £1 billion.

We talk about the principle of advance payments, but remember that under legacy benefits at the end of the claim the payment came too soon. We saw that claimants would in many cases be going into work, having spent a long time out of work, being anxious. They were often paid in arrears at work, so would not have access to funding. People who were desperate to work and do the right thing were financially unable to do so. Under universal credit the wait for the money is at the beginning, but with advance payments to bridge that wait. That is vital to ensuring that claimants can transition into work. As I said in my earlier response, it is the need to balance making advances available to claimants quickly and ensuring that payments are paid based on the correct circumstances.

The shadow Secretary of State raised a point about children. When verifying advance payments, we will verify identity, bank accounts, national insurance and, where they are declared a non-UK national, nationality. However, to make sure we can provide support to those who are often the most vulnerable people in society, there is manual checking of housing and children. That is the bit that can take time beyond when we have issued the advance payment, although it would be checked before the actual main claim. As I have said, by using
greater access to real-time information and data matching, we will be able to speed up that process to improve confidence that all claimants for advanced payments are valid.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): It is vital that we crack down on fraud, but will the Minister reassure us that he will protect the vital advance system, which provides a vital financial lifeline for many, many of my constituents?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. It is absolutely vital that we strike the balance between having absolute confidence that money is being correctly paid out and ensuring that we do not leave vulnerable claimants without access to money. Rightly, the Government have listened to the constructive work with stakeholders to ensure that on the first day of a claim, people who need financial support can get it. That is the right thing to do.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): The Department has a risk register to safeguard taxpayers’ money. Is this fraud listed on the risk register?

Justin Tomlinson: I will have to write to the right hon. Gentleman to give him a specific answer. Any case that is referred is treated seriously. We have a dedicated team.—[Interruption.]

[Justin Tomlinson]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Do not shout at the Minister. Members are supposed to ask questions and get answers. Shouting at the Minister is not a part of that, and certainly not while I am sitting here.

Justin Tomlinson: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. We treat every case seriously and we encourage claimants who feel they may be a victim of fraud to report it immediately either directly to jobcentre staff or to Action Fraud, with which we work very closely. I will write to the right hon. Gentleman with a full response.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is obviously really important that people who need benefits should not have to wait for long periods with no money in their pocket. Will my hon. Friend confirm that any new measures to prevent fraud will not prevent our constituents receiving the advance payments they desperately need?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. We must not forget the need to balance making advances available quickly to claimants with important points. We must not lose sight of that.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I think the general public will be incredulous at the level of incompetence around the universal credit system. How can it be possible that, as has been revealed this week, a brand new system is open to grotesque fraud at these levels? Does the Minister seriously expect us to accept it?

Justin Tomlinson: I understand the hon. Lady’s passion on this subject. She is right that we should be doing everything we can to protect vulnerable claimants, but I remind her that there have been 4.4 million universal credit claims, that as it stands today there have been 42,000 referrals, each of them very important, and that to put it in context, since January, every month we have had more than 110,000 requests for advance payments.

We will continue to tighten up the procedures, using real-time information, data matching and the digital platforms, so that we are as robust as we can be, but we must not lose sight of ensuring that vulnerable claimants have access to funding as quickly as possible. Nobody in this House would want people not to be able to access vital financial support.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I have been raising this matter with the Minister for some time, and I welcome the fact that he says that claimants who have made a claim in error, or not made one to their knowledge, will not have to repay the advance. Will he also confirm that those claimants will be allowed to return to their legacy benefits, since they have not made a valid claim for universal credit that they are aware of, and that he will deal with these cases much more quickly than the eight weeks that my very vulnerable constituent has been waiting since I first raised this with him?

Justin Tomlinson: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady, who raised this case with the Minister for Employment, who is responsible for this area. It helped to focus our minds on what more could be done. Every individual will be treated individually, and we will look at the unique circumstances. Where it is clear that they have been a victim of fraud through no fault of their own, no, we would not expect them to pay it back, and yes, we would consider putting them back on to the legacy benefits if they were better off under those.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): There is huge potential for fraud in Northern Ireland, especially around the border areas; in fact, traditionally there has been a lot of social security fraud in those areas. Given that the Northern Ireland Assembly is not meeting at present and therefore the opportunities for scrutiny are limited, what contact has the Minister had with the Department for Communities and the Social Security Agency of Northern Ireland, first to identify whether fraud has been taking place, and secondly to share the methods being used and indicate the steps that the Department is taking, so that those can be used in Northern Ireland?

Justin Tomlinson: On the specifics of the meetings, I will have to write to provide a full answer. However, we are seeing that the cases that are being reported are clustered around particular areas, so there is a real focus in those areas on raising awareness and on targeting often very sophisticated criminal activity. As we bring forward prosecutions, we are finding that that is making a significant difference as a proactive deterrent, and rightly so.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Ministers have made one monumental misjudgment after another with universal credit. The five-week delay is forcing people into debt and dependency on food banks, and now we
learn that it has opened up a bonanza for crooks and fraudsters. Will the Minister now urgently review the catastrophic five-week delay policy?

Justin Tomlinson: As is very clear, any claimant can access financial support from day one where it is needed. We will continue to do all that we can to ensure that everybody benefits from the personal, tailored approach that universal credit offers, which is an integral part of how we are helping to deliver record employment across all regions of this country.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for saying that, where there has been fraudulent activity and claimants have been transferred on to UC, he will consider revoking that. Can he explain and enlighten us all on the testimony of the DWP officials at the most recent Select Committee hearing, who said exactly the opposite?

Justin Tomlinson: This is in relation specifically to the cases of fraud relating to advance payments. I understand the point that the hon. Lady raises, and as ever we will continue to consider all our operational activities to ensure that we continue to deliver much-needed improvements.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The bit about this that I find most difficult is that the whistleblowers were themselves jobcentre staff. What does it say about the culture in the DWP that they felt that they could not come to the Department and had to go to the BBC? My question is simple: did the Department know about any of this or any of these cases before the BBC revealed them, and if so, what did it do about it?

Justin Tomlinson: Yes, of course we did. That is why we have created a team of 120 dedicated members of staff specifically looking at the area of advance payments, why we have been improving training and awareness for both claimants and our frontline staff, why we are working with Action Fraud on our communications strategy and why, rightly, we are using the full force of the law to undertake prosecutions against the parasites who are targeting some of the most vulnerable people in society.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The advance payment fraud was reported in the media as long ago as last November, so whatever has been happening over the past eight months, as the Minister has set out, has simply not been good enough. What would it take for him to conclude that, rather than having this advance payment system, we should take away the five-week wait altogether?

Justin Tomlinson: But the hon. Gentleman would then have the problem of the legacy benefits: at the end of the claim, as someone moved into work, they would not have the run-on of financial support, which would leave a gap, since the majority of people who go into work are paid in arrears. With legacy benefits, we saw that people who were desperate to do the right thing and to unlock their own talent were left with a financial gap at a point when they could not get financial support. It is not a good thing to advocate going back to a legacy system that trapped people in generations of unemployment.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): In responding to the urgent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on this shocking and disgraceful criminal activity, the Minister said that he would do everything he could to “protect vulnerable people in society”. If that is the case, he will be aware that the all-party parliamentary group for terminal illness published its report last week on his Government’s six-month rule, which is causing harm and heartbreak for the dying and their families. Has he read the report’s damning evidence? If so, how can he justify his Government’s continuing with this policy?

Justin Tomlinson: I pay tribute to the work of the APPG and in particular the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), who has campaigned tirelessly with organisations such as the Motor Neurone Disease Association, Marie Curie, Parkinson’s UK and a number of others. As the Minister for Disabled People, I have had a number of meetings on this matter, particularly on the process as somebody claims through the special rules. We are aware of it, and the Secretary of State is personally passionate that we should do everything we can. This is an area in which we will be making significant improvements in the very near future.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): The Minister’s defence of this system increasingly sounds absurd. The reason so many advance payments are necessary is the five-week wait introduced by his Government, which has left people in Wigan completely destitute. It is humiliating to have to beg for money at a time when they most need help, in one of the wealthiest countries in the world. Why does he not just give up on this defence, do the right thing and get rid of this degrading five-week wait?

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Lady simply does not understand what has happened. Under the legacy benefits, people at the end of their claim as they moved into employment would lose the financial support while they waited to be paid, as more often than not people in work are paid in arrears. That left people without financial support. Under universal credit, while there is a five-week wait for the full payments, people can access advance payments.

Those moving from legacy benefits can also benefit from two weeks’ run-on, no-strings-attached additional money from housing benefit. Since the announcement in the Budget, that will also be extended to an additional two weeks of jobseeker’s allowance, income support and employment and support allowance funding. Again, there will be no strings attached to that, so potentially, combined, that means four weeks of additional funding.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The people who have suffered in this, the claimants themselves, had no part in the design of the system, and feel increasingly disempowered by the whole system. The system fraud that is being applied was originally targeted against the banks. The banks have been criticised across this House for their slowness in protecting individual customers, but they are now moving to a stage where they reimburse immediately and then look into any fraud. Why cannot the DWP do the same for each and every claimant, to take the stress of debt away from them?
Justin Tomlinson: I know that the hon. Gentleman is being constructive with his two suggestions. I recognise the point about people engaging with the formal process, which is one reason why I was so passionately supportive of the roll-out of the Help to Claim scheme, putting in a level of independent support across the jobcentre network, particularly for vulnerable claimants, delivered by Citizens Advice. I think that will make a significant difference.

On the broader point about learning lessons within the banking sector—at times, I am afraid, the banking sector had to be dragged and cajoled into doing the right thing—we continue to look at what more can be done. If there are vital lessons that can be taken from that, those are things that we should give serious consideration to.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): This whole situation is immensely concerning. Can the Minister tell us the average and maximum amounts that victims of these scams have lost?

Justin Tomlinson: I cannot at this stage, but we are looking at this as we work through the cases referred. Regardless of the amounts, for each and every victim it is incredibly serious, which is why I reiterate our commitment to do everything in our power to use the full force of the law to target the criminal gangs targeting some of the most vulnerable people in society.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I recently spoke to somebody who works for Jobcentre Plus, who said they felt that universal credit was not designed to support people and that the five-week delay was an example of that. She said that people were turning instead to prostitution and crime to top up their money. In the light of this recent fraud, it is time the Government abolished the five-week wait.

Justin Tomlinson: When we talk to work coaches up and down the country, they tell us that for the first time in generations they feel empowered to deliver a personalised and tailored level of support that treats everybody as an individual. It is an integral part of how we are delivering record employment and doing everything possible to reduce the amount of unclaimed benefits. Under legacy benefits, £2.4 billion a year was being left unclaimed, which for 700,000 of the most vulnerable—Some hon. Members are laughing, but this £2.4 billion amounts to £280 per month on average for some of the most vulnerable in society. By delivering through universal credit we can get support to the people who need it.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): This latest problem exposes the need for greater safeguards for anyone moving on to universal credit, be it through natural or managed migration. The Secretary of State told the Work and Pensions Committee that we would have a vote on those safeguards this month. When will that vote take place?

Justin Tomlinson: We are still considering how we can do this correctly. We are still on track to do the planned managed migration from the summer. We are aware that it needs to come back to the House and will be reporting to the House on it shortly.

Point of Order

1.22 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance. I am sure you are aware that the Cabinet Office has a role in co-ordinating the cross-governmental response to climate change, including the greening government commitments and the UN sustainable development goals, and is responsible for procurement across Government, which obviously relates to sustainability. We have discovered that in Cabinet Office questions this morning the Cabinet Office decided to unilaterally withdraw from the Order Paper one question that had been drawn four times, each having been submitted by a Labour Member. The question was about what steps the Department was taking to facilitate cross-governmental co-operation on tackling climate change. The Opposition had approached the Table Office, and it confirmed that the question would be in order, but the Department decided to unilaterally withdraw it. I seek your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, as to how we can ensure that questions are in order. If the Table Office say they are, is it okay for Departments to unilaterally decide they are not?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and for giving me notice of her intention to raise it. It is not for the Chair to interfere in such matters, of course, but it is for the Chair to make sure that Members are given proper answers to any question they ask and that Departments are accountable to Parliament and therefore to individual Members of Parliament. We really do not need commentary from the Back Benches while I am giving a polite answer. I have never known a point of order to be heckled like that.

The short answer to the hon. Lady’s question is that it is perfectly in order for Departments to decide which Department is responsible for any matter a Member raises, be it in a written question, an oral question, a letter to a Minister, and so on. It is quite normal for a Department to say that a matter cannot be properly answered by one Minister but that it could be answered by another. Even where the Table Office might have said that a matter is properly for one Department, that Department has every right to transfer it to another one.

That said, if the hon. Lady or the four Members who tabled questions they thought would be answered publicly this morning do not get answers in a timely fashion, please come back and draw it to the attention of the Chair, because the Chair is concerned that Members have their questions properly answered. I hope that helps the hon. Lady.
I have had an involvement with Hillsborough families for 29 years. When I was an articled clerk in a legal practice in Liverpool in 1990, my principal was one of the solicitors on the Hillsborough steering committee conducting the original civil litigation. I have known and tried to help the Hillsborough families ever since that time. When I was first elected to this House in 1997, members of the executive committee of the Hillsborough Families Support Group were amongst the first of my constituents to come to me for help, and I have been helping them ever since. Significant progress has been made over these years—very much against the odds, it must be said—so I have a deep understanding of what has happened to them in the past 30 years. The members of the executive committee of the Hillsborough Families Support Group have told me that they support the Bill because they think that it will make a difference to bereaved families in future disasters.

The Hillsborough families’ experience is extreme, but not unique. In the aftermath of disasters, things often seem to go wrong for the families of the deceased and for injured survivors. I have handled other cases myself. The families of the 44 people who were killed when MV Derbyshire sank with all hands in 1980 spent 20 years campaigning to clear their loved ones of blame for what happened. They felt that the British Wreck Commission had blamed alleged poor seamanship for the sinking, thus casting aspersions on the victims—who could not answer back—rather than on the owners, builders and insurers of the vessel. As the secretary of the all-party parliamentary group on MV Derbyshire, I saw what a heavy toll that took on them, and I helped them to succeed in their long and difficult campaign for official acknowledgment of the truth of what had happened. The truth was that their relatives had been wholly innocent victims of the disaster, and their campaign was fully vindicated, but it should not have taken 20 years.

There have been, and will continue to be, other disasters that kill and injure people, creating more bereaved families and injured survivors. We should use the experiences of past disasters to improve the way in which we handle the aftermath of those that happen in the future. The Bill would establish an independent, adequately resourced public advocate for those who are bereaved in public disasters, and for injured survivors. It would locate the public advocate’s office in a Government Department; the advocate would be able to call on its resources but, crucially, would be totally independent of the Government. It would require the public advocate to act if 50% plus one or more of the families of the deceased and injured survivors asked for that to happen. The advocate would then act as a representative of the collective interests of the bereaved and survivors in securing the openness and transparency that families need.

The process would not replace any representation in legal proceedings, but the advocate would have an additional role intended to give families and survivors confidence that their needs were central in the securing of truth and justice. That would be done by ensuring transparency and openness in a way that cannot be hijacked by organs of the state or other interested parties in the various legal proceedings that often follow in the aftermath of a disaster.

The public advocate, as a data controller, would establish a panel—like the Hillsborough independent panel—in consultation with relatives of the deceased and survivors, to review all documentation at a much
Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill

I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill delivers another important commitment from the Government on animal welfare, cementing our place as a world leader in the care and protection of animals. Under the current legislation, the Animal Welfare Act 2006, the maximum penalty for animal cruelty offences is six months’ imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine. The Bill extends the current maximum penalty to five years’ imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine for the worst animal cruelty offences relating to animal welfare in England and Wales. It is a simple yet vital measure to ensure that those who perpetrate cruelty on animals are subjected to the full force of the law.

We all agree that there is no place for animal cruelty in this country. Those who mistreat and abuse animals through unacceptable activities such as dog fighting, the abuse of pet animals, and cruelty to farm animals will be faced with tougher responses from the courts. An increase in the maximum custodial sentence from six months to five years will help to deter people from committing detestable acts against animals, and will demonstrate that such behaviour is not tolerated in this country.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Is the Minister aware of the growing concern about the welfare of tethered horses? Many horses are attached to a short rope all day long, next to a highway, with no water and surrounded by ragwort, which is harmful to them. However, the authorities seem reluctant to take action. Might the reason be that the law is not quite clear enough in this respect, and if so, could that be addressed by the Bill?

David Rutley: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention, and for his concern about horse tethering. I share that concern, which is why we recently had a roundtable meeting with the relevant welfare groups and authorities to discuss how we could achieve best practice in this regard. I think that there have been some case studies — particularly in the Swansea area, if I remember correctly — and that real action has been taken. We need to spread that best practice far and wide.

It is a pleasure to introduce this important Bill. We committed ourselves in September 2017 to increasing maximum sentences for animal cruelty offences, and in December 2017 we published our draft Bill for pre-legislative scrutiny. That followed the introduction of the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill.

Maria Eagle accordingly presented the Bill.

Maria Eagle accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time: to be read a Second time tomorrow and to be printed (Bill 419).
Fighting (Sentencing) Bill in July 2016 by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), and the introduction of the Animal Cruelty (Sentencing) Bill, also in July 2016 by the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley). I pay tribute to both of them and the supporters of their Bills; I thank them for their hard work.

I am delighted to have secured the parliamentary time to introduce this small but incredibly valuable Government Bill, which is of great importance to the House, the animal welfare community and the public more widely. I pay tribute to all who campaigned for the Animal Welfare (Service Animals) Act 2019, popularly known as Finn’s law, which is closely linked to the Bill. Finn is a police dog fondly known as Fabulous Finn to his friends, and a distinguished example of the incredible bravery and hard work of service animals. This Bill will ensure that those who cause injury to a service animal will receive a proportionate penalty for their horrific actions; I will speak on this in more detail a little later.

Many animal welfare charities and other organisations have been calling for increased sentencing for a number of years. I thank them for their campaigning on the matter and for ensuring that this issue has remained at the top of the agenda: Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, Blue Cross, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the League Against Cruel Sports, to name but a few, have been incredibly effective in their support for an increase in the maximum penalties, and I praise their tireless efforts. Claire Horton, chief executive of Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, stated that the introduction of this Bill is a “landmark achievement”.

This Bill is indeed a landmark step forward for animal welfare in this country. It demonstrates our commitment to protecting this nation’s animals. I pay tribute to Northern Ireland and my hon. Friends in the Democratic Unionist party for setting such a great example in support of animal welfare; Northern Ireland has already introduced a higher maximum penalty of five years for animal cruelty offences, which we are pleased to be able to match in England and Wales.

I also pay tribute to those hon. Members who have consistently advocated introducing this Bill, notably my hon. Friend—most of the time my friend—the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. He can be grumpy on occasions—[Interjection.] Oh, he is there! I had not realised he was behind me! Indeed, I thank all members of the Committee, who tirelessly press the Government on this issue.

Our Bill and the proposals therein on animal welfare sentencing have received strong support from across the House, and I am grateful to the Opposition Front-Bench team, not least the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) for her full and wholesome support; it is much appreciated.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Thirteen years ago in 2006 when the Animal Welfare Act was going through its stages, I proposed an amendment that would do exactly what this Bill does, so may I thank the Minister for bringing it in but express regret that it has taken 13 years to do so?

David Rutley: I am pleased the Bill is before us today; sometimes these things take time—too often in animal welfare—but I am really pleased that through working together across this House we have seen a number of pieces of legislation come forward in recent weeks and months. That is because we are working so closely together. I am extraordinarily grateful for that and for the support we have had from the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who has long called for higher sentencing.

It is also important to recognise the hard work of our Whips. They are not able to speak on this matter, but I know that my hon. Friends the Members for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) and for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) are very keen for this legislation to come through. It would be remiss of me not also to mention the irrepressible hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), who is a complete enthusiast for this Bill and I am sure would love to be associated with it.

The Bill amends the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which currently sets out a maximum penalty of six months’ imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine for the more serious prevention of harm offences. That is much lower than the current European average for animal welfare offences, which is two years; indeed many countries have much higher maximum penalties. I am pleased to say that the Bill introduces one of the toughest punishments in the world and will bring us in line with the maximum penalties in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Ireland, India and Latvia, which are all five years’ imprisonment.

The Government published the draft Bill for consultation and pre-legislative scrutiny in December 2017 as part of the Animal Welfare (Sentencing and Recognition of Sentience) Bill. The consultation closed in January 2018 and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs received over 9,000 direct responses to it; 70% of respondents agreed with the new maximum penalties. In the summary of responses document, the Government committed to bringing forward the sentencing clauses in a separate Bill as recommended by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee scrutiny report in January 2018.

There have been a number of recent cases related to serious animal welfare offences in which judges have expressed a desire to impose a higher penalty or custodial sentence than that currently provided for under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. For example, in 2016 an 18-year-old man kicked his girlfriend’s pet spaniel to death in an horrific attack. The dog was kicked repeatedly so hard that her brain stem detached. The man was sentenced to six months in prison and ordered to pay costs and victim surcharges of more than £1,000. The judge at the magistrates court said that he would have imposed a stronger, longer sentence if the law had allowed it. It was a sickening act of deliberate cruelty and in such cases a higher sentence would have been favourable for the court.

If I may, I would like to give another horrific example of where the judge explicitly told the court that he would have imposed a longer sentence if the guidelines had allowed. In November 2016 a man gave a dog painkillers to then beat her to death with a shovel. The man was sentenced to four months in prison and was disqualified from keeping all animals for life. That sentence was clearly not appropriate for such a dreadful act, and we need to change that, and we will now.

This Bill relates closely to the warmly received Animal Welfare (Service Animals) Act 2019, commonly known as Finn’s law, which prevents those who attack or injure
service animals from claiming self-defence. It received Royal Assent on 8 April 2019, and I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald), who is also in his place, for steering the Bill so skilfully through this House.

When this Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill is enacted, those who cause harm to a service animal in the course of the animal’s duty could be subject to a maximum sentence of five years. The intention of Finn’s law was to increase the maximum penalty for animal cruelty as well as improving the protection of service animals. We are now completing the increased protection of service animals with this Bill, and as a result achieving what the Committee and campaigners have worked so hard for.

The Bill is due to commence two months after Royal Assent and has a limited impact on costs to the criminal justice system. The increase in maximum penalties will not result in an increase in the number of offenders being sent to prison; it will result only in the potential length of time that might be served by the most serious offenders. We have been in discussion with the Ministry of Justice on this matter, and the Government consider that this may lead to some marginal extra costs to the criminal justice system which are unlikely to be more than £500,000 per annum. DEFRA has agreed with the Ministry of Justice to take on the costs, as set out in the explanatory notes.

While some offences committed under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 may be more minor incidents, there are unfortunately cases of serious or systematic cruelty. For example, some forms of animal cruelty, such as dog fighting, can be linked to organised crime and are carried out for financial gain through betting and prize money.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): The Minister talked about the extra cost involved. If a case has to go to the Crown court, very often animals will have to be kept in custody or in care in kennels, so that will cost more. We also need to make sure we have proper kennelling so that the whole court system can cope. We very much welcome the extra sentencing, but that knock-on effect needs to be dealt with as well.

David Rutley: Once again, my hon. Friend speaks with authority on the subject, and he can be assured that we are working through all those details. I just want to underline that costs will be covered through the arrangements put in place.

As I was saying, dog fighting inflicts a high level of suffering on the animals involved. We believe that in such cases, where the level of cruelty and culpability is so high, a higher sentence is clearly justified, and I am sure that the House agrees.

The Bill is a simple measure, amounting to just two clauses, but with a very positive outcome. Clause 1 is the Bill’s main clause; it outlines the mode of trial and maximum penalty for certain animal welfare offences. As I previously outlined, under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 the maximum penalty in practice is currently six months and/or an unlimited fine. The clause changes the maximum custodial sentence available for five key offences: causing unnecessary suffering to a protected animal; carrying out a non-exempted mutilation; docking the tail of a dog, except where permitted; administering a poison to an animal; and involvement in an animal fight.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): The Bill is hugely welcome. However, I am concerned about the narrowness of its scope, and my investigations have not been able to satisfy me that there are no potential areas of obscurity in it. Given that the Bill applies to domestic animals and not to wild animals, what is the situation in regard to, say, feral cats? Would somebody who did harm to their neighbour’s cat be subject to a different maximum sentence from somebody who did harm to a cat that was effectively feral and unattached?

David Rutley: We can talk about that in more detail in Committee, but it is clear that this is about animals that are under the control of man. So in a situation where a feral cat was under the control of a man or woman and was experiencing unnecessary harm, the Bill would apply.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I apologise for coming in a bit late. The Minister might have covered this earlier, but will the courts have discretion in relation to the maximum sentence? Am I right in thinking that there will be a scale?

David Rutley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Just to clarify, we are discussing the maximum penalty; there will be other gradations that the courts will see fit to use. It is important to highlight, as I have done with a couple of case studies, that the courts felt they did not have the right sentencing available, given the horrific nature of some of the crimes they had been looking at. The Bill is about providing a maximum. The hon. Gentleman must be psychic, because I was about to come to that point. Under clause 1, the existing maximum penalty of six months will be retained if the offender is summarily convicted. However, offenders may now receive a higher penalty of up to five years’ imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine if they are convicted on trial by indictment.

Clause 2 outlines that the Bill will come into force two months after Royal Assent. The application of revised maximum penalties is not retrospective and does not apply to offences committed before the Bill comes into force. The clause also specifies the short title of the Bill, and provides for the Bill to extend to England and Wales. Animal welfare is a fully devolved matter, as many Members know. However, in this case the Welsh Government have confirmed that the maximum penalty should also apply in Wales, and the Bill is drafted on that basis. The Welsh Government are preparing a legislative consent motion so that the Bill can be extended and applied in Wales.

It is the Government’s view that the subject matter of this Bill is considered to be within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly. I have commended Northern Ireland for having already set the maximum penalty for animal cruelty offences at five years’ imprisonment in August 2016, and I am pleased that the Scottish Government have announced their intention to do so as well. This country has some of the highest animal welfare standards in the
world, but our maximum penalties are currently among the lowest. An increase to five years’ imprisonment should be introduced to enable the courts to have more appropriate sentences at their disposal for the most serious crimes of animal cruelty, and to reinforce our position as a world leader on animal welfare.

The Government are pleased to be taking forward this positive step on animal welfare. Just a month ago, we introduced a ban on third-party sales of puppies and kittens, and we have introduced mandatory CCTV in slaughterhouses. The Bill follows the previously mentioned passing of Finn’s law and we are also demonstrating the importance of the value of wild animals with the Wild Animals in Circuses Bill progressing well through the other place. The Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill is a fundamental step in ensuring that we have an appropriate response to those who inflict deliberate suffering on innocent animals and, for the reasons I have set out, I commend the Bill to the House.

1.54 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Today has been a long time coming. We welcome the Government bringing forward this vital piece of legislation, although we regret that it has taken this long, considering that it has widespread support across the House and with the general public. I hope the Bill manages to make it through both Houses and on to the statute book in a timely fashion. It is imperative that it should receive Royal Assent and come into force as soon as possible. It is absolutely right that we should seek to increase the maximum penalty for animal welfare offences from six months to five years. Britain can be proud of having some of the best animal welfare practices and legislation in the world, and the Bill does what it needs to do to enhance that reputation. The landmark Animal Welfare Act 2006 is something that, as a Labour Member, I am very proud of, because our Government brought it forward. Now, delivering maximum sentencing through the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill will ensure that our high standard is maintained and builds on those original foundations.

I am aware that many Members right across the House have campaigned for this issue and for this Bill to come forward, but I would like to make a couple of particular mentions. First my hon. Friend for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for her hard work on this issue. I also thank the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and its Chair, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish).

The last time I spoke on this matter on the Floor of the House was in spring 2017, following the publication of the Select Committee’s excellent report covering third-party puppy sales and maximum sentencing. We then had the short-lived draft Bill that would have covered sentencing and the recognition of animal sentience. From that, however, Ministers went back to the drawing board, which is why, to some extent, it has taken so long to get to this stage. After two years’ delay, it is really good that the Government have finally brought forward this Bill, because it is important that sentences for animal cruelty should act as a deterrent. I welcome this.

We are supporting the Bill today, but we will seek to improve it in Committee. We have concerns, which are shared by a number of stakeholders, about the scope of the Bill. This has already been mentioned in an intervention. The proposals apply only to the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and therefore do not apply to wild animals in the way that they apply to domestic animals. Our concern is that this creates a two-tier system, even if by oversight as opposed to intentionally. The same sentences should be available to judges for similar or identical crimes, regardless of whether the animal is domesticated or wild.

Bill Wiggin: I took the Animal Welfare Bill through, and I disagree with the hon. Lady’s understanding. It is possible to commit acts of cruelty only when we as human beings have power over an animal. We must deliver the animal’s five freedoms, and it does not matter whether the animal is domesticated or wild. It is our power over the creature that determines an act of cruelty. I do not think that her accusation of a two-tier system is a fair one.

Sue Hayman: That is an interesting consideration, and one that will be explored within the legal system. I am sure that we can look into it further in Committee. To give an example, the RSPCA reports that a man was jailed for just 22 weeks after he was convicted of setting his dogs on a pet cat and a fox. It is important that harming the fox can carry the same sentence as harming the family pet in those circumstances, and the law must reflect that.

Bill Wiggin: I thought I was clear. In the case the hon. Lady just referred to, it was the dog that did the harm to the fox or the neighbour’s cat, not the human being. That is where the distinction arises. Had he been torturing any of the animals, he would immediately have fallen foul of this Bill.

Sue Hayman: But if any person directs an animal to do such appalling harm, should not that person bear some responsibility?

The Sentencing Council recommends that if a defendant pleads guilty at the first reasonable opportunity, the sentence may be cut by a third, so someone who commits the most serious crime against animals and pleads guilty could end up serving only four months in prison. I think we would all agree that that is an incredibly inadequate sentence for some of the crimes we have heard about.
The Minister mentioned that many people have campaigned for the increase, and I would like to mention groups such as the League Against Cruel Sports, the Dogs Trust, Blue Cross, the RSPCA and Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, all of which have campaigned strongly for the measure, having previously expressed concern about the leniency of sentencing.

Mr Jim Cunningham: We should pay tribute to those organisations for all they have done over many years. Battersea Dogs & Cats Home has done an excellent job—in fact, my hon. Friend probably met its representatives when they came here last week.

Sue Hayman: I agree absolutely. There has been huge support for increasing the sentences for animal cruelty, and Battersea Dogs & Cats Home has been particularly keen to get the law changed.

I support the Minister absolutely in his view that we need to crack down on dog fighting and hand down the sentences that are appropriate for that crime. The Dogs Trust says that the woefully inadequate sentences currently available are cause for serious concern—as the Minister said, we have some of the shortest sentences worldwide. I am pleased to hear that Wales is also to take forward these measures.

There is no parity in the law—for example, if someone harms a service dog, the penalties are much higher than if they harm a pet or a farm animal. We believe that wild animals too should be covered. There is also no consistency in sentencing: a person can be sent to prison for three years if their dog injures a guide dog, but if they beat a dog to death the maximum sentence is six months. In Northern Ireland, five-year maximum sentences are already in place. It is important that we achieve consistency across the UK. Hopefully, the recent consultation in Scotland will enable us to harmonise the law right across the UK.

The Minister mentioned the connection between animal cruelty and criminal behaviour. We know that people convicted of animal cruelty are five times more likely to have a violent crime record, and that animal abuse is 11 times more likely in domestic violence situations. That is another reason why we need to act now. The legislation will protect not only our beloved animals but people, too. In addition, the Government need to place a statutory duty on local authorities to enforce the Animal Welfare Act, so that it has proper teeth, and to give local authorities adequate resources with which to enforce the regulations under the Act.

If the Government are serious about animal welfare, they must introduce the measures in the other half of the original Bill to enshrine animal sentience in law after we leave the EU. Even better, they could get behind the private Member’s Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East.

Animals have the same welfare needs and any attack on them has the same impact on their welfare, regardless of whether they are a domestic pet, a police dog or a wild animal. They all feel pain; they all suffer. The people who harm them all need to feel the full force of the law.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Do the hon. Lady’s comments about the welfare of animals also apply to animals that are bred for slaughter?

Sue Hayman: All animals need to be looked after to the best of human ability and should not be abused. We need the highest standards possible in slaughterhouses and abattoirs.

The Opposition welcome the Bill and will support it today.

2.5 pm

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman). I agree with many of her comments about the importance of the sentencing increase and how there should be no distinction between particular offences. I welcome the Bill because as well as increasing sentences for animal welfare offences in respect of all animals, it has a special relevance for me and those of us who supported Finn’s law, the Bill that became the Animal Welfare (Service Animals) Act 2019.

When I first met my constituent PC Dave Wardell and Finn, who live in Buntingford, and heard their story, I knew we had to try to change the law. Finn had been badly injured in October 2016, saving Dave’s life in an attack by a knife-wielding suspect, yet there was no separate penalty at court for the attack on this service animal, and the charge was criminal damage, treating Finn as though he was just a piece of kit. Because a seven-year-old police dog is not worth much money and criminal damage is judged by the value of the damage, no separate penalty was imposed at court for the harm done to Finn, despite the fact that the dog was almost killed in the attack, faced a four-hour operation, and had saved his handler’s life.

Solicitor Sarah Dixon started a national campaign for Finn’s law that has united press, public and politicians. Both the Daily Mirror and The Sun have supported Finn’s law, and a petition raised over 125,000 signatures.

I first drafted a Bill based on Qonto’s law—a Canadian law named after another brave dog—and was given permission by the House to bring it in as a ten-minute rule Bill in December 2017. I discovered that Ministers had reservations. After many discussions and lots of pressure from supporters, I decided that a different approach was needed—one based on measures in Western Australia. Ministers were worried that, were we to have only an offence of attacking a police dog carry a sentence of five years’ imprisonment, it would not reflect properly the point made by the hon. Member for Workington that the same maximum sentence should be available for ill treatment of all animals.

Ministers agreed to go with the Western Australian approach and I presented the replacement Bill, which became the 2019 Act.

The original Bill was drafted with a maximum penalty of five years’ imprisonment for an attack on a service animal, but Ministers made it clear to me that my new Bill should make it straightforward to prosecute under the Animal Welfare Act for causing unnecessary suffering to a service animal and they would bring in this Bill to increase the sentence for Animal Welfare Act offences.
against any animal. I have therefore always regarded this measure as Finn’s law part two—putting in a proper maximum sentence.

I had great support for my Bill from Members of all political parties, including the author of the original Animal Welfare Act, the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw). It took many months, but we made progress. Lord Trenchard took the Bill through the House of Lords, and Royal Assent was given on 8 April, as has been mentioned. The Act is now in force. Importantly, Finn attended Parliament on all occasions and helped to get the support we needed. When the Bill finally got through in the other place, Finn let out a loud bark in the Public Gallery, to the amusement of many noble Lords and Baronesses. Very few ten-minute-rule Bills become law, so it was a great moment.

The Finn’s law campaign has maintained the social media pressure, and holds a twice-weekly twitterstorm called “Finn hour” which has been directed very effectively to help change the law. Every mayor and all the police and crime commissioners in our country have supported Finn’s campaign. It has been a privilege to work with the team and to see the part two Bill introduced.

Let me just read out some of the comments I have received from Finn’s law campaigners about this Bill. I have received hundreds of messages of support during “Finn hour”. People have said things such as:

“There are far too many instances of animal cruelty reported every day. The increased sentences are needed urgently”;

“Here’s wishing the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill a speedy and successful passage”;
and:

“Hopefully, a speedy passage. Finn ‘barks’ for…the country”.

It is also important that, in time, this should cover Scotland and Northern Ireland. My colleague Liam Kerr MSP has been pressing in Scotland, and we have met Nicola Sturgeon, with Dave and Finn, and there is now a consultation in Scotland. That shows that Finn is a very effective dog. We are also in touch with Northern Ireland MPs.

Finally, the House may be interested to hear that since the passing of the Bill, Finn, already the most decorated police dog, has continued to collect awards: he won at Crufts; he has been given the freedom of the town of Buntingford; and he was recently a finalist on “Britain’s Got Talent”, where his story and Dave’s pitch for this Bill to become law brought the great Simon Cowell to tears. So, I welcome the Bill; Finn’s law part two takes a big step forward today.

2.11 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Ind): I strongly welcome the measures in this short, simple Bill. I emphasise “simple”, because that is how it needs to stay in order to get it implemented quickly. The changes are long promised, long needed and long overdue.

There is a perception among many people, including, importantly, members of the judiciary, that the sentences available to the courts at the moment to deal with serious offences of cruelty are inadequate, despite the UK having some of the most progressive animal welfare legislation in the world. As we have heard, the maximum penalty for the most serious cases of animal cruelty is still only a maximum of six months in prison, an unlimited fine and/or a ban on keeping animals. Given the level of serious animal neglect, cruelty and violence against animals every day, that does not seem to be acting as a deterrent.

The Minister gave the example of the man who received only a 26-week jail term after he was found guilty of kicking a four-month-old puppy to death. We heard from the shadow Secretary of State about another example, that of the Lancashire man who received only a 22-week sentence and was disqualified from keeping animals for life after the RSPCA obtained a video of him setting his dogs on a pet cat and a fox.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Lady. Lady for making such an important speech. Does she agree that cruelty and a lack of empathy towards animals often translates into cruelty and a lack of empathy towards people? As a psychologist, I know that part of the psychopathy checklist we used to do with patients to measure sociopathy was animal cruelty.

Angela Smith: I completely agree with the hon. Lady. Indeed, that was a point I made in the Second Reading debate on the Bill that became the 2006 Act, and I will say more about that later.

When we compare ourselves with other European countries, we see that the maximum sentence for cruelty to animals in England and Wales is woeful. A substantial number of European countries have already legislated for a maximum sentence of between two and three years, and in some cases it is up to five years, as the Minister pointed out. Further afield, Canada, Australia and New Zealand already offer a maximum of five years’ imprisonment. Even within the United Kingdom, the maximum sentences in England and Wales pale in comparison with Scotland’s one-year sentencing power and, even more so, with Northern Ireland’s sentencing power of up to five years. I pay tribute to Northern Ireland for having made progress on this before any other devolved Administration or indeed the UK Parliament. I also recognise that Scotland has announced a consultation on proposals to increase sentences to five years, and I hope the Scottish Parliament sees that consultation through and implements stronger powers, so that we can all be in line and be in the same place as a United Kingdom.

There are several reasons why sentences for animal cruelty need to be increased, not the least of which is that public attitudes have no doubt changed in the 10 years since the passing of the 2006 Act. I served on its Bill Committee and I recall the contribution of the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), who led for the shadow team. I remember those sittings clearly. It is now becoming more obvious that the courts, too, want to be given the option to pass tougher sentences for extreme forms of cruelty, with many magistrates and judges asking for an increase in the punishments they have at their disposal. Without this increase in sentencing powers we could also be in the invidious position of facing the prospect of no prison terms for animal cruelty or for fighting with animals being available to the courts, if the Ministry of Justice’s proposal to abolish sentences of six months or less is taken forward and implemented. We need to bear that in mind, and it is another reason why this legislation is so important.
I also want to draw attention to the link with domestic abuse. Blue Cross has pointed out that research clearly suggests a link between animal abuse, domestic abuse and other serious crimes. It found that women in domestic violence shelters were 11 times more likely to report that a partner had hurt or killed pets in the home, as the shadow Secretary of State pointed out. The research also shows a direct correlation between cases of animal abuse and cases of child abuse, with children at risk in 83% of families with a history of animal abuse. It should not surprise any of us to hear that. We need to do more as a society to join up the investigative powers of social services, the education system and the animal welfare charities, which work so hard to identify cases of animal abuse in homes up and down the country. We could do more to encourage joint working between these different agencies and charities to raise awareness of where the risk lies to animals, children and women, and to people generally.

Before I draw my comments to a conclusion, I want to pay tribute to the Chair of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, of which I am a member, for his leadership of our inquiry—the pre-legislative scrutiny we carried out on the original Bill, which put animal sentence provisions and animal sentencing powers together in the one Bill. It was a very good inquiry, and the recommendation we clearly made was that the two sets of provisions needed to be separated and that we needed to implement the sentencing powers provisions quickly. I am only sorry that it has taken so long to get to this point. A number of Opposition Members have asked the Secretary of State repeatedly when we were finally going to see this Bill on the Floor of the House. We have got here now, so I will leave that there, and just say that I am thankful to be able, at last, to get this on to the statute book.

I hope that the Bill will quickly pass its legislative hurdles and gain Royal Assent later this year, because we need to see these measures enacted. I take the point that there are various other issues that could be addressed in these provisions, such as extending the powers to cover cases involving wild animals, but I think we just need to get on and get this Bill through Parliament and on to the statute book. I know that the animal welfare charities are keen that that should be the case. I have been contacted and asked, “Please keep it simple.” So I understand the debate about other areas of animal welfare policy, but let us just get on with this. It is long overdue and we need to get on with it.

Sir Oliver Heald: I very much agree with what the hon. Lady is saying. Does she agree that as we are towards the end of the Session and have a limited window in which to do this, we really need to get it done?

Angela Smith: I take that point entirely, although it is not the fault of Opposition Members that we are up against it in the way that we are, with, I hope, the Session due to end at some point soon and the Queen’s Speech on its way. We do need to get on with this, and we should keep it simple.

The measure is supported by all the major animal welfare charities. I pay tribute to the work on this issue by Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, Blue Cross, the Dogs Trust and the RSPCA, all of which are worthy charities that I have worked with over a significant number of years. I also wish to mention World Horse Welfare, which of course feels strongly about this issue and needs to be included in any list of tributes to the animal welfare sector for the campaign to increase the sentencing powers.

It is right that the situation in England and Wales comes into line with that in the rest of the UK and in other western countries. I repeat that the current limit of six months, which is often reduced by a third if the defendant pleads guilty, is clearly not adequate and does not act as a deterrent, as shown by the fact that many of the associations that deal with animal cruelty have reported increases in cruelty, especially of the most serious types, despite the Animal Welfare Act being on the statute book.

I conclude by saying again: can we please just get on with this and get it implemented? Let us give the courts the powers that they need.

2.20 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), who has been a consistent champion of animal welfare since the moment she was elected to this House.

Hooray—Parliament is doing something! At long last we are making it worth while to come here. Colleagues should recognise that this is a broken Parliament. Why is it broken? Because we had an ill-advised general election, which my party obviously decided to hold. It was a disastrous result from my party’s point of view. We lost our majority and cobbled together some sort of alliance with the Democratic Unionist party. It has taken the business managers, who have come and gone over the past two years, a long time to get a grip on what to do in this sort of Parliament. At long last, they seem to have realised that there are things we can do. The Chief Whip has just disappeared, but one of his colleagues is on the Treasury Bench. I say to the business managers: if my party is struggling with a legislative programme for the new Queen’s Speech, why not consult the hon. Member for Southend West? I have a whole range of measures on which I think we could get some sort of cross-party support. Our constituents are very frustrated about the situation. If we are not going to have a general election, we cannot just keep on discussing meaningless motions. We have to get on and do something, and we could do a whole raft of things that could improve the quality of life in this country.

There is no point in our legislating on anything unless we enforce the legislation, so I was puzzled by the exchange earlier when my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) challenged my hon. Friend the Minister about cruelty to tethered horses. I listened to an Adjournment debate led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on that very same issue. It is a puzzle to me, because in 1988, through a ten-minute rule Bill that became an Act of Parliament—the noble Lord Hogg was the Minister at the time—we got on to the statute book an Act to stop horses, ponies and donkeys being cruelly tethered and to make sure that they were properly watered and fed. For goodness’ sake, what has happened to that Act of Parliament? I realise that the longer we are here—I will come to the point made by my hon. Friend the
Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) in a moment—the more we are forgotten, but that is an Act of Parliament. If we have the law already, it is no good people jumping up with suggestions; we need to do something. We need to enforce the law that already exists, so I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will do something about that.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does this measure not try to address that very point? We are all extremely frustrated that a good law is not being properly enforced; this measure might help.

Sir David Amess: My right hon. Friend, who has years of wisdom and experience, is yet again absolutely right. My hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) mentioned the fact that had he been listened to in 2006, the measure we are discussing would have already happened.

I am not going to fall out with the Opposition, but the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) has heard me say before that when the new Labour leader became Prime Minister in 1997, he and his team consulted a huge range of animal charities, and there was, over Labour’s 13 years in government, some disappointment about the failure to deliver. That is except for one issue, on which I might fall out with one or two colleagues, and that is foxhunting. I have always felt—in those days, there were just four or five of us—that the Labour party did a good thing on foxhunting. However, I absolutely empathise with my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire in respect of those 13 years.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I just want to add to the debate something that has not really been discussed. The most recent Labour Government introduced the Animal Welfare Act 2006, under which provision was made to increase sentencing to imprisonment of up to 51 weeks and a fine not exceeding £20,000. We did amend the law, but it never got enacted, which was bizarre. It is important to recognise that we did try to take steps. I do not know why that was not enacted.

Bill Wiggin rose—

Sir David Amess: I do not think we can have an intervention on an intervention, but the hon. Lady makes a good and valid point that it seems my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire is going to deny.

Bill Wiggin: I am afraid I am. I urge the House also to consider the case of lost dogs, which are now returned to councils rather than to the police. The criminal justice legislation that would have changed sentencing in the way the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) just mentioned was never brought forward by that Labour Government, so I am afraid the buck stopped very much with the Labour Government of the time. Indeed, the Minister concerned subsequently served at Her Majesty’s pleasure himself.

Sir David Amess: Madam Deputy Speaker, I have already been speaking for six minutes and I have not even started my speech, so I need to move on quickly. We want to get this legislation on to the statute book quickly, and people will be frustrated.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) mentioned Finn’s law. Given that you are a fellow Essex Member of Parliament, Madam Deputy Speaker, and that my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) was interested in the matter, I should say that I was privileged to be at the event at which Paul Nicholls, together with the chief of police, unveiled the monument to police dogs. I met Finn and the whole thing was just a tear-jerker. My right hon. and learned Friend spoke about the dog barking when the legislation went through the House of Lords, and I can testify to that.

Now to my brief speech. It is true that a dog is a man’s best friend but, as we have heard already, there are too many examples of cruelty. There is a danger that we will talk about more and more horrific things, such as dogs being forced to fight against each other and the latest thing, which is sport trophy hunting. How is it that companies can be trying to attract Brits to go abroad, where these magnificent animals are enclosed, so that they can cut off their tusks and heads and so on? It is absolutely barbaric. Shame on anyone who goes on one of those holidays.

I am told that 26% of households in the United Kingdom own a dog and 18% own a cat. The vast majority of British people look after their pets well. We have one or two farmers present; introducing children to animals at an early age is a good way to get them to treat animals well. I know that not all children can necessarily empathise with animals, but I think that that would help. I join others in saying I am so glad that, as a developed country renowned for its historical championing of animal welfare, we are to have this legislation.

In 2017, the RSPCA investigated 141,760 complaints. That is a huge number. In 2018, the RSPCA phone line received 1.1 million calls. I am sure that none of them was made from the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), but an awful lot were certainly made in Essex. The way in which the animals are protected is the first vital part of the Bill. The second important part is that it will act as a deterrent. The Bill recognises that the root of the problem is really with animal abusers, and although it may take a few months to kick in, all the literature that I have read agrees that this legislation will act as a meaningful deterrent.

There are too many examples of animal cruelty. Recently, in a national newspaper, we heard about a French bulldog that had just had puppies. How could someone have chained that dog to a car—we all saw it—and dragged it along the road? That is just horrendous, and the person responsible has still not been caught. I am glad to say that the RSPCA is on the case.

Just last week, The Independent reported that a driver in Somerset was luring birds on to a road with chips before mowing them down. That is sick behaviour beyond belief. In another shocking example, which took place at the end of last year, a man in the UK hit a dog with a hammer and strangled it with a washing line just because it was getting on his nerves—perhaps he had mental health problems. None the less, these are absolutely despicable incidents, and they are happening in our country.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned dogs. He will recall that, seven years ago, he and I helped to co-open the Dogs
Trust Rehoming Centre at Nevendon in my constituency. I visited it again last week. Will he join me in commending the superb work that it does, rehoming nearly 900 dogs a year? If he wants to talk about compassionate, loving and focused animal welfare, the Dogs Trust is about as good as it gets, and Lisa Cooper and all her staff there are a living embodiment of that.

Sir David Amess: And the Dogs Trust will be very pleased with that plug that my right hon. Friend has given it. I was there. It is a magnificent Dogs Trust, and my own family has had two rescue pugs from it over the years. It is absolutely fantastic.

My right hon. Friend has just reminded me that, when I entered this place for the first time, animal welfare did not have the high priority that it does today. That is not criticising the background of colleagues; it is just saying that we did not give the matter as high a profile as we do today. I do remember, though, that when my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire had a wonderful debate on monkeys, the House was absolutely packed—but that was quite a rarity.

Sir Greg Knight: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work that he has done on this subject during his parliamentary career; he is really committed to the issue of animal welfare. I hope, therefore, that he will be prepared to volunteer to be a member of the Committee on this Bill, to see that the Minister does indeed look at the important issue of enforcement.

Sir David Amess: Embarrassingly, my right hon. Friend recognises that I am susceptible to flattery, but as I am on the Panel of Chairs, I do not think that I can also serve on the Committee, much as I would like to.

Let me go back to the Protection Against Cruel Tethering Act 1988. When my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford was a councillor in Basildon, we opened the horse and pony sanctuary in Pitsea. It is tragic that this big event has been completely whitewashed and here we have legislation and it is not even being enforced. That is very disappointing.

Controversial lady though my good friend Ann Widdecombe is, she and I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill for endangered species some time ago. I am very glad that the Animal Welfare Act 2006—she was still here then—has been as effective as it has.

In 2017, the RSPCA investigated all these complaints. My final point is that there have been only 1,492 prosecutions, so we have a huge number of complaints—more than 1 million phone calls—but very few prosecutions. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will address that. It is very good that we are increasing sentences from six months to over two years, but is there a problem with resources? Do we not have the enforcement officers with local authorities? I am told that the cost of everything that we are putting in place today is about £500,000, which I realise is an awful lot of money.

Bill Wiggin: I think that my hon. Friend is suggesting that he would like to see the number of convictions going up. Actually, I would like to see the number of convictions going down, because people who are committing acts of hideous cruelty are going to prison for a lot longer and are therefore less likely to do the same thing again and are less likely to involve an animal.

We should judge this not by the number of convictions, but by the success with which the Bill delivers proper justice for those creatures.

Sir David Amess: My hon. Friend articulates the point that, hopefully, this sentencing will be an effective deterrent, so we will not have the same number of complaints.

On 23 May, I asked a question in this House about the lack of animal welfare officers in local authorities. I hope that the Minister might have some news on that, because, possibly, 440 RSPCA inspectors and 50 welfare officers are not enough to tackle this problem.

I repeat: this is a broken Parliament; but in a perverse way, I am glad that animals have benefited from the legislative opportunity that has arisen because it is broken. May we, in the weeks and months ahead, pass much more legislation such as this.

2.36 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess). There is a rare outbreak of consensual agreement across the Benches today, which I am proud to be part of.

All of us who are speaking in the Chamber today are speaking on behalf of those who do not have a voice. We are speaking on behalf of those whom it is our human duty to protect, to feed, to care for and to love. In particular, I speak today on behalf of Baby the bulldog and of Scamp the dog and, of course, of so many other animals who have met their sad end at the hands of humans. They should have been nurtured, stroked and loved, but instead they were ultimately abused and then killed.

I am very glad finally to have the opportunity to speak to this Bill, which has, as has been said, been a long time coming. I was proud to spend the night in Parliament in July 2016, as I queued for a private Member’s Bill that was pretty much, word for word, the Bill that we have here today, and I am so pleased to see it here in paper. That Bill sought to increase the maximum sentencing for animal cruelty from six months to five years, building on a lot of work that had been done in the past, but sadly, that Bill was objected to by the Government Whips and never made it to Second Reading, and then ultimately fell with the onset of the 2017 general election. Of course, I am delighted that it is here, and I will not hold what happened against the Government. A few months later, I am delighted to say, they saw sense and announced support for the policy, and here we are today.

The change in law has been a long time coming. For too long animal abusers have been getting away with a slap on the wrist, and this Bill will finally, I hope, bring justice for the thousands of animals who have suffered human cruelty. Like the hon. Member for Southend West, I did not come to Parliament expecting to champion animal cruelty. It was an incident of the most horrific cruelty in my constituency that caused me to understand the scale of what is happening around the country, and made me determined to make a difference and to change things. I apologise for some of the graphic details that I
am about to share, but it is really important that we understand the reality of what is happening, and has happened, in the country and what has driven us to bring about this change in law today.

Baby was a small bulldog who was cruelly abused by Andrew Daniel Frankish in Redcar. Baby was held aloft by Andrew Frankish at the top of some wooden stairs before he repeatedly threw her down them, laughing as his brother filmed it. Baby was completely submissive throughout the ordeal, not even making a noise as she landed on the stairs, bouncing to the foot them and crashing through a baby gate to the floor. Her neck was stamped on and she was thrown to the floor with force over and over again. Her small chest was jumped on with the full body weight of one of the Frankish brothers.

One of the men said, “See if we can make it scream any more. We should throw it down the stairs by its ears,” before picking her up, throwing her against the wall, headbutting her twice and throwing her down the stairs again. Baby was tortured and beaten by those who were supposed to care for her. The whole horrible ordeal was filmed by the brothers for their entertainment, and they are heard laughing on the mobile phone. Baby should not have had to suffer that horrific abuse, but she did, and sadly was put down shortly afterwards. The evidence was found two years later on a mobile phone that happened to have been dropped on a supermarket floor; but for that, those two young men would never have been brought to justice.

We would hope that Baby would have seen justice after what she had been through, but sadly not. Despite the hard work of the police, the RSPCA and all those who gave evidence, the brothers were convicted of causing unnecessary suffering to her by subjecting her to unnecessary physical violence—an offence under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. But she was let down because the two brothers received a suspended sentence, just six months’ tagged curfew and £300 in costs. No one in this Chamber or the country can possibly feel that the justice system did its job that day.

That was when I decided to try to amend the law to ensure that sentences fit the crime in horrific cases such as this, and I was pleased to present my Animal Cruelty (Sentencing) Bill two years ago. During the progress of that Bill, another horrific incident in my constituency made the case for a change in the sentencing law even more pressing. A small dog named Scamp was found buried alive in woods near Redcar with a nail hammered into its head. The perpetrators pleaded guilty to offences under the Animal Welfare Act and were sentenced to just four months—not enough time for reflection, punishment or rehabilitation.

John Redwood: I thank the hon. Lady for bringing these horrendous stories to the attention of the House; they are very powerful in making the case that we all want to make. I thank her for what she is doing.

Anna Turley: I really appreciate that sentiment; that was very decent of the right hon. Gentleman. So often these cases bubble up in the media but then disappear. If this place is for anything, it is for responding to situations such as this and acting. I am proud that we are all here today to do that.

Scamp, as I said, was found buried alive. The people of my constituency were horrified by the two cases I have mentioned. I pay tribute to their response. Vigils were held in my community for those animals. Hundreds of people came to lay flowers and candles and to send out the message, loudly and defiantly, that the perpetrators do not represent our community. They do not represent the people of Redcar, who are decent and kind and love animals. But the people are angry: they feel that the criminal justice system has let them down, as do the majority of people across our nation of animal lovers.

On researching how these crimes could have resulted in such impossibly lenient sentences, I was astonished to find that the maximum sentence for any form of animal abuse is just six months’ custody. Incredibly, that has not changed since the Protection of Animals Act 1911, which was introduced, essentially, to make it an offence to override or overload animals pulling loads on the street or in pits. The law is lagging a century behind. If we are to continue declaring ourselves to be a nation of animal lovers, this Bill is necessary to send a loud and clear message that we take animal cruelty seriously.

I join others in paying tribute to the animal welfare organisations that have supported this campaign and for their efforts—day in, day out—in saving and protecting animals and investigating crimes. Specifically, I would like to thank the RSPCA, the Dogs Trust, Battersea Dogs & Home and the League Against Cruel Sports. I also thank the wider public for their contribution to the progress that the Bill represents. Colleagues across the House will have been lobbied by many of their constituents who have passionately held views on the need to protect animals and ensure that sentencing is a proportionate punishment.

Mr Francois: I entirely endorse the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) about the powerful contribution that the hon. Lady has made. I pay tribute to her powerful track record on this issue. We are often called a nation of animal lovers. Does the hon. Lady agree that love is not enough? We also need protection. This Bill will now help to protect the animals that we all love.

Anna Turley: The right hon. Gentleman is right. As I said in my introductory comments, as human beings we have a duty of care, love and protection towards animals who have been bred alongside us for thousands of years and that we have cared for, protected and nurtured. That is our responsibility to them. I hope that this legislation will send out the message and that anyone who cannot understand it will be dealt with severely.

I also thank my community in Redcar and Teesside who have shown their compassion and given the Bill so much support—signing petitions and responding to the terrible acts with a determination to help change the law.

I take on board everything that has been said about getting the Bill through as quickly as possible and I have no wish to slow its progress, but before I finish I want to bring an issue to the Minister’s attention, as I will throughout the Bill’s progress, to make the most of the opportunity. It concerns the trend of filming animal cruelty with the aim of sharing and uploading videos to social media. As I said, Baby’s aggressors deliberately filmed their despicable acts for entertainment. There are
many examples on social media of video clips of cruelty going viral—people kicking cats or tormenting small animals. The perpetrators are not content simply with inflicting injury on animals; they are motivated by the prospect of the films going viral, getting hits and being shared. That is grotesque and demonstrates a greater level of malicious intent, which possibly requires a specific deterrent. I urge the Government to consider the possibility of an aggravated sentence for those who film themselves undertaking such acts. I will table an amendment in Committee and ask the Government to support it.

Finally, I want to say a word about Baby and Scamp, because it is in their names that I sought to change the law. We will probably never know the full level of cruelty and torture that those silent and defenceless animals endured. We can only begin to imagine the pain experienced and the fear that they felt. We cannot undo the suffering caused to them, but we can show each other that such cruelty has no place in our communities, and that such depraved behaviour will face the punishment that it deserves. I wholeheartedly welcome this Bill—Baby’s Bill—and I thank the Minister for bringing it forward. I look forward to voting it through, to put right the suffering caused to them, but we can show each other that such cruelty has no place in our communities, and that such depraved behaviour will face the punishment that it deserves. I wholeheartedly welcome this Bill—Baby’s Bill—and I thank the Minister for bringing it forward. 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that dogs seized during proceedings will spend protracted time in kennels while the cases go through the courts. This has a potential impact on the dogs’ and cats’ welfare, and that seems to be counterproductive to the intention of this Bill. There are also capacity and cost issues involved in keeping a large number of dogs for such a long period. I assume that there will be a similar impact on other seized animals. Given that I have not yet been able to see an impact assessment for this Bill—I do not know whether one is planned—I do not yet know whether this has been considered by the Government. I therefore ask the Minister to say something about it in his closing remarks, or to me later, if possible.

I very much look forward to having the pleasure of voting for a piece of legislation that will do more to protect animals in the UK from abuse. As I have said many times before, it is a great honour to represent the constituents of Clackmannanshire and the Western Islands. My mailbag is full of animal welfare concerns, and I know that today I am speaking for my constituents. For me personally, when I leave this place—in the hopefully very distant future—I will look back on debates and votes like this with pride at the positive action I was a part of taking, as I will look back on debates and votes like this with pride at the positive action I was a part of taking, as I will look back on debates and votes like this with pride at the positive action I was a part of taking.

I very much welcome the fact that this Bill is being brought forward today. As we have heard, it has taken far too long. My hon. Friend brought forward her private Member’s Bill in 2017. We have not had an adequate explanation as to why the Government objected to that legislation. We then had pre-legislative scrutiny on the EFRA Committee. It was clearly not the sort of legislation that had to go through pre-legislative scrutiny—it was a very simple Bill. The argument now being used is that, because it has taken so long and we are about to adjourn for the summer recess, it is important that this Bill goes through with very little scrutiny and without any amendments—that it should just be raced through.

If there has been a delay, that is the Government’s fault. That cannot be used as a reason not to try to explore some broader issues, particularly my hon. Friend’s suggestion that we should look at introducing a more severe penalty for those who have filmed themselves indulging in such cruelty, which betrays the particular mindset of the individuals involved. I hope that we can do a fully fleshed out discussion in Committee of the issues involved, but I am very keen to see this Bill on the statute book as soon as possible.

Possibly one of the reasons why the Bill went to pre-legislative scrutiny in the EFRA Committee is that it was at the time paired with the sentience issue. Again, that was a very short Bill; there was one paragraph on sentience. As my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) said, I have introduced a ten-minute rule Bill on sentience. When the Minister appeared in front of the Select Committee, he said that the Government were looking for a suitable vehicle to bring the sentience proposal forward. As the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) said, there has been so much time in which we could have done so. Yesterday, when I went into the Division Lobby to vote, I found myself not quite remembering what to do, because it had been so long since I had done it. I stood there looking at the Division Clerk and thought, “Oh yes, I am meant to give them my name!”

We have not been dealing with legislation and voting. Most of this type of legislative stuff could be dealt with in one day, yet the Government have almost had to be dragged kicking and screaming to bring forward measures such as those on wild animals in circuses, which took eight years to get to this place and is pretty much uncontroversial, as is this Bill. I do not rate why it took so long. Finn’s law is great, but that process went on for quite a long time, as did the legislation on third-party puppy sales and CCTV in slaughterhouses. If we did nothing else but simple animal welfare measures, as the hon. Member for Southend West said, we could come up with a whole list of them to keep us occupied while we were waiting for the Brexit impasse to be resolved. To buy off a rebellion on the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, this House was promised in late November or early December 2017 that sentence would be legislated for before we left the EU. If the amendment in question had been pushed to the vote, I think the Government would have been in serious difficulties. They are therefore under a moral responsibility to bring forward this legislation as soon as possible.

The debate so far has been mostly about dogs and domestic animals; there has not been much discussion of farm animals. I get quite impatient when I hear it so often stated that we are a nation of animal lovers. That seems to show a degree of complacency and self-congratulation, because the horrific exposés by undercover investigations of what is going on, even in high-welfare farms. For example, Animal Equality brought a case to court fairly recently after it had gone undercover and filmed workers at Fir Tree farm in Lincolnshire kicking pigs in the face, jabbing them with pitchforks and slamming gates on their heads. At the beginning of this year, they received an eight-week suspended sentence and 100 hours’ community service. There does seem to be a bit of disconnect. Pigs are very intelligent animals. I can see why people perhaps feel more empathetic about cruelty to pets because there is a direct relationship, but if people are going to eat meat, we have a duty to respect the animals in the food chain. Those people should certainly have had much longer sentences, and it should not have been left to an organisation such as Animal Equality to do undercover investigations to reveal the case.

Animal Equality has also just revealed footage from a chicken farm that supplies Nando’s, Lidl and Asda—it is verbatim part of our nation’s food chain. The chickens were kicked and abused on the farm. They were stepped on, which broke their necks. Again, this...
was a red tractor farm. Whenever those responsible for the red tractor scheme are put on the spot, they say that it is a one-off, and the reason why animal welfare groups such as Viva! or Animal Equality went into those farms is that rumours had been heard about them, and these are the rogue guys; they are not indicative of what is happening across the piece. However, if we look at what Viva! discovered about the way that pigs were being treated on Hogwood farm, it seems that this is just the tip of the iceberg. If these are the higher welfare farms, what is going on at the farms that do not have a red tractor mark? We need to do far more to investigate standards on our farms and in slaughterhouses. I know that there is now CCTV in slaughterhouses, but there have been horrific stories.

I am keen for the Bill to go forward, and I do not want to delay it, but there is scope to look at some amendments. The Minister has said that there might be a larger piece of animal welfare legislation, or it might be tied into the environment Bill or the agriculture Bill—l have heard lots of different rumours about what might be coming forward. I urge him to look at issues such as live exports. I do not understand why a ban would only be on live exports for slaughter and not fattening. I do not see the difference, because the cruelty is in the journey that the animals have to take.

We need to look at vivisection. The number of animal experiments continues to rise. I am not opposed to genuine scientific advances or genetic research, but so many of these experiments are totally unnecessary. If we leave the EU and its chemicals testing regime, we could find that we are doing far more duplicate animal experiments, and we need to be more serious about reducing those numbers.

The final point that I want to make is about shooting. We heard recently, as a result of inquiries that I made with the League Against Cruel Sports, that 27 million game birds are being imported into the UK to be shot for so-called sport each year. They are raised on factory farms in France, Spain, Portugal and Poland with standards that we would not accept. Regardless of what we think about shooting birds for sport, we should be challenging the likes of Eurotunnel for bringing in so many of these birds to facilitate a very cruel pastime. We certainly ought to be looking at the conditions in which the animals are transported. If we are going to have a shooting industry, I do not see why we cannot insist that either the birds are raised in this country or eggs are imported, rather than live animals.

There is a lot more to do. I welcome the Bill, and I am hoping to serve on the Bill Committee. I hope that we can get it passed into law before too long. There are many other things on his to-do list to turn to.

3.2 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I would like to join the Member in thanking all the Members who have brought us to this point over the years—13 years, according to the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin). I would like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) in particular, as well as the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who have pushed this forward over the last two years. It is good to see something that was promised to us two years ago finally come to the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) made a point about what the maximum sentence would apply to. It is worth saying that the Bill is not about inadvertent mistreatment; it is about serious and deliberate cruelty. Several Members have made the point that deliberate cruelty to animals is an indicator of likely cruelty to humans, and especially domestic violence.

I agree with the hon. Member for North Herefordshire that eventually, it will be possible to save money if the number of prosecutions falls. To achieve that, we need to create the expectation among people who are thinking of being cruel to animals that they will be prosecuted and, in extreme cases, face heavy sentences, which means we must ensure that the Bill is put into place properly and properly policed. If we can deter this sort of cruelty, it will help to deter domestic violence. Any law-abiding society that applies the law properly saves money. Even if it does not save money in the short term, due to imprisonment or court costs, it will save money in the long term through encouraging and forcing people to abide by the law. We should not be counting the cost when it comes to abiding by the law; we should be ensuring that we are a law-abiding society.

Much of the cruelty that takes place is part of serious criminal activity. We are not just talking about lone criminal acts. In some cases, we are talking about international dog-fighting rings, with serious money involved. To clamp down on these rings, we need serious sentences. Dog fighting is a good example of where I part company with the hon. Member for North Herefordshire. It is not a human being hurting a dog—it is a dog hurting a dog—but what happens to animals in most cruelty cases is a direct result of the attitude of the human beings who are responsible for those animals. We cannot say that we will not prosecute a case simply because another animal has created that violent situation. If a human being is meant to be responsible for that animal, they need to be responsible for what that animal is doing. I look forward to dog fighting becoming as much a part of the past as cock fighting and bear baiting.

There are serious issues about which animals should be covered by this legislation. The Opposition are not necessarily convinced that every animal that needs to be covered will be covered. Wild animals and farmed animals have been mentioned. Several campaigning organisations have contacted us—I am sure they have contacted other Members—to suggest all sorts of areas where the Bill could be improved. At some stage, we will need a comprehensive and effective animal welfare Bill, as the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) said. I believe that a Labour animal welfare Bill will probably be more comprehensive and effective, but that is something for the future.

We do not want to allow our wish to improve the Bill to get in the way of passing it. We will put forward things that we think might improve it, but the most important thing is that we get a quick resolution of this specific issue and pass the Bill. I am proud and delighted to join my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) in commending the Bill to the House.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I would like to thank the Members who have made valuable contributions to this important debate. As has been explained, one of the key purposes of the Bill is to ensure that there is a deterrent to animal cruelty by extending the maximum sentence possible. The many examples that have been given, particularly by the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), will reverberate among those for whom the welfare of animals is close to their heart. I am on to my fourth rescue dog, and it is noticeable that when a dog’s history is not known, they often flinch when they see people of a certain character, which perhaps reflects the horrendous experience they have been through. They often require a lot of extra training and support to recover from that.

I genuinely hope that this legislation, which has good support, will make quick progress under the stewardship of the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley). I should point out that the Bill is just one element of the action that the Government intend to take to improve animal welfare. There have been a number of pieces of legislation, and I hope they will soon be joined by this Bill and the Wild Animals in Circuses (No.2) Bill, which is progressing well through the other place.

I now turn to the points made by individual Members. The hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) mentioned feral cats. It is important to state that the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which this Bill is modifying, covers protected animals. In its legal definition, a protected animal is a vertebrate animal of a kind commonly domesticated in the British Isles. This Bill ensures that stray dogs and feral cats will be covered.

Several Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) and my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), have referred to the issues of horse tethering. The Animal Welfare Act 2006 and these new maximum penalties will absolutely apply to horse tethering where that leads to unnecessary suffering. Horse tethering is fully covered in the equine welfare code made under the 2006 Act, which gives clear guidance on appropriate tethering. Anyone not tethering in line with the statutory code risks prosecution under the Act. My hon. Friend the Member recently hosted a roundtable with local authorities, as did the hon. Member for Bristol West. The House will be aware that this Bill is specifically about amending the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Other legislation does apply to wildlife, with different levels of penalties that can be imposed, including unlimited fines. However, I am conscious that there is a very strong case to abolish sentences of six months or less altogether, with some closely defined exceptions, but any such proposals do not affect this Bill, which is about increasing the maximum available penalty for animal cruelty to five years. It may apply to the more minor offences under the Animal Welfare Act, but those offences, such as in section 9, do not generally attract a custodial sentence now, and an unlimited fine will continue to apply.

The hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) said, Northern Ireland is already at that stage, and we will be joining it.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Lord Chancellor’s proposals about custodial sentences. My right hon. Friend is considering the issues relating to more minor, short-term custodial sentences. He is on record as saying that there is a very strong case to abolish sentences of six months or less altogether, with some closely defined exceptions, but any such proposals do not affect this Bill, which is about increasing the maximum available penalty for animal cruelty to five years. It may apply to the more minor offences under the Animal Welfare Act, but those offences, such as in section 9, do not generally attract a custodial sentence now, and an unlimited fine will continue to apply.

We also have the issue of the sentencing guidelines. The Government have already been in contact with the independent Sentencing Council about the change to the maximum penalty, which we hope Parliament will introduce shortly. There is already an existing sentencing guideline in relation to animal cruelty offences under the Act. It was reviewed and updated by the Sentencing Council as recently as 2017. However, I am pleased to say that the council has confirmed that, once the Bill is passed, it will consider the need to revise the guidelines and any revision would involve a public consultation.

Angela Smith: I am grateful to the Minister for the clarification she has given, but let me be clear that, in my speech, I was absolutely defending the need for this Bill in the context of the potential change in the law in relation to six-month sentences, which I think strengthens the need for this legislation. That is all I will say.

Dr Coffey: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady’s point, which is why I am sure the House welcomes what she has said and also the progress on the Bill.

The hon. Member for Redcar referred to filmimg and to making this an aggravating factor. I think this is a very useful point, and we will certainly raise it with the independent Sentencing Council. As I have said, it has already indicated that it will consider and revise the guidelines once this Bill has become legislation.

One of the things my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West mentioned was enforcement. Under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, it is for local authorities, the Animal and Plant Health Agency and indeed the police, which all have powers of entry, to inspect complaints of suspected animal cruelty and take out prosecutions, where necessary. It is for local authorities to make decisions about what they consider to be local priorities, rather than for the Government to decide. However, it is important that local authorities have the opportunity, as they do now, to continue to work in close partnership with others. We know that the RSPCA does investigate allegations of cruelty. It has successfully prosecuted between 800 and 1,000 people on average every year, and in doing that, it does a very valuable job.
[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) mentioned the impact of animals being held in kennels. I think it is fair to say that we do not necessarily expect a large number of cases to come before the Crown court, where the issue about the length of time may arise. At present, we estimate that about 25 cases that would previously have been held in the magistrates courts may well now be held in the Crown court. However, we consider that only a very small number of animals may need to be held in kennels for an extended period.

We cannot say from the Dispatch Box today precisely what decisions will be made about which animals would need to be taken away from the owner while somebody is awaiting sentencing, and such an action would not necessarily follow. However, it is also important to state that the Animal Welfare Act has provisions that allow a court to disqualify anyone from having animals, if necessary for life, if they have been convicted of an offence.

The court can also issue orders under section 3(6)(b) of the Bail Act 1976 to prevent the commission of further offences while on bail. The courts can make the sale of existing animals, and indeed a prohibition on owning animals, a condition of a defendant’s bail. It is important to stress that courts already have the power not only to prevent people on trial for animal welfare offences from acquiring new animals, but to remove the animals they already have. I do not believe we need further legislation to bring that about.

On what was said by the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Stratha ven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron). It is important that we continue to make good progress in Committee, so that we can bring this Bill swiftly back to the House and it can make its way to the other place. With that, I commend this Bill. The Bill represents the fact that we are a nation of animal lovers, and it certainly reinforces that.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

ANIMAL WELFARE (SENTENCING) BILL

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill:

Committal

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 25 July 2019.

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

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

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

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.
3.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): I beg to move,

That this House has considered tackling climate change, protecting the environment and securing global development.

I welcome this timely debate and the work of the Select Committee on International Development, and of many hon. and right hon. Members on both sides of the House, to highlight the urgency of addressing the interlinked challenges of tackling climate change, protecting the environment and ensuring sustainable development.

The challenge has never been clearer and our will to act has never been stronger, as demonstrated by the resounding support from both sides of the House for committing the UK to a target of net zero emissions by 2050. The world faces the challenges of doubling global infrastructure to meet development and of feeding 1 billion more people, while simultaneously halving global greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 to keep pace with the Paris climate change targets.

Globally, we are not yet on track to meet the aspirations of the Paris climate agreement. On our current trajectory, we may hit 1.5°C above pre-industrial temperatures as early as 2030, and 3.5°C above by 2050. This risks 100 million people being pushed into poverty by climate change by 2030, making the sustainable development goals much harder to achieve.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What has been the impact of the Americans withdrawing from the Paris agreement? Has there been any dialogue, for want of a better term, with the Americans to get them back into the agreement?

Andrew Stephenson: We have regular discussions with the American Government. Obviously we think the Paris climate change agreement is important, but we are seeing reductions in America’s emissions because many states and many bodies across the country have decided to up their ambitions despite the actions of the federal Government. We are seeing some encouraging signs, even if we hope the US Administration would go further and faster.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Minister talks of the need for the US to go further, but will he acknowledge that the UK needs to go an awful lot further, too? He will be aware that the Committee on Climate Change reported just this morning that “actions to date have fallen short of what is needed for the previous targets and well short of those required for the net-zero target”.

If that is what the Government’s own watchdog is saying, what will they do to make sure we have real action, not just warm words?

Andrew Stephenson: We are the best in the G20 in terms of our reductions. Between 1990 and 2017 we reduced our emissions by 42% while growing our economy by 72%. I will happily take some criticism from the Committee on Climate Change, but we should acknowledge that this country is a global leader in our efforts to tackle climate change.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I congratulate the Government on leading the way as the first major industrial country to call for net zero carbon emissions by 2050. We lead the world on our international development commitments, and as a member of the International Development Committee—the Committee is meeting in a few minutes’ time, which is why many members of the Committee are not here today—may I urge the Government to make sure we do so on the environment, too?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank my hon. Friend for what he says, and I pay tribute to him and to other members of the International Development Committee for their inquiry on this subject. I know the Committee heard many different pieces of evidence, and it made firm recommendations to the Government. I hope we will have the official response soon—hopefully next week—and then we can all reflect on how we can go further and faster, because we do need to go further and faster in all these areas.

Caroline Lucas: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Stephenson: I am going to make some progress. I am about one minute into my speech, and I have already given way to the hon. Lady.

The International Development Committee described the impacts of climate change as “nightmarish,” and it talked about increasing drought, flooding, displacement, hunger and disease, potentially reversing the hard-won development progress we have seen over the past few decades.

The International Development Committee’s inquiry on UK aid for combating climate change, published in April, found that “it will be the least developed countries and the most vulnerable people who will be hit the first and the hardest by climate change…Climate change cuts across everything. The effectiveness of all UK aid spending is dependent on whether the international community rapidly and effectively combats the causes and impacts of climate change.”

As the scale of the challenge becomes ever clearer, we see a tipping point in public awareness and engagement.

I doubt whether any hon. Member here today does not have schools in their constituency that are going above and beyond in learning about the environment. I recently visited St Joseph’s Catholic Primary School in Barnoldswick, in my constituency, to present it with an Eco-Schools green flag award.

We have also seen children at schools around the world going on strike to call for urgent climate action. We have seen the success of London Climate Action Week, with 150 events showcasing a wide spectrum of climate action and solutions, and we have witnessed the strength of cross-party support for our bid to host COP 26 next year and for the UK leading the way with our net zero target.

There are many challenges ahead. We know we need to do more, and we do not have all the answers yet, but we should be proud of the UK’s ambition and leadership to date on climate change. We have led the world in delivering clean growth, showing that action on climate change can be a win-win for the environment, for the economy and for quality of life.
Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Is the Minister able to go into more detail on the radical change that is urgently needed across all levels of government and all Departments to make sure that change happens within the next 11 years? That is what the advice is telling us. Otherwise we face a climate emergency the likes of which we have never seen.

Andrew Stephenson: As the hon. Lady will be aware, the Government have published a number of strategies that are kept under constant review. In my own area—business and industry—“The Road to Zero” was published about a year ago, and it talks about phasing out all petrol and diesel cars by 2040, which is something we need to keep under review. Many hon. Members on both sides of the House think we should do it faster, and as we roll out charging points, invest in industry and take various other steps, we should always keep these things under review as we seek to decarbonise transport, home heating and all sectors of our economy.

Anna McMorrin: Words are fantastic, but we need to see action and targets to meet them. The advice of the Committee on Climate Change is actually to move towards getting rid of diesel cars long before 2040. We need to take urgent action to cut those emissions, and to cut them now.

Andrew Stephenson: I have some sympathy with what the hon. Lady says, but the Government set the target in “The Road to Zero” after consultation with industry and different groups. We came to it as a sensible target. We now have more than 200,000 electric vehicles on our roads and more than 20,000 charging points.

One thing that is overlooked when people think about the charging infrastructure is that, over the past few months, we have been installing 1,000 additional public charging points every month. We are starting to see a significant ramping up of progress, following announcements of investment in this area over successive years. Over £1.5 billion is being invested in the decarbonisation of cars in this country. In the months ahead, in addition to further Government announcements, we will start to see progress in this area.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that what we have is a process in which the Committee on Climate Change is helping us by pointing out what we need to do next, and we are doing it? Recently, 80% by 2050 became 100%, so it is a process by which we are meeting our targets.

Andrew Stephenson: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for that point. Most of the committee’s critique of the Government is fair, but we are about to publish updates on 80% of the actions. In many ways we have signalled a clear policy intent, for example on future home standards. A lot of progress is being made, and I agree with his point.

On 27 June, we set a legally binding target to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions from across the UK by 2050. That world-leading target will bring to an end our contribution to climate change, and makes the UK the first major economy to legislate for a net zero target. The UK also has a strong track record on international development, through our legal commitment to provide 0.7% of our gross national income as official development assistance. Alongside efforts to reduce our own emissions, we have committed to work with developing countries, including as part of our ODA, to enable them to pursue clean growth and climate-resilient development. We are on track to provide £5.8 billion of climate aid—our international climate finance—to help developing countries tackle the causes and impacts of climate change between 2016 and 2020.

That climate aid is delivering real results. Since 2011, we have helped more than 47 million people cope with the effects of climate change and natural disasters. We have provided 17 million people with access to clean energy. But it is still not enough. As the International Development Committee noted, it is not a problem that can be solved by Government action alone. We need businesses, communities and individuals to also act. It will be really challenging: real shifts in behaviour and global ambition will be needed, and there can be no more business as usual.

The next few years are critical. That is why tackling the crisis has become such a high priority for the UK, and it is why we have offered to preside over the major UN climate summit next year—COP 26—in partnership with Italy.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): On the point about business, what has also been said clearly this morning in the report back from the Committee on Climate Change is that the Government need to set out a road map so that businesses can understand in which direction they are going, and then the investment will follow. The first action has to lie with the Government.

Andrew Stephenson: To go back to the example I have just used of decarbonising transport in this country, “The Road to Zero” is a clear road map that was set out a year ago by the Government. It was not a kneejerk reaction: it was done in consultation with industry, other bodies and our international partners to come up with a credible track to reduce carbon emissions from road transport.

The UN climate action summit in September this year is a key staging post in our efforts. It will be a critical opportunity for world leaders to set out their ambitions ahead of COP 26, and to drive an unprecedented shift in the way we approach resilience and adaptation. Despite the scale of this challenge and the opportunities to be gained from acting, it is often seen as a problem for the future. That is why the United Kingdom and Egypt are co-leading the resilience and adaptation theme at the UN climate action summit in September. We want to drive a transformational change in the way different stakeholders around the world think about and invest in resilience and adaptation.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The resilience point is well made and incredibly important. The Committee on Climate Change said today that some 9,000 properties a year need to be fitted with flood protection—up from 500 at the moment. Kirkstall in my constituency flooded in December 2015 and the Government still have not committed to the level of flood protection that the community needs. When the Government speak about resilience, is it not just more warm words and not enough action?
Andrew Stephenson: I disagree with the hon. Lady. We have seen billions of pounds spent on flood defences across the United Kingdom. There are areas where we want to go faster: the Environment Agency has just finished a £1 million project in Earby in my constituency, and I am lobbying for it to do even more in the area. I am aware that many right hon. and hon. Members would like us to go further and faster on flood defences. I will happily raise the issue with my colleagues in DEFRA, but we are investing in ensuring that we are resilient in the future. We can do more, and we need to do more, but we are making some good progress.

Let me turn to the issue of international climate finance. Many of the interventions so far have been about our domestic record, but I want to steer us back to our international obligations and what we are doing to help some of the poorest in the world.

Let me give the House a sense of the ways in which the UK is supporting developing countries with the climate challenge. The UK uses its international climate finance, a growing part of our UK aid budget, to support developing countries to move on from business as usual to: adapt and be more climate resilient; take up transformational low-carbon development; and tackle deforestation and unsustainable land use. The Department for International Development, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and DEFRA work together to deliver that support, which is making a difference in over 100 countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Two quick points. At the launch of the “People and Nature” campaign in Parliament on Monday, we discussed the fact that there is not much point in DFID adopting these very admirable principles if UK Export Finance is supporting fossil fuel investment. Secondly, we have heard reports recently that in Brazil, parts of the Amazon the size of a football pitch are being deforested every minute. The current President’s approach suggests that he wants to continue that deforestation. Where does that fit? We hear that Government Ministers are going to Brazil to talk about fossil fuel exploration. There seems to be a lack of consistency between what DFID and other arms of Government are doing.

Andrew Stephenson: I thank the hon. Lady for those points. There has been a clear trend in UK Export Finance to move away from support for fossil fuels and towards significant additional resources going into funding renewables. Where fossil fuels have been supported they have been fuels such as gas, which is widely seen as a transition fossil fuel, and away from high-polluting fossil fuels such as coal, which UK Export Finance has not financed for well over a decade. I will touch on Brazil in my speech, so if she will allow me I will come on to that shortly.

Through programmes like the Climate Investment Funds, we are: climate-proofing road and canals in Zambia; mainstreaming climate resilience into Government planning in Malawi and Mozambique; supporting climate-vulnerable small island states to manage climate risks; and helping to drive investment in some of the largest solar power complexes in the world. Through programmes like the Renewable Energy Performance Platform, we are mobilising private sector investment in solar homes systems and small-scale renewable energy in sub-Saharan Africa, bringing clean power to those who need it most.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my good friend the Minister for allowing me to intervene. Ever since I was a boy, I have always been extremely concerned about jet fuel being injected directly into the upper atmosphere. I was told when I was young that it was clean. Of course it is not. One of the really big problems we have internationally is that jets go across our skies—some of them are not ours, obviously—and we cannot electrify a jet engine. It would be wonderful if someone could come up with a way of making an electric jet engine, so that we do not spew out exhaust into the upper atmosphere, which must have a direct effect on our climate.

Andrew Stephenson: I agree with most of what my hon. and gallant Friend says. I would just say that we do not have an electric jet engine—yet. Through the industrial strategy, a huge number of programmes are being run through my Department, including the Future Flight Challenge, which is looking at exactly these challenges so that we do not just electrify road transport, but move to lighter-weight and more efficient engines, and eventually on to electric engines flying our passenger aircrafts. Some of that work is running over a long period of time, but between Government and industry we are investing billions of pounds in exactly the kind of challenge he talks about.

We are a world leader in climate policy, green finance, and sustainable services and technologies. Through our climate aid programmes we are sharing our learning and expertise internationally, whether bilaterally or in multilateral forums, building on our pioneering Climate Change Act 2008, net zero legislation and standard-setting power sector reform, helping to build markets for clean growth technology and services worldwide. To give the House an example, in June, my Department hosted delegates from 12 developing countries for a week-long workshop to introduce them to British expertise in offshore wind and see it in action in the Tees Valley. We are now working with the World Bank to support those countries with their plans to develop their own offshore wind projects.

We are building bilateral partnerships to tackle these challenges. For example, the UK recently signed a memorandum of understanding with Colombia, signalling the start of a bold new partnership for sustainable growth. This first-of-its-kind partnership focuses on: clean growth; halting deforestation and environmental crime; preserving biodiversity; and promoting green finance to ensure the private sector can play its part in supporting Colombia’s transformation. About 200,000 square hectares of forest are lost each year in Colombia, putting its diverse ecosystems, indigenous communities and natural resources at risk, as well as driving greenhouse gas emissions. Our programmes address the structural development issues that lead to such deforestation, and in turn reduce carbon emissions.

One of our programmes works to restore degraded land, increase biodiversity and protect standing forests while at the same time increasing agricultural production by 17%, bringing income to the poorest farmers. That is sustainable development in action, benefiting the climate, the environment and people’s livelihoods. Working to
mobilise private investment to address the climate challenges is a strong focus of our climate aid, and our innovative, market-driven approach ensures that we meet global climate and sustainable development needs hand in hand.

To give another example, growing demand for soy is driving agricultural expansion and deforestation in Brazil, particularly in the Cerrado savannah region, driving up emissions and causing environmental destruction. During London Climate Action Week, we announced a green bond that will help to prevent land conversion and restore natural habitats, while supporting farmers to grow their businesses. Launched the same week as the green finance strategy, it highlights our commitment to using our green finance expertise to support sustainable development in Brazil and other countries that will be most directly impacted by the effects of climate change.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an important point about sustainable development and preventing deforestation. Does he agree that we must reach out to countries that we currently have a difficult relationship with—for example, Russia, where we are seeing dramatic deforestation in Siberia that could create untold damage not only to the region, but to the climate?

Andrew Stephenson: I agree very strongly with what my hon. Friend says. We must work with all countries around the world. Obviously, most of our overseas work is focused on the poorest countries, but we must ensure that we engage with middle-income countries and all countries to ensure that they play their part, because it is the poorest in the world who will pay the price, and an ounce of carbon does not recognise national borders. We must work on this internationally; that is why I am really proud that we are bidding for the conference of the parties to be held here. We can never stop pushing on this globally to ensure that we are all doing everything that we can.

The scale of the challenge that we have talked about today is immense. Meeting our objectives and delivering the global transition to a low-carbon economy, while ensuring continued global development, will require action from Governments, business and communities. The UK is at the forefront of ambitious action to catalyse that transition. As announced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at the G20, we have committed to ensuring that all UK aid spend will be aligned with the Paris agreement. That will mean that every penny we spend on support for developing countries, whether for education, job creation or infrastructure, will be compatible with our shared climate change goals.

We will work collaboratively with partners around the globe, including the multilateral development banks, to develop appropriate and robust methodologies for enabling our aid to align with the objectives of the Paris agreement, and we will encourage others to follow suit. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has also set out his intention to double the spending in his Department on climate and environment between 2021 and 2025, and to put climate and environment at the centre of our aid strategy.

Government action alone will not be enough; the global transition to a low-carbon economy will require unprecedented investment in green and low-carbon technologies, services and infrastructure. That is why the green finance strategy that we launched on 2 July is such an important step. Building a financial system fit for net zero will mean fundamental changes to the way in which investment decisions are made.

The strategy will position the UK at the forefront of this global transition, catalysing the investment we need to transition to a net zero economy, while strengthening the competitiveness of the UK financial sector and the wider economy, and ensuring that the City of London is the go-to hub for green investment and that we seize the significant opportunities of clean growth for the UK economy. Only once we are shifting the global economy by trillions will we really start to see a gear change in the low-carbon transition. It is critical that we all work together to make this transition. Tackling climate change and pursuing clean growth are critical to continued global prosperity and meeting the sustainable development goals, and for our continued prosperity and security right here in the UK.

As well as challenges, the low-carbon transition will bring huge opportunities—for cleaner air, for conserving the environment, for creating economic opportunities that the UK is well placed to seize. There are almost 400,000 jobs in the UK’s low-carbon sector and supply chains, and it is estimated that the UK low-carbon economy could grow by 11% per year until 2030. I am proud that UK companies such as Lightsource, which is developing solar in India, BBOXX, which is enabling off-grid power in sub-Saharan Africa, and Faro Energy, which is investing in renewables in Brazil, are helping to drive the clean growth transition around the world.

Caroline Lucas: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Stephenson: I am about to conclude my remarks, but I look forward to the hon. Lady’s contribution.

The UK has a proud record in this area. We have committed to spend 0.7% of GDP on international development and are the first major economy to legislate for net zero. By working together—Government, business and individuals—we can be world leaders in this area. I look forward to the contributions of hon. Members from across the House, including that of the Minister of State, Department for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin).

3.46 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate, although I am surprised that the Secretary of State for International Development is not here, given we were told this would be a DFID debate. It was announced as such in last week’s business statement, but then the business was changed again on Monday. I am glad that the debate itself has not been chopped from the Order Paper, but I am not sure why a Minister from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy opened it. This is a rather chaotic way to deal with such an important issue and a pretty shambolic way to deal with the Prime Minister’s legacy.

It is just two months since Labour secured the support of this House for our becoming the first Parliament in the world to declare a climate emergency. We called
then on the Government to commit to net zero carbon emissions by 2050. It was a small but important step and a reminder that real change comes from below. What a testament it is to those young activists striking from school and to the extinction rebellion movements that they have changed the tone of debate in this country so irreversibly. What a testament it is to their moral leadership that Secretaries of State and prime ministerial contenders in the Conservative party are now scrambling to demonstrate their green credentials, albeit, I would say, not that convincingly. It is a testament to their activism that a Prime Minister whose first act in office was to shut down the Department for Energy and Climate Change is now trying to make it her last act to create a climate legacy that she desperately hopes she might be remembered for.

That said, sounding the alarm and setting out promises for 30 years away is not enough. Politicians have known about the impact of climate breakdown for decades but have continued to pour billions into fossil fuel industries while offering little more than thoughts and prayers to those in the global south being hit hardest by the consequences.

Sarah Newton: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that he is rather letting down his side of the House. When the Climate Change Act was passed in 2008, a radical consensus had been forged in this House such that this issue was above party politics. Unlike in other countries where climate change is a party political issue, we are united in this House in wanting to tackle it. It is one thing to have a robust debate on the means to the ends, but we are all united around those ends.

Dan Carden: The hon. Lady should wait for my full contribution, but there are certainly differences between many Members and the Government, not least around support for fracking and other fossil fuel investments still being supported by the Government.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if there were consensus on the need for us to stop using fossil fuels, the Government could ban fracking exploration tomorrow?

Dan Carden: I do agree with the hon. Lady. Lady should wait for my full contribution, but there are certain differences between many Members and the Government, not least around support for fracking and other fossil fuel investments still being supported by the Government.

Kerry McCarthy: I do not know whether my hon. Friend has had a chance to look at the Environmental Audit Committee’s report on UK Export Finance, but does he agree that the Minister’s assertion that we are significantly reducing our investment in fossil fuels through that organisation does not stack up? There does not seem to be any evidence that we have shifted our policy at all.

Dan Carden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and the Government need to report back to Parliament on that.

I want to say a few words about climate finance. The signatories to the Paris agreement have committed to finding at least $100 billion just for mitigation and
adaptation in developing countries, but even that number is extremely conservative; UN Environment estimates that the real number for mitigation and adaptation alone could in fact be as high as £500 billion by 2050. So why does the UK not have a serious climate finance strategy? In its most recent report in May the International Development Committee called again for one to be given to Parliament, and I urge the Minister today to set out exactly when that will happen.

I turn now to how the UK can tackle the root causes of climate emergency, rather than just manage the decline of our planet. It must not be the role of the British Government and the British taxpayer to throw money at clearing up the mess left behind by the world’s biggest polluters simply so that they can carry on polluting. The truth is that our global economic model is fundamentally broken; it is a system that is driving us towards disaster in the quest to accumulate ever more wealth and extract ever more profit. Unless there is a UK Government who are serious about transitioning away from our current economic model, however ambitious our international action is it will only tackle the symptoms of climate change, never its root causes.

It is a tragedy that those least responsible for the climate crisis will be the first to suffer its consequences. It is not the world’s billionaires who are suffering the worst effects of planetary breakdown, and we should be under no illusions: they are making plans not to fix our economic model, but to escape, survive and ride out the catastrophe.

I want to bring to the House’s attention the writings of the technology writer Douglas Rushkoff, who last year recounted how he was brought in as an expert adviser to a room of billionaires to talk about climate change. He was flabbergasted when, instead of asking him about how to prevent the climate catastrophe or what role they could play, they asked him about how they could insulate themselves from the danger, including, amazingly, the use of disciplinary collars to maintain the loyalty of their private security forces to protect them when society finally broke down and when wages and money no longer held sway. That is quite remarkable.

The time for tinkering around the edges is over. To avert climate catastrophe we must radically restructure our economy here in the UK and globally so that it works for the many, not the few. We should consider this: if global growth continues at 3% each year the global economy will have doubled in size by 2043, and so too will material consumption unless we can de-link it from economic growth. For too long we have ignored the plain fact that we cannot sustain permanent growth on a planet of finite resources. That is exactly why we need the kind of systemic change that our shadow on a planet of finite resources. That is exactly why we need the kind of systemic change that our shadow on a planet of finite resources. That is exactly why we need the kind of systemic change that our shadow on a planet of finite resources.

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We are talking a bout nothing less than a great transition in how we structure our economies and societies, and that is why I want to end on a note of hope. We spend a lot of time talking about the catastrophe that is starting to unfold and the existential threat facing the planet. The vested interests are so strong that we must keep campaigning and fighting and, yes, the media barons are not always on our side on this one. They tell us that anyone who speaks up on the climate emergency is simply insisting that we all have to make terrible personal sacrifices such as cutting our holidays or our use of plastic straws. I understand why the narrative of fear can prevail, but what the climate emergency is really about is pointing the way to the better world that we all want to live in. This is about levelling things up and radically slashing inequality. It is about our children having clean air to breathe and greener public spaces to play in. It is about living on a planet with millions more trees, travelling on better public transport and having meaningful, decent green jobs in democratically owned companies that put people and planet before profit.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) wrote powerfully last week that, on the climate emergency, we need to “talk about the dream, not just the nightmare.” We have little more than a decade to save much of our environment as we know it from extinction, but the urgency of that threat has brought ideas to the surface on how we can bring about a sustainable alternative to the economic system that took us to the brink. Labour is preparing itself so that, when in government, we will not only prevent the nightmare but make that dream a reality. We on this side of the House stand ready to collaborate with our international partners and with other parties to do everything in our power and use every lever available to make the global transition to a new, greener and fairer society.

4.2 pm

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I thought I agreed with some of what the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) was saying until he started to couch his remarks in what seemed to be a somewhat cynical grab of this issue by Labour. He talked about attempting to reintroduce state control of
industry and having a great deal more corporatism of the state kind at the heart of his policy. I became suspicious as the speech went on and suddenly realised that he was a great supporter of the shadow Chancellor, which made me even more suspicious. But anyway, enough of that. Although actually, it was a bit mean of him to criticise the Secretary of State when he is off in Africa visiting environmental projects—

**Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): He’s just annoyed that he wasn’t invited.

**Sir Oliver Heald**: I hear what my hon. Friend says. But anyway—enough of this.

I want to talk about transport and climate change. The Committee on Climate Change has correctly identified the transport sector as the largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the UK and made a distinction with other sectors, such as power, heat and industrial, which have all seen year-on-year reductions in emissions, whereas transport has not decarbonised and its emissions are increasing. I am glad that the Government have come forward with proposals, but the UK’s transport infrastructure in all communities, large and small, is vital to boosting our productivity and cutting emissions, and change is needed. As a member of the Conservative Environment Network, I agree with our manifesto, which was launched last week and which I hope the Government will consider seriously. It states that the UK should have low carbon communities and low carbon industrial clusters, and that our communities should be connected by low carbon transport. Meanwhile, poor air quality in our cities is leading to a move out of diesel vehicles into petrol and petrol hybrid vehicles, which improves air quality but increases CO₂ emissions, which is putting the fourth carbon budget at risk of not being achieved by 2027.

A total modernisation of our transport network is an economic, environmental and public health priority.

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): Will my right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

**Wera Hobhouse**: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

**Sir Oliver Heald**: I was just about to say how I would tackle the problem. Let me do that, then perhaps I will give way.

How do we tackle the problem? First, we have to bring forward the phase-out date for the sale of new petrol and diesel cars to at least 2035. Given the life cycle of a traditional car, the Committee on Climate Change is clear that ensuring that all cars and vans are electric by 2050, which is needed for net zero, will require all new vehicles to be electric by 2035, and I believe that is achievable. By 2025, new electric vehicles will have the same up-front cost as equivalent conventional models, and if we can get the infrastructure right by that point, there should be no reason for consumers not to buy an electric vehicle.

**Stephen Kerr**: My right hon. and learned Friend talks about air quality and electric vehicles. Should we have an ambitious target to eliminate internal combustion engine vehicles in our cities much sooner than the date he is suggesting?

**Sir Oliver Heald**: Certainly there is a key role for incentivising that. The advantage of electric vehicles is that they avoid those damaging types of pollution we are concerned about.

**Wera Hobhouse**: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for mentioning road surface transport and the fact that our emissions are still increasing. He is absolutely right that we need the right infrastructure. Does he agree that what does not work is, for example, Highways England, in its recent consultation not even considering that it is its responsibility to provide the electricity grid needed to power electric cars? It is important that Departments work together and that Highways England takes responsibility for ensuring that we have the right electricity infrastructure.

**Sir Oliver Heald**: I agree that co-ordination is crucial. The hon. Lady makes a good point about infrastructure.

To make that long-term target a reality, we need short-term policies to get us to the point where we can accelerate electrification of road transport. Important measures include providing Government-backed interest-free loans for electric vehicle purchase; creating incentives for the installation of ultra-rapid electric vehicle chargers at key strategic points, such as on the motorway network; a new tax on sales of non-electric vehicles after 2030; introducing the right as a tenant to request an electric vehicle charging point; and changing the sort of fuel we use in petrol or hybrid petrol cars. I support the campaign recently instigated by the all-party parliamentary group for British bioethanol, which has considerable support in the House, for a shift to 10% ethanol in standard petrol, which would deliver both emission reductions and UK jobs and which I see as part of the transition.

British bioethanol is created essentially from wheat in the north of England. The wheat would otherwise be used for animal feedstuff if, and only if, a high-protein additive such as soya were added to it. It cannot be used for human beings. The soya comes from South America, which touches on the point about the Brazilian rain forest, which makes these soya imports a subject of environmental concern. A by-product of making bioethanol from British wheat is a rich-in-protein animal feed, which displaces the soya. With total investment of £5 billion, two factories have been set up in the north of England, involving 5,000 jobs. One of them is mothballed and the other is running at half capacity as they wait for the Government to mandate E10 petrol—petrol with 10% ethanol. Forward-looking countries in Europe, Australia, Canada and the USA are already doing that; it is time we got on board. It is estimated that the reduction in carbon emissions from E10 being used as the UK’s standard petrol would be equivalent to taking 700,000 cars off the road; it would also be less polluting and protect British jobs. I know the Department for Transport has already consulted on this, but it should move quickly to make this change, certainly for 2020.

Let me now talk about the tax situation and how we deal with the change from fuel duty to a world of electric vehicles. As we shift to electric vehicles, the amount of revenue the Exchequer takes from fuel will naturally shrink. We need, therefore, to change how we pay for roads. Road pricing is based on the principle that those making use of public roads should pay a sum
commensurate with costs involved. Ideally, the total sum should include the costs of air pollution and greenhouse gases as well. Sophisticated schemes also use live data to factor in congestion, and charge people more to drive during peak times on busy roads. There are existing schemes, such as in Singapore, that show that this can be done. So the Government should be looking at that as a possible way forward. By working with the power of market price signals, road pricing incentivises individuals to use cleaner fuel and to travel at times that are less damaging.

I shall turn now to regional rail networks and bus, tram and cycling services. The lack of decent transport outside London is a handbrake on UK growth. Local transport networks in towns and cities are woefully undeveloped compared with those in similar sized places in other countries. For example, Leeds is the largest city in the European Union with no mass transport system. Its twin city, Lille, has two metro lines, two tram lines, and an international high-speed rail connection. Fixing this disparity is critical to UK growth and to easing the pressure on housing demand in London. To meet net zero, we need a switch of freight from road to rail, and for commuters and travellers to feel confident to use low carbon transport.

I wish to mention a few strategic transport investments at this point. Surely the time has come to modernise the rail network across the Pennines.

Andrew Stephenson: Hear, hear.

Sir Oliver Heald: Yes, exactly so. A place such as Letchworth Garden City was designed with transport in mind from the very start, with Ebenezer Howard ensuring that the railway station was in the middle of the town and that there were cycle ways. In recent times, the numbers of cycling racks at the station and the green way have been enhanced; a lot has been done. My hon. Friend is right to say that if we want to meet our ambition of having proper connectivity, we need cycling, walking and low carbon public transport in order to effect the change.

Gareth Thomas: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is making an interesting speech. I have been trying to keep pace with all his asks of the Chancellor in terms of costs—it is a serious list of asks. Does he not think there is a need for a serious debate, costed out, about the cost of decarbonising our transport network in the future? I agree with his proposals for investment in Leeds, and for Letchworth Garden City and his constituency. Other things are also needed for London and the funding simply is not there within the DFT’s budget, so an urgent plan to change that is essential.

Sir Oliver Heald: Yes; of course, the purpose of the carbon budgets and some of the work of the Committee on Climate Change is exactly to tease out those effects. It is a good thing that the body that we set up to be independent, to give the Government advice and to hold their feet to the fire is doing just that—that is what it is there for. Yes, there are costs, but there are also gains. I just made the point about bioethanol; there is already investment in green jobs in the places where we want them, such as Teesside and the Humber. Those factories could generate more jobs and make money that could be taxed. At the moment, all that is being held back for want of a Government decision on an environmental kind. There is money to be had for the Government in terms of inputs, as well as just outputs, or debts. I agree with the hon. Gentleman to some extent, but we do have a process in hand.

Let me turn to light railway in the context of rural locations. I shall use the example of Buntingford, in my constituency, where housing numbers are being rapidly expanded—basically, planning is being allowed to double the size of the town—but there is no employment, or not much, because it is a rural community, and it does not have a train service. That means there will be many more car journeys, as the new homes go to commuters, who travel mainly to London and Cambridge. If we built a light rail link to Stevenage, people would have the option of going by public transport to the big town to shop or on the main line to work.

Of course, people think that light railway is bound to cost a fortune, because in a city it does—the land has to be bought, and it is incredibly expensive—but we need to look more at whether light railway can be done at a sensible price in a rural location. It would also have environmental and social benefits. I have asked Hertfordshire County Council, which is currently visioning its transport for 2050, to look into the idea, and also to look at whether there might be other possibilities for east-west routes in the county.

Rachel Reeves: Both the right hon. and learned Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) have mentioned my city of Leeds, so I feel I should stand up and say something. Three years ago we got the first new train station in Leeds for 30 years, and it has made a huge difference to Kirkstall in my constituency. Other new train stations could be opened on existing lines, including in Armley.
in my constituency. As well as some sort of tram network or underground system, simple things can be done in cities like Leeds, such as reopening train stations and opening new ones on existing lines.

Sir Oliver Heald: I am glad that the hon. Lady and I agree on this. In the area near North East Hertfordshire, Cambridge North station was recently opened, and that has had a good effect in respect of building the high-tech businesses in that part of Cambridge. That is another example of using the existing railway system but putting in new facilities.

This might be a bit controversial, but we need to consider as a society where we are going with our shopping behaviour. Walking, cycling or using a low carbon means of transport to visit a bricks-and-mortar shop in a high street is surely more environmentally sound than more and more vans delivering to our doorsteps. We need to consider that in the context of the incentives and disincentives applied by Government.

My hon. Friend the Minister referred to improved environmental fuel for aviation and to electric planes, and such things will happen. This is an enormous subject, but I just wanted to make it clear in my speech that tackling transport emissions is key if we are to meet the net zero carbon target by 2050.

4.19 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): First, I apologise for being a couple of minutes late at the start of this debate.

This is such an important debate, as it covers probably the three biggest areas that will affect our lives directly and the lives of our children and of the generations to come. I look forward to travelling to New York next week with other members of the International Development Committee for the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. This serves as a central United Nations platform for the follow-up and review of the sustainable development goals—I was hoping to hear more about that in today’s debate—which have been described as “a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future.”

Achieving those goals will be vital for securing global development. Looking at all 17 of them, it is clear that protecting the environment and tackling climate change will play a fundamental role. Let me give some examples. Goal 6, to provide clean water and sanitation, goal 7, to provide affordable and clean energy, and goals 14 and 15, to protect life below water and life on land, all require environmental protection in order to succeed. The fundamental question that we in this Chamber must ask is: how will we achieve goal 1, no poverty, goal 2, zero hunger, or goal 11 on sustainable cities and communities, among many others, when those goals are being put in jeopardy by the disastrous consequences of climate change?

Protecting the environment and tackling climate change must be a priority for all Departments of all Governments in these islands, with clear targets, policies and actions to ensure that that is delivered. As we know, Scotland has a rich and diverse natural environment, and the Scottish Government are determined to lead by example by protecting and enhancing our natural capital.

Studies suggest that the elements of Scotland’s natural capital that can be given a monetary value are worth more than £20 billion each year to our economy, supporting more than 60,000 jobs. Furthermore, many of Scotland’s growth sectors, such as tourism and food and drink, depend on high-quality air, land and water. That is why the Scottish Government are taking action to protect our environment to ensure that we have a thriving and sustainable economy. For example, the Scottish Government have an ambition for Scotland’s air quality to be the best in Europe and have established an air quality strategy called “Cleaner air for Scotland: the road to a healthier future”, with 40 aims to realise this goal. To support this, £10.8 million has been provided to support the introduction of low emission zones—something on which I will touch later and, given what was said by the previous speaker, something that is important for all of us here as well.

Moreover, figures from June have shown that the Scottish Government have met their target of 11,200 hectares of new tree planting and now plan to increase the target further in 2024 to 15,000 hectares. To put that into context, that is 22 million trees. I have to say that, sadly, England has barely managed to make 10% of that, so I am looking to hear more about that later. These actions will not only protect the environment, lead to healthier lives and offer fantastic opportunities for our economy, but play a fundamental role in tackling climate change.

Last month, I spoke in this Chamber and welcomed the UK Government’s decision to legislate for a net zero carbon emissions target by 2050, following the advice of the UK Committee on Climate Change. However, simply setting targets will not solve climate change, and I think we have heard that from across the Chamber. What we need is a clear plan setting out how to transition to a net zero economy. Today, the UK Committee on Climate Change has reported that action to cut greenhouse gas emissions is lagging far behind what is needed, and that the UK’s credibility rests on Government action over the next very short 18 months. There is no time to dither or delay. The Committee has called for a net zero policy to be embedded across all levels and Departments of Government and for the new Prime Minister to lead the UK’s zero carbon transition from day one, working closely with Northern Ireland and the First Ministers of Wales and Scotland.

The Scottish Government’s “Climate Change Plan 2018-2032”, which sets out the actions needed to make Scotland carbon neutral by 2045, is due to be updated within six months of the Climate Change Bill receiving Royal Assent. Work is already under way to meet the enhanced target. Scotland’s energy strategy sets a target for the equivalent of 50% of energy for Scotland’s heat, transport and electricity consumption to be supplied from renewable sources by 2030. In order to help achieve net zero emissions, a publicly owned not-for-profit energy company will be established to deliver renewable energy to Scottish customers. This is not a party political debate about the left or the right, but a debate about how we can combat not only climate change but fuel poverty. The reason for setting up that company is that it will endeavour to ensure that the price is as close to the cost price as possible. I urge the UK Government to do that for the rest of the UK, as well as to achieve their recently set targets.
Furthermore, with transport accounting for just over one third of total energy demand, Scotland already has the most ambitious agenda in the UK for decarbonising transport. The Scottish Government have already announced the change in policy on air departure tax and committed to phasing out the need for new petrol and diesel cars by 2032—eight years ahead of the rest of the UK. The plan is to implement low emission zones in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and my wonderful city of Dundee by the end of 2020.

To help achieve all that and send a clear signal that Scotland is a place for innovation and low carbon technology, the Scottish Government will establish an innovation fund to invest a further £60 million in delivering wider low carbon energy infrastructure solutions across Scotland, such as electricity battery storage, sustainable heating systems and electric vehicle charging. The expansion of the charging network will raise awareness and uptake of ultra low emission vehicles among private motorists and accelerate their procurement in the public and private sectors. I am disappointed that the UK Government withdrew the tax incentive from electric vehicles last December. I hope that they will consider putting it back, so that more people move towards electric vehicles again.

Rachel Reeves: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that the most recent data shows that the number of electric vehicles sold has actually fallen? That suggests that the cut in grant and the failure to deliver the charging infrastructure is deterring people from buying the cars that all of us in the Chamber believe people should be buying to help reduce our carbon emissions.

Chris Law: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. This is fundamental: if we want to change public behaviour, we have to put the carrots and sticks in place. Things have happened since 2015. For example, the cancellation of the carbon capture and storage project at Peterhead and the removal of tariffs for on-land wind generation are two other factors that should be reconsidered.

I am pleased to say that my own city of Dundee has the highest proportion of electric vehicles in its council fleet in Scotland and one of the largest electric taxi fleets in the UK. As a result, people now feel that the electric charging points across the city are not novel but normal to use.

I have to correct something. I keep hearing that the UK was the first country to declare a climate emergency, but in fact Scotland was. We understand that we will need to go even further. Progress to date has been achieved with little impact on most people; few of us have had to make any real radical lifestyle changes.

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Gentleman is moving on to discuss the broader issue of the environment, I think. A report last week from Zero Waste Scotland suggested that Scottish households spend £600 million a year just on packaging. We can do a lot in that direction. The Scottish Government have rightly taken a lead with the deposit return scheme. However, would it not be more sensible if all parts of the United Kingdom got together with a co-ordinated approach to a deposit return scheme that covered the length and breadth of these islands?
He has said:

“We can’t keep spending huge sums of British taxpayers’ money…”

Let us remember that this is 70p in every £100—

“as though we were some independent Scandinavian NGO…The present system is leading to inevitable waste as money is shoved out of the door in order to meet the 0.7 per cent target.”

That is ridiculous. Of course, as I said in a debate this morning, the UK is not “some independent Scandinavian NGO”—it is one of the largest economies in the world, and it has both a legal and a moral duty to commit to 0.7% on aid spending and securing global development. If we are truly serious about taking the unique opportunity to eradicate poverty, reduce inequalities, combat catastrophic climate change and protect our natural environment by 2030, as set out in the sustainable development goals, it is vital to have a well-resourced, stand-alone Department committed to international development and the 0.7% aid target.

We therefore now need detailed plans on how this Government will face up to the challenges of protecting our environment, tackling climate change and securing global development. It is up to us, the next one, to find the answers to these great global challenges. Those plans need to be bold, ambitious and unafraid of criticism. SNP Members would rather see plans come forward that were radical and visionary—that allow for real debate, without which we will ultimately fail everyone in our responsibility to meet the urgent targets that have been set. There is nothing to fear in scrutinising bold proposals in this Chamber and debating whether they are fit for purpose. The real fear is prevarication, lack of planning and piecemeal policies that will fail not only the UK but our partners in the rest of the world.

To support these efforts, regardless of who is Prime Minister, it is imperative that the targets that have already been set are not rolled back or undermined and that the Department for International Development is maintained as a stand-alone Department to lead work in tackling these issues globally. Fundamentally, given the breadth of the debate today, it is essential that there is policy coherence across Departments and that the next Prime Minister understands and is committed to this. We cannot have one Department undoing the good work of another. May I suggest that the Cabinet Office is seriously considered to oversee this?

No one Government has all the answers, and it is important that Governments across these islands share best practice and learn from each other. Of course, I look forward to the time when Scotland is an independent nation, but we will always share our responsibilities as an outward-looking, internationalist nation, and share our world-leading policies on issues like climate change and hear about examples of best practice in Scotland, that fantastic member of the United Kingdom.

There is no doubt that our actions are changing the planet. Our relentless consumption of the earth’s resources over centuries has consequences, and today we are starting to see them. Many of our once abundant coral reefs are bleached white and left lifeless. Vast expanses of land where rain forests once stood are stripped bare for farming. Even in Europe, some reports suggest that deserts will expand across the southern Mediterranean. We are destroying the earth’s natural carbon sinks, and with them, the wider biosphere—so much so that our planet is now in the midst of its sixth mass extinction. Not since the extinction of the dinosaurs have we seen such a loss of plant and animal species. According to one study, current extinction rates are 1,000 times higher than they would be if humans were not around. The International Union for Conservation of Nature’s red list found that more than 27% of all assessed species on the planet are threatened with extinction.

We have the facts about what is happening to our world today, and we know why these changes are occurring, so in theory the solution should be simple. In one sense, it is—we need to stop producing carbon dioxide and implement strict protections for vulnerable ecosystems. But to do that, we need both the political will and a sense of economic realism. We need to take the people of the country with us, which is why this must not be a party political issue.

I have heard the calls for putting the UK on to a war-like footing, immediately banning combustion engines, limiting flights and turning off the taps to traditional fossil fuels. It can be tempting to get swept away on this wave of emotion and the calls for drastic change. There is a serious risk of gesture politics overtaking pragmatic, sensible policy making. Setting goals without a plan is wishful thinking. We need a plan, but it must be carefully constructed to avoid the mistakes of the past. We all remember diesel cars—we were all convinced that we had to buy them. As a result, the market share went from 14% to 65%, and look what happened next.

We need to ensure that these actions are complementary. I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on the United Nations global goals for sustainable development. We need to check that the policies we put in place are coherent, because some policies to pursue one goal may impact negatively on another goal. This is the whole world’s ecosystem we are talking about, and we need to take account of that.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): My hon. Friend is right that we need to take people with us and ensure that this works for them. Does she agree that if we provide enough charging points for electric vehicles and support people to purchase them, we can help to clean up our environment and significantly reduce the cost of living, because electric vehicles are so much cheaper to run?

Gillian Keegan: Yes. Last year I went to the Nucleus conference at Goodwood and saw one of the world’s leading electric car manufacturers, NIO—a Chinese company—which is solving the problem in a different way. Instead of creating lots of charging points, they had changeable units that people could pick up and drop off in a garage, like we do with Calor gas on the continent. We need to consider all the best practice, because we do not want to get policy wrong again.

Wera Hobhouse: The hon. Lady is right; we need to get this right and take people with us. Is it not also true that we are up against some strong vested interests?
We should not underestimate how much those with strong vested interests in the fossil fuel industry and the car industry would like to continue as before, because that would be easiest for them. They are going to push back, and that is the challenge we face in this House.

**Gillian Keegan:** As politicians, we are very used to strong vested interests; in fact, most of us can spot them a mile off. I worked in car manufacturing for eight years before coming to this place. Those companies have made radical changes to their manufacturing processes and designs, and all of them are moving to electric vehicles. We must be generous to those businesses and industries. There is sometimes a little bit of anti-business rhetoric in this place, and we ought to remember that those businesses do most of the investment in most technology innovation in this country.

**Wera Hobhouse:** I thank the hon. Lady for giving way again; she is being very generous. I am not anti-business. My family runs businesses, and I understand how business works. They need to have the right incentives. When I talk to those in the car industry, they say that the Government need to send a strong message out to the industry and investors about where they are going, and currently they are failing to do that.

**Gillian Keegan:** Having spent 30 years in business, I can tell the hon. Lady that no business waits for politicians to give them the answer. They do not; they innovate, they invest in innovation and they invest in where the market is going. In fact, they often create the market.

We need to take drastic action, but we need to do it in a way that is not drastic. This became apparent to me during the Extinction Rebellion protest. When it came here, I spent an hour listening to, learning from and debating the points raised by one group. One of the suggestions made by some in the group was the introduction of a one child policy here in the UK. That would be a rather totalitarian response, and it is unnecessary given our already declining total fertility rate of just 1.76 in 2017.

That said, there were plenty of sensible ideas as well, such as installing solar panels on all new builds, putting in alternative fuel boilers and ensuring we are insulating homes properly, which is one of the simplest things that can have a massive impact. We should all be doing it, and I hope to see some action on that. Obviously, we should also be moving to greener modes of transport, reusing and recycling, and restoring peat land and planting millions more trees a year. All of these offer many financial and environmental benefits.

It is fundamental to remember that to become a carbon neutral country, we will need to invest in technological development and to incentivise, with incentive schemes, green infrastructure and much more. However, I believe we must be cautious about policies and ideas that negatively impact on growth; for example, calls that limit people to one long-haul flight, which was another Extinction Rebellion idea—it did confirm that it meant return flights—and one short-haul flight per year. As someone who has worked internationally for 30 years, I would dearly love to get out of a job and take 200 flights a year. It was my job to grow business and to grow jobs, and such flights are sometimes part of what needs to happen in a globalised world.
Derek Thomas: I thank the hon. Lady for her enthusiasm and for the opportunity to intervene. She will be aware that the Committee on Climate Change has said that this is about upscaling and making sure that we have the skills we need right across the country. In places like Cornwall, which I represent, the skills are not there and low-paid jobs are the norm. Does she agree that this gives us the opportunity to create wealth and spread it across every corner of the United Kingdom?

Rachel Reeves: I absolutely agree. Some of those coastal towns, cities and regions stand to benefit the most. In my own region, Yorkshire and the Humber, the job opportunities from offshore wind have helped to transform previously deprived communities. There will be huge opportunities in Cornwall, with battery technologies giving huge potential for growth and jobs in an area that desperately needs them.

Gareth Thomas: I endorse the remarks of my hon. Friend and of the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on the huge potential for offshore wind to create new jobs in this country. Does she agree that the solar industry also offers significant potential for new jobs, and that it would be good to hear the Government’s plans to accelerate the requirement to put solar panels on new buildings?

Rachel Reeves: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, and I would also add the opportunities from onshore wind, which the Government disappointingly continue to block, and from tidal power. The experience of offshore wind is that, after initial Government support and investment, the industry and the energy it produces can become cheaper than those it replaces, which again provides big opportunities for jobs and investment.

Sir David Attenborough gave evidence to the BEIS Committee yesterday. Right at the beginning, he said that the environment around us is essential for every breath we take and everything we eat, as well as for our sanity and our sense of proportion. How we treat our natural environment and what we put into it is incredibly important.

As you can imagine, Madam Deputy Speaker, the BEIS Committee always has huge audiences for every inquiry and every evidence session, but our audience yesterday was particularly large, and the attendance was pretty impressive, too. The audience was also very young.

The Minister said at the beginning of this debate that when he goes into schools in his constituency they often talk about these issues, which is inspiring and gives us all hope for the future. The next generation, who listened to our evidence session yesterday, and the generation after that, who are at Castleton Primary School in Armley and Beecroft Primary School in Burley in my constituency, know what a priority this is, and I hope they will continue to press us to make it our priority in this place, too.

I am proud that this was the first Parliament to pass a climate change Act in 2008, and that the current Parliament has set a target of achieving net zero by 2050 but, as Lord Deben said on the publication of the report of the Committee on Climate Change today, international ambition does not deliver domestic action. That is an important point for us to dwell on. I welcome the bid to host COP 26 next year, and I welcome the fact that we are the first country to legislate for net zero, but we will achieve it in 2050—I hope we achieve it sooner—only if we put policies in place today to make it happen.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and I entirely agree with her. Enfield Council will pass its climate change plan tonight but, on her point about the need for action, does she agree that one action the Government could take is not to subsidise fossil fuels? Fossil fuels have caused so much damage over the years, particularly in developing countries.

Rachel Reeves: We have made huge progress in just the last decade in terms of our reliance on fossil fuels, and we can now get through a week or two without using coal. By 2025, we will not be using coal to generate energy in this country, and that is fantastic. But as the shadow Secretary of State for International Development said in his speech earlier, we are still funding and investing in the development of fossil fuels overseas. Climate change and the emission of carbon is not something that we can just tackle here at home. It is no good reducing our carbon emissions in the UK if we fund investment in them overseas. That is why international action matters, but so do the investment decisions that British companies and the British Government make.

Like Enfield, Leeds City Council has declared a climate emergency and is putting in place policies to address it, which is very welcome in our city.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): Has the hon. Lady’s Committee looked at the issue of three-phase electricity supply to homes? One of my constituents is keen to invest in solar and Tesla-style wall plugs so that they can recharge vehicles and so on, but the cost of installing the necessary three-phase electricity supply is a problem. Does she feel that that would be a better area for the Government to invest in and allow us to expand renewables?

Rachel Reeves: Electric vehicles have been discussed quite a bit already today, and much more could be done to encourage people to buy them and to make it easier for people to charge them, as well as to get the charging infrastructure in all communities, including more rural ones.

Our Committee has produced several reports over the last few years on practical things that the Government could do. It has been disappointing at times that our recommendations and suggestions are often rejected by Ministers, when if they had accepted them, we might be a little closer to meeting some of our objectives. On electric vehicles, our Committee recommended that the target of 2040 be brought forward to 2032, and that was before the Government committed to net zero.

The Committee on Climate Change today said: “The ‘Road to Zero’ ambition”—which the Minister is obviously proud of—“for a phase-out of petrol and diesel cars by 2040 is too late and plans to deliver it are too vague. A date closer to 2030 would save motorists money, cut air and noise pollution and align to the net-zero challenge.”

I urge the Minister to look at the evidence from the Committee on Climate Change, and the evidence that our Committee took, which points resolutely to the need to bring forward the date for phasing out the internal combustion engine.
While we welcome decisions by companies such as Jaguar Land Rover to invest in a new fleet of electric vehicles, we need to do more to work with our car manufacturing industry to turn the Faraday Institution’s ideas and research into practical applications that can revive our British car industry and keep more jobs here, while not polluting the planet in the way that the car industry has in the past.

Everybody who gave evidence to our Committee said that there is no way that we would meet even our previous targets without the roll-out of carbon capture and storage. But we are still waiting for Government decisions on investment in that industry, so that we are not just doing the research and development in labs, but are trialling it and piloting it in some of our communities. That goes back to the point that the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) made earlier about communities all over the country. The communities that stand to benefit most from carbon capture and storage are in the north-east, Humber, Merseyside, south Wales and Fife, for example—all areas that desperately need jobs and investment. If the Government unlocked the funding, which they have previously cut, they could ensure more good-quality jobs all over the country while contributing to reducing our carbon emissions.

Our Committee has also just concluded a report on energy efficiency, which we will publish soon. Without giving away the findings—my Clerk might be watching—we heard a lot of evidence that the homes we are building today will need to be retrofitted in years to come because they are not of a high enough energy efficiency standard. It seems nonsensical that we know we are building homes today that will have to be retrofitted in future. Those who got planning permission on a development five or 10 years ago only have to meet the energy efficiency rules and regulations from when they got that planning permission, not those in place today. If we just fixed those things, we would be building homes that do not contribute to global warming in the way that they do today.

The Committee also heard evidence that since the Government scrapped the green new deal, improvements to existing housing stock are just not happening. They are not happening in social housing, the private rented sector or the owner-occupied sector. Unless that happens, we have no chance of meeting the net zero commitments. I urge the Government to look at that when our report is published, and not reject our conclusions and recommendations, which happens far too often, but engage with them, adopt them and put them in place. Only by doing that do we have any chance of meeting the targets that we all say we want to achieve.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I have been following the hon. Lady’s Committee inquiry into energy efficiency with great interest. The evidence she has received has been compelling and I look forward to the report. Does she agree that the need to focus on energy efficiency is unarguable, because if we are going to pass on to consumers the inevitable cost as we transition our energy system, doing that alongside the savings that come with a focus on energy efficiency seems to me to be a fair contract with the consumer?

Rachel Reeves: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. We often debate the cost of living in this Chamber. One of the big contributors to the cost of living is the cost of gas and electricity. This Parliament legislated for a cap on energy prices—I welcome that and our Select Committee conducted important pre-legislative scrutiny work—but the cheapest sort of energy is that which we do not use at all. If we improved the energy efficiency of our homes, we would have lower bills. A Government investment strategy through the National Infrastructure Commission that retrofitted homes, particularly for people on lower incomes, would therefore help to reduce our carbon footprint and put money back in the pockets of some of our poorest constituents. That would be a double win and we should all work together to achieve that.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to the Chairman of the Select Committee that I have the privilege of serving on for giving way. There is a triple win here. A lot of ill health stems from poor-quality housing stock. If we were to have a national mission to upgrade our housing stock, one key benefit would be an improvement in the nation’s health. That would save us a lot in health costs.

Rachel Reeves: I thank the hon. Gentleman—I was going to call him my hon. Friend, because he is very much my friend and an excellent member of my Select Committee. He makes a really important point. I do not think any Member in this Chamber has not had a constituent come to their surgery because of problems with a damp or poorly insulated home, while also paying astronomical gas and electricity bills. Would it not be wonderful if we could fix that, particularly for our poorest consumers?

I would like to finish where I started—with what Sir David Attenborough said at our Select Committee yesterday. He said that we “cannot be radical enough” when addressing climate change. If we listened to the young people who have been on strike, the protesters, the people who came to listen to that evidence session and all the people who tune into programmes about our natural environment, this would be a national emergency. We would be taking steps commensurate with the scale of the challenge. I very much welcome the Government’s commitment to net zero by 2050, but it is now imperative that we put in place the policies that will help to achieve that, so that our generation can pass on to our children and grandchildren a better world and a better planet.

4.58 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a privilege to follow my friend, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). I am very proud to serve on her Select Committee, because I think we do a lot of really good work. Certainly, my pride as a Member of Parliament is augmented by the experiences I have as part of that Committee.

I was among those who were in the House just a few days ago, in relative terms, when we had a debate on amending the law to set a net zero carbon target by 2050. The damage that humankind is doing to the earth and the resulting climate emergency represent a call to action for the whole world. Britain, with its historic role in shaping the industrial age, accepts its unique responsibility to assume a global leadership role in tackling climate change, but we cause only 1% of the world’s emissions,
so we must use all the soft power at our disposal to influence the nations of the world to approach the challenge of climate change with the serious intent that the times we are living in demand.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point. He rightly mentions the challenge of climate change, but does he also recognise some of the opportunities in that transition to the low carbon economy—not least in Scotland, where we both come from, with our renewables potential?

Stephen Kerr: Indeed. I am grateful for that intervention and I will come on to talk about some of those issues, some of the lessons that we can learn and some of the opportunities that we can take advantage of, particularly from a Scottish point of view.

It is each generation’s responsibility to preserve and sustain our planet for those who will follow. I believe that this generation accepts the seriousness of that responsibility, but we politicians owe it to the people of our country to hold an honest conversation about what the change in law we made just a few days ago amounts to. Setting targets in law, holding debates, setting up committees and publishing reports are clearly not going to do the job in themselves.

This is the most difficult transitional change we will ever go through as a country, and we should not minimise the challenge. We do ourselves no favours by minimising the nature of the challenge that we face. I too will refer to the evidence that we received yesterday from Sir David Attenborough—appropriately enough, I would say, in the Thatcher Room. We should never forget that Margaret Thatcher was the first politician of stature to highlight the issue of climate change and the dangers that it posed to the whole world, most especially the poorest people on the planet. She did that 30 years ago this coming November, at the United Nations.

It was in the Thatcher Room that we took evidence from Sir David Attenborough. I doubt that anyone has done more to raise public consciousness of humankind’s wanton abuse and neglect of the planet and the impact of climate change than Sir David. As the Chair of the Select Committee has already mentioned, Sir David was indeed a star witness; the Public Gallery was packed—significantly, I would have said, almost exclusively with young people. At one point, he turned in his chair to face them and he applauded them. He told us:

“It is their world that we are playing with. It is their futures that are in our hands. If the faces around here do not inspire us to do that, I don’t know what will.”

It was an inspirational moment.

I had the opportunity to ask Sir David whether he was optimistic about our ability to meet the challenge of climate change, and he said:

“I see no future in being pessimistic, because that leads you to say, ‘To hell with it. Why should I care?’ I believe that way, disaster lies. I feel an obligation, because the only way you can get up in the morning is to believe that actually, we can do something about it, and I suppose I think we can.”

He went on:

“Whether that is optimistic or not, I do not know, and whether in fact it is going to produce a result or not, I do not know, but that is the only way I can operate. I have to get up in the morning and say, ‘Something has to be done, and I will do my best to bring that about.’”

The House will not be surprised to learn that, in the time I have been a member of the Select Committee, Sir David has been the only witness who, at the conclusion of his testimony, elicited a standing ovation from both the members of the Committee and the people in the Public Gallery. In fact, he is the only witness that the Committee has ever asked for a photograph with.

The young people of the United Kingdom are ahead of the curve on this issue, and it is for us in this House to take up the baton to build a new cross-party consensus. I agree with what was said earlier about the need for this to rise above the cut and thrust of party politics.

James Heappey: I am envious of my hon. Friend for having been able to hear such amazing evidence in person yesterday. Does he agree that perhaps the edge that young people have over older generations is that they understand the existential nature of the climate change threat? They genuinely see it as a challenge to their ability to live the life that they want to lead in the future. The sooner we can convey that existential threat to older generations, the sooner we will gain the public consent necessary to close meaningfully with these huge challenges of addressing climate change.

Stephen Kerr: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Now is the time to unite the generations and the nation itself to tackle the challenge that lies before us. Yes, we have filled columns and columns in Hansard discussing Brexit—it is the national obsession at the moment—but the issues in this debate transcend any of the matters relating to Brexit, which will very soon, I hope, be a chapter in the story of our nation. This is about the future of our planet, and young people absolutely get that.

It is essential that we build a cross-party consensus by dealing with the issues as they arise on an evidence-led basis. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change said in its most recent overview of climate science:

“Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia. The atmosphere and ocean have warmed, the amounts of snow and ice have diminished, and sea level has risen.”

I repeat: it is vital that we have an honest conversation between ourselves as political representatives and the people we represent in our deliberations in the House.

The Committee on Climate Change has said there is currently no Government strategy to engage the public in the transition to a low carbon economy and adds that that will need to change. That warning—that very strong nudge—needs to be accepted by us all on the Government Benches. There needs to be a shared determination to address the need for a national conversation. My constituents, of all ages, reach out to me to discuss climate change because it concerns them. Sir David Attenborough yesterday mentioned how a 90-second, two-minute clip in one of his documentary series on the damage that plastics were doing to the ecology of the oceans of the world had galvanised a whole body of opinion not just in this country but across world.

That feeling was reflected in a meeting I attended the Sunday before last with the green team at Stirling Methodist church. They wanted to talk to me about their ideas and suggestions, which they wanted to share more widely, for how people could choose to act and
even the mental attitude they could adopt to establish our own net zero carbon target. I could not help but think about that when I was listening to my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan). In addition to sending a first-class Member of Parliament to this House, her constituents have done the planet a power of good by reducing the number of times she flies from 200 to something a little bit more manageable.

We have an individual responsibility in terms of our own lifestyles. In that meeting with the Methodists, we shared together as Christians our sense of having a covenant responsibility to be keenly aware of our responsibility as stewards of the earth. We all agree that we owed it to each other, to our children and to our children’s children to bring about a wider conversation in Stirling and beyond about what these new net zero targets would mean for our lifestyle expectations and how we behaved as individuals, not least in terms of diet. We must be under no illusions as to the real change that will be required of our country and of us as individuals if we are to meet the challenge we have set ourselves of net zero by 2050.

I will make a short list of some of the areas where we need action this day—to borrow a phrase from Winston Churchill—and I will start with single-use plastics. Pragmatically speaking, we need to address this issue. There will always be a place for plastics, even single-use plastics—for medical purposes, food hygiene and other specific purposes—but we must adopt the default position that plastic should not be used as a single-use material.

I intervened earlier on the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) to highlight a report that appeared in the Scottish press a few days ago and which mentioned that Scottish households alone were spending £600 million just on the packaging of the goods they were buying, which they were then either recycling or otherwise disposing of.

**Derek Thomas**: I have been visiting schools for a long time now, and everyone I have spoken to wants a plastic-free school, but the pupils tell me that many of the items that are supplied to the canteens—over which they have no control—are wrapped in single-use plastic. Those children are at their wits’ end, because they feel that they do not have the power to bring about change. What does my hon. Friend think we should be doing about that?

**Stephen Kerr**: We need to do something, and I think we need to have a discussion about what that means, because I think the House has a part to play in that something that we need to do. I have become personally aware—much more than I have ever been—of the extent and volume of single-use plastic in my life. I know that during Lent some of my hon. Friends, and indeed some Opposition Members, engaged in a fast to clear their lives of single-use plastic. That was exemplary in setting the pace for all of us in the House and for the whole country, but we really need to apply some fresh thinking to the urgent need to deal with single-use plastic.

For instance, as I said earlier to the hon. Member for Dundee West, we need action on the proposed deposit return scheme. I know that it takes time for these things to be put together, and I know that it is important for there to be as much discussion as possible in Parliament, in Whitehall and, of course, with the business community, especially the retailers who will have to manage much of the scheme. I also appreciate that the Scottish Parliament, on an all-party basis, has done some pioneering work in this regard. I must say to the Minister, however, that it is surely not beyond the realms of possibility for all the Governments on these islands, at all levels, to work together to create a single UK-wide scheme for the return of plastic bottles in particular. That would remove any danger of geographical or cost anomalies. By working together, we could help to cement the idea of deposit return with the public. The sooner we do that, the better.

The second point that I want to make concerns transport. I do not want to repeat some of the things that have been said earlier, but it is important for us to understand that 15% of global man-made carbon emissions come from cars. We have a huge opportunity to move to lower emission vehicles, but we need many more electric charging points. The infrastructure is patchy to non-existent, and it does not give confidence to potential purchasers of low emission or electric vehicles. The planning laws throughout these islands should be changed to insist that car-charging points are installed in all new private houses and commercial properties as part of their initial construction. We also need a single system for using car-chargers: expecting drivers to have several cards in their wallets and separate registrations for different charging points is absurd if we wish to make it easy for people to make the transition to vehicle use. Governments need to do what Governments, and only Governments, can do, and bring together every party so that a sense of co-ordination and working together is at the heart of this national infrastructure project.

Let me ask the Minister a question that I asked during a debate just a few days ago. Where is the promised competition for a standard charging point design—the so-called Hayes hook-ups? I think that that could capture the imagination of the wider public. [Interruption.] Yes—the Hayes hook-ups are named after our right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes).

With better infrastructure will come greater consumer confidence, but the Government should restore the incentives for buyers of electric vehicles that they reduced last year, because they have had some impact. We must be ambitious, and set new targets to eliminate the use of internal combustion engines from our cities by the middle of the next decade. I think that that is realistic. I also agree with something that was said by an Opposition Member earlier: it is important for the Government to give a clear signal to manufacturers, because investment decisions are made within the framework of public policy.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman shares my excitement about the potential for wave and tidal energy. Will he join me in calling on the Government to step up and offer the kind of support for the sector that could enable it to shift up a gear or two, start commercialising its projects that are so tantalisingly close to realisation, and then not only contribute to the environment changes that we seek but offer our economy many more jobs?

**Stephen Kerr**: I agree that no technology should be off the table; all the new technologies and all the existing technologies should be part of the Government’s consideration.
I was talking about the support that I wish to give to the hon. Member for Leeds West in relation to our Committee’s finding that we need to set a clearer and bolder ambition on the discontinuation of the sale of new petrol and diesel cars and vans, the date for which is currently 2040; it needs to be something nearer 2030 or 2032.

The third point I wish to make is about housing, which has already been mentioned by previous speakers. Let me say this as a Scottish Conservative: I know that other Members of the House must sometimes wonder what is going on at this end of the Chamber where my colleagues and I have occasional ding-dongs with SNP Members—all for good reasons I am sure—but the UK Government should follow the lead of the Scottish Parliament. With cross-party support, the Scottish Government have set out a package of measures to upgrade the energy efficiency of homes and commercial properties, including a detailed plan and milestones. Detailed plans and milestones are often lacking in the plans created in Whitehall.

**Stephen Gethins:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point about the Scottish Parliament. The Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 was passed in the Scottish Parliament—its ambitions are in excess of what was aimed for in this Parliament—because all the parties sitting in that Parliament came together. It was during a period of minority Government, but when we work together, cross-party, and have meaningful conversations, especially on critical issues such as climate change, minority Government can work.

**Stephen Kerr:** There is sometimes a very strong case for minority Governments, in the sense that we do then have to depend more on reaching out across the Floor of the House. It is true that all the measures that we are discussing on the environment and climate change have pretty much the unanimous support of the Scottish Parliament, and that is a strength. It is a political strength, because when the time comes to change the Scottish Parliament, and that is a strength. It is a political strength, because when the time comes to change the Scottish Parliament in 2021 to a Conservative Scottish Government led by Ruth Davidson, we can be sure that those policies will continue.

Upgrading the housing stock should become a national mission; it should become a national infrastructure priority. The Government should now set out their response to the National Infrastructure Commission recommendations in relation to social housing and should come forward with their own proposals to unlock the able-to-pay residential sector.

We need to consider incentives for the adoption of new technologies in heating, insulation and energy generation, and we need to do that across all types of houses. In King’s Park, in my constituency of Stirling, many of my constituents tell me that they spend a fortune on heating their homes because the heat disappears through the single-glazed windows and old-fashioned roofs that they are required to have in the conservation area that they live in. I am a Conservative so I am all for conserving, but it is equally important that we conserve with consideration to the environment. Improving the insulation of our homes and upgrading the housing stock is an investment with a long-term return, as was mentioned earlier, in lower energy consumption and lower energy bills and, as I have said, better physical and mental health. Pound for pound this is a sound national investment from every aspect.

**Chris Law:** The hon. Gentleman is making a lot of very valuable points here. I wonder if he would support the UK Government setting up a national energy company with all its energy coming from renewables, as the Scottish Government are doing. Not only will that company take energy from renewables and boost the renewable energy sector, but it will also tackle fuel poverty head-on if it is done as close to cost as possible.

**Stephen Kerr:** I understand the motivation, but, in good Scots tongue, “I hae ma doots” about whether that is a workable solution. I know the hon. Gentleman says that the Scottish Government are going to do it, but we will see what happens, and I do have concerns about that as there are other ways to get to where we want to get to without setting up some kind of state retailer for energy.

I am nearing the end of my remarks, but I want to mention the fact that we need to consider new electrical infrastructure. We need to consider whether the national wiring has the capabilities it is going to need. I really do not see, any time soon, there being a plethora of charge points around the country where we can recharge our electric vehicle in a few minutes, because we just do not have the wiring to support that kind of recharging network. Also, I know the Minister will be disappointed if I do not mention smart meters. A lot of money is being spent on advertising smart meters. This is an individual step to be taken by households across the country to attack the issue of climate change. I support that, because smart meters are a vital component of the creation of a smart grid, but I really think that the Government should explain to the House how we are getting on with our target of rolling out smart meters to all premises by 2020. From what I know of the facts as they stand, that target seems a long way off.

**James Heappey:** I share my hon. Friend’s concern about the pace of the smart meter roll-out. I also wonder whether that technology has now been overtaken by all the internet of things-enabled functionality that is going into people’s homes. Moreover, does he agree that the slow pace of deployment for smart meters does not alone with hope for the million homes a year that we will have to retrofit with zero carbon heating systems in order to hit our net zero targets?

**Stephen Kerr:** That was a good intervention from my hon. Friend, and I do have a lot of those concerns. For example, I have concerns about the status of the SMETS 2 meter installation, particularly in Scotland and the north of the country. There are technological reasons why the pace there is slower than in the rest of the United Kingdom. I am also concerned about where we are in general with SMETS 2 meter installation. And what about SMETS 1 meters? How are we getting on with having Smart DCC adopt them? The answers to those questions might be difficult for Ministers to bring to the House, because there is no shortage of challenges relating to smart meter roll-out, but we really should face up to those challenges. We have an opportunity now to properly review where we have got to. A fundamental question is how many SMETS 1 meters that have been installed will need to be replaced because they cannot be adopted by DCC. I hope the Government will make note of the need to update us on this, whether in a written statement or by some other means.
The young Swedish national Greta Thunberg went on strike, refusing to go to school until Sweden’s general election in September, to draw attention to the climate crisis. Her protest has captured the imagination of her country, which has recently been plagued with wildfires during its hottest summer since records began. Greta has made her message global; she even came to Westminster to spread the word in the UK. She has shown us that the actions of just one person can make a difference.

I have visited schools in my area, including St Bernadette’s RC Primary School and Denny High School, and the local Baptist church. I have furnished the schools with Greta’s book and had fantastic conversations with the children about deforestation in the Amazon rain forests, the loss of orangutans and the use of palm oil in providing us with probably cheap food. They were so aware—they knew everything that was going on. They even had a mural of Greta up in the classroom. It was so impressive. Greta’s message was not lost. Those children care, and many of us in this House—most of us, I think—care and are taking some action.

Over the years, I have fought to highlight issues of pollution. I have made a stand against fracking to protect the purity and the worldwide reputation of Scotland’s water and land. Like others, I have voiced my anger at the plastic pollution all around us, from nurdles found in our waterways to the plastics that make up our clothes and are present in toiletries and cosmetics. I thank the local charities and voluntary groups I work with for keeping up the pressure and raising the profile of the detestable waste that those products cause in our natural world.

As the hon. Member for Stirling and others mentioned, the natural historian Sir David Attenborough has apologised to younger generations for the damage that we have done to their planet. We are so fortunate and privileged to have that great man speaking out and, we surely hope, being listened to by the decision makers. On the sustainable development goals, he said:

“Over the next two years there will be United Nations decisions on climate change, sustainable development and a new deal for nature. Together these will form our species’ plan for a route through the Anthropocene.”

This crucial time presents an opportunity to reach an agreement on the political will and the resources needed to address the crisis together and to make certain that no one is left behind.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman, a fellow member of the Environmental Audit Committee, is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that the COP process is vital? We expect to hear that the UK will host the 26th COP next year, 2020. Does it not need to be a zero carbon COP, when we get global agreement on this, so that we can pursue our own international development goals and ensure that everyone shares the burden globally?

John Mc Nally: I absolutely agree with what the hon. Gentleman says. We serve on the Environmental Audit Committee, where we have received invaluable evidence in the past two or three years. I agree that we cannot just set a target; it has to be achievable at a very early stage. We simply do not have the time, and I will speak more about that as we go on.

We have been put to shame by the urgency demanded by the new breed of young environmentalists. They have had enough of taking baby steps. They know that
time is running out, and I agree with them. In October 2018, the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned us that we have only 12 years to make the unprecedented and unparalleled changes needed to prevent a rise in global temperatures of more than 1.5°C. Mike Thompson, the head of carbon budgets at the Committee on Climate Change, told the EAC that it is now or never on that. Exceeding this by even half a degree risks global catastrophe, with flooding, fires and famines, which other hon. Members have mentioned. Those are clear and challenging messages that we simply cannot fail on.

A decade ago, in 2009, Scotland set itself the world’s most ambitious greenhouse gas reduction target, when the Scottish Parliament voted unanimously to cut the country’s emissions by 42% by 2020—next year. The latest statistics show that we remain on track to achieve that. In her recent speech at the Scottish National party conference, our leader, Nicola Sturgeon, acknowledged the situation’s urgency. Her speech was inspiring, strengthening my resolve and that of many others, from all parts of the community, not just politics, to do what we can to make this a dominant issue.

How are we helping? Thanks to a green initiative, I and fellow MPs are forming climate youth ambassadors groups to generate public interest in initiatives we can help with locally. As with the SERES education for sustainable development youth ambassadors programme in South America, we aim to build a cohort of facilitators to inspire, mobilise and grow community resilience to climate change. UNESCO is recruiting youth ambassadors, again with the aim of developing organisers and future leaders to build this resilience to climate change. We in Scotland certainly want to be part of the environmental ambitions. This is very much about, “If you can change the world, get busy in your own little corner.”

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an amazing speech, talking about young ambassadors. Will he join me in paying tribute to the children at Sunnyside Primary School in Craigend, who are having a massive influence. Will he pay tribute to them

John McNally: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, and what he says just exemplifies what we need to do as politicians to make their voices heard. We cannot just have empty voices in this place—we need to take action.

On 26 June, most of us here met up with “The Time Is Now” mass lobby. Thousands of people from nearly every constituency in the UK came to Westminster to meet us. Like others, I was inspired by constituents of mine who had travelled here to meet up with each other and with MPs. I sincerely hope that our constituents went away feeling that they were being listened to and that their message and concerns had been made clear. What united the firefighters, schoolchildren, doctors, church groups, UNISON and others who came to Parliament? It was, quite simply that they care. They care about our warming climate and they care that our natural world is in decline.

In Scotland, we have already been leading the way with our public rejection of fracking, our strides forward in investigating alternative energy sources and our consultancy on climate change, and our programme of change within the Scottish Government is working really well. We are consulting and we speak to people; we do not just take it for granted that people are not listening.

In Scotland, the purity of our water and land is integral to the quality produce we sell and trade to other countries. As a publicly owned body, Scottish Water is a company that brings many admiring looks from elsewhere in the UK and globally. I was delighted to attend an event this morning, where we heard how it, too, is looking to own its own water system. The people at this morning’s meeting looked on at us ensively, thinking, “Why can people not run a utility properly?” It is all part of us and it is all part of a community. Why should we not own these things?” I take this opportunity to congratulate the staff of Scottish Water, who protect the reputation that we enjoy.

But that is not enough. Nothing happens in isolation. Around the globe, toxic air affects many towns and cities; plastic-strewn rivers and seas are commonplace; sea levels are rising; and millions are being displaced. Closer to home, as the Environmental Audit Committee has heard, some of our best-loved species, such as hedgehogs, puffins and red squirrels, are now hard to find or threatened by climate change and/or invasive species in their natural habitat. Although biodiversity is declining across the planet, the UK as a whole is one of the worst offenders, ranking 189th out of 218 countries for biodiversity intactness. We are well below our neighbours Germany and France, and only slightly above the USA.

Our joint bid with Italy to host the next major climate summit in 2020 will be another opportunity for Scotland and the rest of the UK to show global leadership. The next step will be to put in place the policies that get us to net zero as soon as possible.

Let me finish—and I will finish; I know the hon. Member for Stirling appreciates some good humour—by taking this opportunity to wish the ethical stock exchange in Edinburgh the very best for a successful future venture. It is an idea whose time has come. Investors who care about our common world can be reassured that due diligence is being carried out on the companies to be listed. Project Heather, the group setting up the new exchange in George Street, adds some “magic dust” to the uniqueness of the stock exchange, because it, too, wants to make a difference to the world we live in, now and for the long term. The stock exchange promises to list only companies that have a positive impact on society and the environment. I hope that some, or all, of Scotland’s famous investment trusts, as well as, for example, the National Trust and church organisations, take the opportunity to put their money where their mouth is and invest in the courageous step taken by the people leading the company. The stock exchange will meet the ever growing demand for ethical investments, and offer a clear pathway and peace of mind for investors.

Ideas such as the ethical stock exchange can clearly demonstrate that companies have a capital and a social conscience. For example, the famous ice cream producer Mackie’s has produced an all-electric ice cream van. This is probably the best day to talk about ice cream, although it might be the worst day to talk about ice
I do welcome the fact that we want to work cross-party on this matter. I am looking forward to that and, as I said earlier, one starting point for me would be to stop fracking. There are some simple things that we can do, but obviously there are political differences to overcome. Mention was made, for example, of nationalising the grid in Scotland. Is that a proposal? There are different ways of addressing this issue. We need to have a rational discussion about it and be honest about the difficulties, but we also need to understand where our political differences lie and, hopefully, overcome them. We need to do something; we owe it to the younger generation.

The climate crisis is the most pressing challenge of our time. We are already seeing its disastrous effects across the globe. The UK has a moral responsibility to take the lead in tackling the crisis. First, as a pioneer of the industrial revolution, we have been among the greatest producers of historical emissions, so if I do not take the point that we are responsible for only 1% of global emissions. We have a much greater responsibility than for just 1% of current global emissions. We need to take our share of responsibility for the emissions that we have produced over many decades, and even over centuries. Secondly, we are a rich country. We have the means to decarbonise more quickly than poorer countries.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The hon. Lady has made a very important point. One of the challenges that we will have to meet as a world is how we bring billions upon billions of people out of poverty in a way that does not damage the environment. If we are not careful, we will be seen as saying, “We’re okay,” and as pulling the ladder up after us with our comfortable standard of living. It is a real challenge for us to tackle climate change both here and across the globe in a way that is fair and equitable to those people who are currently living in poverty.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. Social justice absolutely must be at the heart of tackling this issue internationally and in this country. We cannot afford to allow such action to become the burden of the poorer communities. We need to work internationally and collaboratively, which is why the whole debate in this country about separating from Europe through Brexit—I will touch on that later—is so damaging, because it sends out a message that we want to do something; we owe it to the younger generation.

Thirdly, as Lord Deben, the chair of the Committee on Climate Change, said this morning, when we know, we have a responsibility to act. We know now how to get to net zero, so we have a responsibility to do it. This is a very important point. It is not that we do not know how to go about it; we do know what to do, and therefore we have a moral responsibility to do it, and do it quickly.

I welcome the fact that this House and the Government have now said in legal terms that we should get to net zero by 2050, but I wonder whether that is only a desperate effort to build a legacy for the current Prime Minister. The hypocrisy of it is striking, given that her Government have relentlessly undermined the climate progress achieved by the Liberal Democrats in the coalition Government. Distant targets such as 2050 are meaningless unless backed up by concrete short-term action. The Committee on Climate Change has reported
that of its 25 headline policy actions for the past year, this Government have only fully delivered on one—one out of 25.

Complacency—[Interruption.] Complacency, which I am hearing from the Government Benches, is not in order. The Liberal Democrats are committed to achieving a net zero target by 2045, but we recognise that that will be achieved only if vital steps are taken immediately. For example, we need to ban fracking now. It is unacceptable that the Government support the development of new fossil fuels when all our efforts should go into developing renewables as sources of power. The Government blocked the Swansea tidal lagoon, even though it would have allowed us to become world leaders in tidal power. They privatised the green investment bank and stopped the growing solar power industry in its tracks. They have all but banned onshore wind, although that is now the cheapest form of renewable energy. They are also failing to lay out a clear road map that would allow industries to make long-term green investments.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I apologise for not having been in the Chamber earlier; I had to attend a Westminster Hall debate. The hon. Lady mentioned the privatisation of the green investment bank. Will she inform the House of how much money is being lent by that bank post privatisation in comparison with when it was under Government ownership?

Wera Hobhouse: The hon. Gentleman wants to make a political point—that the private bank works better. This will be the big debate about climate change. Who will take the lead—the private or the public sector? I am not convinced that the private sector will deliver what we need to achieve the net zero target in 2050. I do not believe it will. Those will be our big political differences. I do not mean that everything needs to be nationalised, but we need a clear debate about what will be carried by the public sector and by the private sector. I believe that, to make the transition socially just, the public sector will have a very important role to play.

I am going to say something else that the Government side of the House will not like. If we are serious about the climate emergency, the most important thing we can do is stop Brexit. Climate change is a global problem and the fight against it requires co-ordinated international action. As our closest geographical neighbour, the EU is a good place to start. It has been a force for good in meeting the challenge of climate change. Through its institutions, we have learned how to negotiate and bring together separate national interests under a commonly shared vision.

The process is not easy and not perfect, but it is far preferable to going it alone. The EU has taken the lead on international climate change action: it has, for example, introduced projects such as emissions trading schemes and interconnectors between national grids. One initiative important for local councils was that of the European directives on biodegradable waste, without which this country would have done nothing about recycling.

This is why the European Union actually works: it makes national Governments take action when they would not do so on their own. EU directives have required member states to take decisive action even when national Governments would not have done it. It has built environmental protections into its dealings with the rest of the world, putting key protections at the heart of its trade deals. Outside the EU, we will be weaker. We will have less clout, for example, against the United States, which might impose environmentally harmful terms on us as a condition of any new trade deal. While we are desperately looking for new trade deals, we might be victims of all that.

Luke Graham: The hon. Lady mentioned the impact of Brexit. I am not trying to rehash the Brexit debate here, although we probably would have been on the same side. The Paris climate accord obviously includes countries outside the EU. We can show leadership and try to bring countries together from both inside and outside the EU once we leave.

Secondly, does the hon. Lady agree that a number of Members in this House are nationalists who want not only to break out of the EU but break up our own United Kingdom? Surely breaking up the component parts of the United Kingdom would not help us to tackle climate change in any way.

Wera Hobhouse: It is absolutely true that we should not be getting into the Brexit debate, but I believe in co-operation at every level, and the environment that has been created in this House in the past two years against the European Union is very damaging to international co-operation.

Our closest geographical neighbour is the European Union, and we should work very closely with it. That is why the best thing we can do if we are serious about climate action is to stop Brexit. History will not look kindly on us for leaving the European Union just at the moment when our moral responsibility is to protect our planet and work together. We should be placing ourselves at the heart of the European project, because the climate emergency demands it.

5.50 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Cr-op): It is a pleasure to close this debate on behalf of the Opposition. We have heard excellent contributions from across the House. It has been heartening to hear the common theme that tackling the climate emergency is of the highest priority. Indeed, the Minister said that the will to act has never been stronger. It was very heartening to hear that. However, there will be a lot of changes on the Treasury Bench over the next couple of weeks, and we hope that those who really care about this will continue to make sure that it is pushed to the very top of the agenda. We can afford nothing else.

There were excellent contributions from colleagues across the House, and I want to reflect on a few of them. The right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) put forward an excellent manifesto on behalf of electric vehicles. His speech was very well made. Indeed, he made my heart leap, as a Nottinghamian, when he talked about electrification of the midland main line. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) would say the same: we think that that is a priority project. When there is a change of Prime Minister, I will again, humbly but very sincerely, ask Ministers to prioritise that project. I hope that the right hon. and learned Gentleman might join me in that, because the current approach is fundamentally wrong.
The hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) prioritised talking about economic benefits. That is important, because there is a danger that we discuss this issue in too many negative terms and it turns people off. We need to grasp that opportunity. I very much agree with what he said about making it a priority for each Department to report on its individual target. It is that kind of aggregate action that will make an impact.

The hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) began by talking in very sobering terms about mass extinction and loss of species. Again, if that does not act as a call to action to us, I really do not know what will. I did slightly depart from her argument when she talked about not being swept away by major promises on a grand scale. Pragmatism can indeed be very important in the difficult choices ahead, but I would say that we have to be really ambitious. There will have to be a step change in our approach in order to do this. I do not think that slogans are necessarily any use either, but that is certainly not what Labour Members are endorsing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) talked about citizens’ assemblies. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on deliberative democracy, I was very interested to hear that. I wonder if she might come and talk to our group about what her Select Committee is up to, because we are very interested in this sort of work. She echoed the comments of the hon. Member for Dundee West in saying that we have an awful lot to gain from a green industrial revolution. In my community, we have had four decades of deindustrialisation. That has absolutely scarred our community, and this is the route back from that. The tens of thousands of skilled, sustainable jobs in these industries are our future, so there is an awful lot to gain.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) relayed lots of what David Attenborough had said to the Select Committee, which was a stand-still moment for all of us in Parliament. The hon. Gentleman is dead right to say that young people are ahead of us on this issue—a theme I will return to shortly. I echo his comments about the importance of faith. I really feel that faith communities can act as conveners within our local communities, because these are important places where people come together and are willing to be vulnerable and generous with each other. He talked about the individual actions we are going to take to change our lives, and faith communities have a really strong role to play in that.

The hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) said that when he talks to young people, there is a sense that adults have not done enough. That message has been loudly heard, and we now have to catch up. I was interested in his idea about local climate youth ambassadors. There is a lot of energy among young people. The two things I get asked when I go to my local schools are, “What are you doing about it, Mr Norris?”, and, “What more can I do about it?” That would be a good avenue. Finally, the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) talked about the inconvenient truth; I agree. I would be interested to hear the response from those on the Treasury Bench to her strongly made point on fracking.

The shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), set out clearly the Labour party’s programme for tackling the climate emergency and getting to grips with the root causes, and I want to build on that for a couple of minutes. One element is addressing our aid budget. The new and possibly outgoing Secretary of State for International Development says that he wants to spend more of the 0.7% set aside for aid on tackling the climate emergency. That level of ambition is great, and we all recognise how urgent the emergency is, but it should not be a zero-sum game.

I would like to be very clear that, for the Opposition, tackling the climate emergency must not come at the expense of tackling poverty and inequality abroad. That goes back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling—how do we lift billions out of poverty in a sustainable way? It cannot not be at the expense of aid spending on health, education and sexual violence against women and girls. I am sure the Minister agrees with that, and I would be interested to hear more on that.

UK aid spent on tackling the climate emergency must go towards climate-compatible development and climate justice. It must continue measurably and demonstrably to reduce poverty. It cannot be another excuse to repurpose the aid budget and take some money we would have spent somewhere else and badge it up as aid. That would really miss the point. Will the Government commit to finding additional funds for climate finance, rather than relying on incremental increases from the existing official development assistance budget? Will the Minister reassure the Select Committee that all ODA-funded climate spending will directly and measurably help the world’s poorest, in line with current UK law?

Global climate justice also means that we must ensure that our transition in this country towards a better, greener future is not at the expense of the global south. The Opposition reject any new green colonialism, which is becoming too real a risk. We must not export our climate emergency overseas. We must solve the problem, not brush it under the carpet. That fundamental principle of global climate justice must be at the root of all the actions we take.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that the exporting of our climate problems is part of what we need to address in this House? I fear that, in trying to clean up our own act, we might be merely pushing the problem overseas to countries that are less well equipped and morally should not have to take responsibility for ensuring that what we do here is properly contributing to net zero carbon.

Alex Norris: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention. That is a really inconvenient truth. We might think, “We’re only 1% of the world’s emissions. We’ll sort ourselves out,” but we must understand what we have exported. I talked about the deindustrialisation in my community. Those jobs and functions are happening elsewhere in the world, as are those emissions. We have to be very careful that we are not dishonest about that.

We must manage our waste properly rather than export it, filling the seas around south-east Asia with plastic. The principle of global climate justice must guide us to secure labour rights and fair supply chains when Britain pays for the raw materials to build millions of solar panels. It must guide us to net zero by reducing
the most powerful signal that we can send to the UK private sector that, whatever happens in our politics, everyone is on the same page on this agenda. Of course, there may be differences about what we do and how fast we go, and a range of different points of view were expressed on that today, but what was most powerful overall was that everyone agreed, cross-party, that this is something we need to tackle.

We should also welcome the fact that, although I am responding to this debate as an International Development Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) opened it as a Minister in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. That also sends a very strong signal about how we are working on this across Government.

We are all agreed that climate change remains one of the biggest global threats to sustained development and, indeed, to our own way of life. No country on this planet is projected to be spared from further temperature increases, and the world is already facing serious challenges to the natural environment, food production and water resources. The challenges posed by change to our climate are systemic. Much more needs to be done and greater global ambition is needed. That is why the UK is jointly bidding with Italy to host next year’s COP 26.

We have had an excellent debate, full of a range of very strong contributions. Although the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) objected to a Business Minister opening the debate, he will be interested to know that 34% of all our climate finance is spent by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. He will also be interested to know that the multilateral development banks agreed at last year’s COP to align their $200 billion of climate finance with the Paris agreement—that is a point he specifically requested.

As we send out these strong cross-party messages, we need to think carefully about the attacks I heard from Opposition Members against the oil and gas sector. I am sure that Labour voters in Scotland would be alarmed if they felt that the hon. Gentleman would be as harsh on the oil and gas sector in Scotland as he appears to be on the sector elsewhere in the world.

This is the only political point I will make from the Dispatch Box today, but we need to think about actions that will lead the world and about actions that will lead to businesses moving from this country to other parts of the world. I would put in that second category the shadow Chancellor’s aspiration to remove the UK listings of many perfectly good, British companies, which will simply move their listings elsewhere.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Minister is talking about future investment. Will she commit her Government to taking real action on carbon capture, utilisation and storage? The project in Peterhead was shamefully abandoned by George Osborne a few years ago, and we need to get projects such as St Fergus up and running. If we could do that by 2023, it would do an awful lot to help this issue. Can the Minister get behind that?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we are spending £45 million on supporting this technology, and we published an action plan last November, but of course we need to do more.
[Harriett Baldwin]

In a strong speech, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) talked about transport and the importance of changing behaviour in the sector, which is such a big emitter of carbon. I highlight the £1.5 billion that goes with the “Road to Zero” strategy, which was published last year, and the private sector is rapidly responding to the signals sent out from this place.

All the UK car companies have now developed electric models, including today’s welcome news about the Mini in Oxford and the wonderful news about Jaguar Land Rover in the midlands. Even in my constituency, Morgan Motor Company, known for its traditional cars, will have an electric model. My right hon. and learned Friend will be interested to know that 1,000 charging points a month are now being installed across the UK, which exceeds our expectations. The sector is rapidly responding to the signals we have sent out from this place.

The hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) made an excellent speech about what Scotland is doing, and he made the valid point that the minority SNP Government may have examples of best practice from which England and other parts of the UK can learn.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) made an amazing speech, and I salute her work as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the United Nations global goals for sustainable development. With her experience of the car industry, she made some powerful points about how we are bringing people with us.

The hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), who is Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, made a powerful speech about how this is an opportunity for the UK to lead the next industrial revolution, and she highlighted some of the Committee’s excellent work in this area.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) spoke at some length—I am now looking at the time to make sure I am not also going over—and he highlighted the importance of our moving beyond single-use plastics. As a member of the Select Committee, he spoke with great knowledge of trees, electric vehicles and a range of other important areas. He also spoke of the importance of cross-party work in Scotland.

I am glad that the hearing aid of the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) did not cause any faltering in his excellent speech as a member of the Environmental Audit Committee. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) highlighted that this is not a new issue. I am old enough to remember the slogan “Plant a tree in ’73”. I will not embarrass the House by asking other hon. Members to acknowledge that they remember it, but it is something that we have been doing for a while. We need to act faster and go further. I diverged from her only on her feeling that we would be helped in doing that by being a member of the European Union. We are going further and faster than the European Union which was not able to reach consensus on the issue recently.

The shadow Minister talked about the importance of climate finance. The UK has led the world in green finance. We published a further green finance strategy last week, and the leadership of Mark Carney at the Bank of England has been strong in this area, including on disclosure in annual reports. The City of London has shown itself able to attract a lot of listings, and we have more than $25 billion of funding going into green developments, which has happened as a result of the UK’s leadership in this area. We need to carry on with that because such investments can often be very capital intensive.

Looking to the future, I am confident that the UK can lead from the front in helping the world to drive the change necessary. That is why debates like today’s are important, timely and effective. I thank everyone who has generated the strong amount of consensus in this important debate today.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.
That this House has considered tackling climate change, protecting the environment and securing global development.

PETITIONS

Rights of British National (Overseas) Passport Holders

6.12 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of a group of over 3,000 British national overseas passport holders living in Hong Kong and the UK. Those British nationals still feel proud of their historical ties with the UK and share our values. In view of the deteriorating state of human rights and democracy in Hong Kong, the petitioners therefore request:

That the House of Commons urges the Government to carry out an urgent review of the rights of British National (Overseas) passport holders, addressing the need for these passport holders in Hong Kong and China to access British consular assistance and request diplomatic protection in view of the ongoing political situation in Hong Kong, and allowing BN(O) passport holders with Tiers 4 and 5 visas to be given routes to residency in the UK.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of Residents of the UK of Hong Kong origins,
Declares that the rights of British National (Overseas) passport holders should be reviewed; notes that over 150,000 BN(O) passport holders in Hong Kong and China are unable to access British consular assistance and request diplomatic protection despite the deteriorating state of human rights and rule of law in Hong Kong; further that citizens of British Hong Kong were issued the BN(O) passport without the right of abode in the UK as a political compromise with the Chinese government prior to the 1997 handover, instead of being given British citizenship as is the case for citizens of other former British colonies; further that these British nationals still feel proud of their ties with the UK and share British values; further that many highly educated and skilled BN(O) passport holders studying and working in the UK under Tiers 4 and 5 visas are unable to remain and contribute the UK economy and society; and further that a petition on behalf of a group of 240 BNO passport holders and their families have received over 3000 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to carry out an urgent review of the rights of British National (Overseas) passport holders, addressing the need for these passport holders in Hong Kong and China to access British consular assistance and request diplomatic protection in view of the ongoing political situation in Hong Kong, and allowing BN(O) passport holders with Tiers 4 and 5 visas to be given routes to residency in the UK.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002491]
Postmasters’ Pay

6.13 pm

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): This is a petition on behalf of the 375 residents of Chilton in my constituency, who are concerned about the future of the local post office. It is an issue that affects not only Chilton but the rest of the post office network, and it is to do with the payments made to sub-postmasters which on occasions can lead to them being paid less than the minimum wage.

The petition states:

The petition of Residents of Chilton,

Declares that no postmaster should be paid below the minimum wage; further that a related petition on this matter has received significant local support.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to call on the Post Office Ltd to review postmasters’ pay to prevent postmasters being paid below the minimum wage.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

St Rollox Railway Works

6.14 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present a petition on behalf of residents in my constituency and the wider city of Glasgow. It declares that the permanent closure of St Rollox Railway Works, affectionately known as the Caley in my constituency, would lose hundreds of well-paid jobs; further that the restoration of the Garratt steam locomotive Springbok, which was originally built in Springburn in the 1950s, exported to South Africa and brought back to Scotland in the 1980s, and has unfortunately been lying derelict for some 30 years, would provide a proper opportunity to maintain the workforce until a new operator for the site could be found; further that the restoration of a steam engine for heritage purposes would not trigger the state-aid restrictions that the Government have otherwise claimed would restrict their ability to save the site; further that there is a need for the UK and Scottish Governments to collaborate on finding a sustainable railway engineering use for the St Rollox Railway Works site to extend the current 160 years of industrial excellence and railway engineering in Springburn; and further notes that over 100 signatures have been collected on an associated Labour party petition to save the St Rollox Railway Works.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with the Scottish Government to jointly financially support the restoration of the Garratt steam locomotive Springbok and to use the time thus provided to identify a new operator to guarantee the future of the St Rollox Railway Works.

The petition states:

The petition of Residents of Glasgow,

Declares that the permanent closure of St Rollox Railway Works would lose hundreds of well-paid jobs; further that the restoration of Garratt steam locomotive ‘Springbok’ which was originally built in Springburn and is currently decaying in the Summerlee Heritage Park, Coatbridge would provide an excellent project to maintain the workforce until a new operator for the site could be found; further that the restoration of a steam engine for heritage purposes would not engage state-aid restriction; further that there is a need for the UK and Scottish Governments to collaborate on finding a sustainable railway engineering use for the St Rollox Railway Works site to extend the current one hundred and sixty years of industrial excellence and railway engineering in Springburn; further notes that signatures have been collected on another petition to save the St Rollox Railway Works.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with the Scottish Government to jointly financially support the restoration of the Garratt steam locomotive ‘Springbok’ and to use the time thus provided to identify a new operator to guarantee the future of the St Rollox Railway Works.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services: North-east

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

6.16 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): As hon. Members know, it is very difficult sometimes to secure an Adjournment debate—the last one took me over a year to obtain—so I was very pleased when this one was granted, especially as it is on such an important matter, as I will outline in some detail tonight. It is especially welcome that business has fallen early tonight, so I do not need to rush or curtail my remarks to leave time for the Minister. This is such an important matter and I know we will both have plenty of time to deal with this issue.

I would first like to thank my constituents for bringing their case to me, and for waiving their anonymity in the hope that their story can help other families and ensure that something like this does not happen again, as it could so easily have had a tragic ending. Going public like this is a very brave thing to do and I sincerely hope that their story, and today’s debate, will spark a change.

In March this year my constituent, Mr Thomas, wrote to me about his daughter Jane, and the “deplorable treatment when attempting to access CAMHS support”. Jane, aged 16 at the time—she is now 17—tragically lost her mother as a result of alcohol abuse. Everyone will appreciate the grief that this will have caused Jane and her family, and the lasting impact of that grief after years of watching a parent decline due to alcohol abuse. Many hon. Members, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), have spoken growing up with similar experiences. I pay tribute to them, and to Jane, today.

Having experienced such loss on top of what she would have seen her mum go through over the years, Jane was understandably struggling with her mental health. Mr Thomas therefore felt that Jane needed professional intervention. Having consulted Jane’s GP, Jane was referred to North Durham child and adolescent mental health services at Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys Foundation NHS Trust. This is where Mr Thomas’s frustration begins.

Jane waited weeks for a CAMHS appointment following the referral, but it was not forthcoming. Mr Thomas went back and forth with the GP to ensure that the referral had been made, and was assured that it had. He was even shown the email confirming that. He then contacted the CAMHS team directly over the phone. As you can imagine, he was surprised to hear that they had no record of any referral regarding Jane. Mr Thomas says that this “set the pattern of misinformation and incompetence that Jane and I were to encounter.”

Mr Thomas contacted CAMHS again to enquire whether an appointment would be made for Jane, and was told that Jane would not be seen as her need had already been assessed and her case was closed. That exasperated him further, as it referred to an earlier episode and a case from several years earlier, not the most recent case following the death of Jane’s mother. Therefore, it did nothing to inspire confidence.

Jane finally saw a CAMHS practitioner at the end of last year and was making positive progress, but her last appointment was on 4 January 2019. It is now July, and Jane has not had another appointment on the national health service in the past seven months. The initial reason for the delay was that Jane’s counsellor had left to start her maternity leave—something that, of course, she is absolutely entitled to do—but the trust will have been well aware for some time that the counsellor’s maternity leave would need to be covered. There also should have been a period of handover so that the service could continue its work smoothly. That did not happen.

Maternity cover was found after a gap of more than two months. However, just days after starting, that person resigned their position, leaving the trust unexpectedly without any cover. I am told that that was for personal reasons. It was at that point that the trust wrote to Jane Thomas, on 8 March, apologising for the delay in her treatment and suggesting that, if she had any inquiries, she should contact the team at North End House or, if she was in crisis, she could call the CAMHS crisis team. It was then three months since her last treatment.

It was upon receiving that letter that Mr Thomas contacted me to bring all this to my attention. There was nothing in the letter to Jane—I have seen a copy of it—to suggest that she should contact the trust to arrange an appointment or alternative provision; it just said to call if she was in crisis. I therefore wrote to the trust on 18 March, asking them to examine this matter further and advise Jane and Mr Thomas.

On 29 March, I received a reply that said that the trust had “looked at interim solutions, such as part time staff working additional hours.” It did not say whether that was actually happening, or whether that would include an offer of support to Jane, only that they were looking at it. That was just one of the many opportunities that the trust had to take another look at Jane’s case, to see what interim solutions were in place for her and to make contact with her directly, perhaps by calling her, as they did yesterday—I will come to that in a moment. But that did not happen.

Yesterday, I spoke to Mr Levi Buckley, director of operations at the trust, in advance of this debate. We had been trying to arrange a call for some time and could not get the dates to match, but obviously that changed once I secured this debate. I was told yesterday that alternative arrangements had been put in place for the majority of patients. He told me that when Jane’s counsellor went on maternity leave in January, all those patients should have had their cases reviewed and reassigned to another counsellor or another support network. However, for whatever reason, that did not happen for Jane, although I am told that it did for all the others. Jane had obviously, and shamefully, just slipped through the net. The trust realised that, no doubt prompted by Mr. Thomas, and in March, when the new counsellor started and then left after two days, they contacted Jane to apologise with the letter dated 8 March that I mentioned earlier.

There was no concerted effort at any point by the trust to re-establish contact with Jane, who for all they knew was getting no support at all with her mental health.
There was just that one letter. Even after I contacted the trust on 18 March to begin this dialogue, they still made no further contact with Jane until yesterday, when she was called within two hours of my conversation with Mr Buckley, prior to this debate. I understand that Jane spoke to the head of the CAMHS service, who apologised and offered her transitional provision to move her into adult services, as she is 18 later this month. It is, of course, entirely up to Jane what she decides to do.

Having spoken to the trust, they agree that they could have done more to make contact with Jane, who obviously was easily contactable, as they spoke to her without delay yesterday. There have been many opportunities available, since March when I first contacted the trust on behalf of Mr Thomas and Jane, to make that direct contact and arrange counselling provision for Jane, but that did not happen. That means that a vulnerable young person had fallen through the gaps because of incompetence, and even when it had been brought to their attention in March, nothing was done to rectify the situation until yesterday.

It does not need me to point out that this could have been fatal, had Mr Thomas not sought and paid privately for mental health provision for Jane. I understand from my call with Mr Buckley yesterday that the situation at the trust was made more difficult because, after advertising the job twice and getting no applicants, they had to lower the grade of the position—meaning that the person would require more supervision—in order to attract someone they could employ. This person is due to start in September—nine months after the counsellor on maternity leave left. Mr Thomas emailed me earlier today to say that the “analogy of too many Generals and no Soldiers would suggest itself”.

I agree.

In April, when I met Mr Thomas in my constituency surgery, he was very clear that this was about incompetence and bad management within the trust that had allowed his daughter to slip through the cracks. What has most frustrated him about this ordeal is the lack of accountability for what he calls the “appalling management of the service”.

He went on:

“This CAMHS organisation is poorly led, poorly administered and managed with incompetence.”

Can the Minister please inform the House who should be accountable for these failures?

A freedom of information request made in 2018 to the Care Quality Commission by a concerned parent inquiring into numbers of complaints made against CAMHS went unanswered, with the CQC stating that it did not have full oversight of this organisation and therefore could not provide the requested information. Who does oversee CAMHS? Who should be taking responsibility for the vacancy gap and the real problems that the trust has had in filling the vacancy, and for the impact it has had on vulnerable young people who need access to support? What advice can the Minister give to Mr Thomas to help his daughter get the professional treatment she needs, when she needs it, on the NHS? Does the Minister think that trusts should not be able to mark their own homework on such cases?

They must surely be held accountable when there are failures and recognise the need for change. I hope that this debate brings about some change.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for this debate. I would encourage him to apply for a debate with the same title, only with “Scotland” at the end instead of “North-east” so that he can explore that 50% increase in the number of suicides among 15 to 24-year-olds. We need to do something about this national crisis.

Mrs Hodgson: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for his intervention. I would encourage him to apply for a debate with the same title, only with “Scotland” at the end instead of “North-east” so that he can explore that 50% increase in the number of suicides among 15 to 24-year-olds. We need to do something about this national crisis.

Throughout all this incompetence it is Jane who has suffered. If this is an issue of recruitment and retention, which it seems to be, what will the Minister do to ensure that CAMHS staff are both recruited and retained nationally, and specifically in the north-east? Nationally, the number of consultant child and adolescent psychiatrists fell by 4.5% between October 2013 and October 2018, which might account for why it was so hard for the trust to recruit someone, while the Government are on track to miss their mental health workforce target by 15,000 staff. Labour research in January found that the total number of mental health nurses had fallen in every month the previous year. I should be grateful if, in her remarks, the Minister would address the issues that led to this decline in the number of mental health nurses and evaluate the impact that it is having on young people such as Jane.

If an A&E just closed its doors because of a lack of staff and stopped treating people, there would be an outcry—we would not stand for it—so why do we allow it to happen when it comes to mental health? The Prime Minister said she wanted mental health to be a priority, but the Government are nowhere near achieving that goal. Mental health awareness is one thing, but it must be matched by mental health support and treatment services, and that is where the Government are failing, especially with regard to staffing.

According to research carried out by the Children’s Society, more than 110,000 children a year are unable to access mental health support from a CAMHS service, despite being referred for support. Three out of four children with a diagnosable mental health condition do not receive the support that they need, according to similar research conducted by YoungMinds. This is therefore not a problem exclusive to the north-east—or even Scotland, as we have just heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney)—which is why the Government must take action.

I wrote to Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust, which informed me that it did not operate a waiting list in County Durham and Darlington CAMHS. However, Jane and other young people, across the north-east and the whole country, are still waiting. It beggars belief that the trust could say that, but it is in the letter that it sent to me.

As I have said, Mr Thomas was left with no choice but to engage a private practitioner. That came at a huge cost to him and his family, but as a loving parent he felt that he had no other option. No parent should be
put in that position, and not all parents have the means to step in when the services let them down so badly, as was the case for Jane.

According to the Royal College of Psychiatrists, mental health trusts have less money to spend on patient care in real terms than they had in 2012. Of course, lack of funding means that trusts are strained and unable to provide vital services. Is that what led to the staffing problems in this trust? Was it inability to fill the vacancies down to the salaries being offered, or was the workload that was being demanded of staff too high? Why did that new person leave after only two days? Will the Minister support Labour’s calls for the ring-fencing of NHS mental health budgets and an increase in the proportion of those budgets that is spent on support for children and young people? Increased funding will relax some of the pressure on services, and will ensure that they can be sufficiently staffed and resourced to improve patient experiences.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, Mr Thomas and Jane were very brave to allow me to share their story with the House in so much detail today. However, it should not have come to this. Jane, having mental health problems, should have been referred to CAMHS, been assessed and then been given therapy appointments as necessary to support her recovery—unbroken, with no seven-month gaps in provision. Instead, she and Mr Thomas have been back and forth and have had to fight, and even pay, for the support that she needs and to which she is entitled.

Mr Buckley, from the trust, informed me that North Durham CAMHS had seen an 18% rise in referrals over the last year. It follows that as the number of referrals rises, the funding must also increase to meet that need. The Government must increase the proportion of mental health budgets spent on support for children and young people: they must make mental health a priority, with actions and not just warm words.

While the staffing crisis and mismanagement at Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust rages on, Jane still has no access to treatment and support on the NHS, although I have been told that she received a call yesterday suggesting that the problem might be resolved shortly. I therefore ask the Minister what she will do for Jane, and young people like her, to ensure that situations like this do not occur in future.

6.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for the sensitive way in which she has outlined the case of her constituent Jane. We often debate NHS issues in this place, and it is often a case of trading statistics and numbers, but the hon. Lady has reminded us all that there are vulnerable people needing help who are potentially at risk of more harm when the NHS fails them. I will write to her in more detail answering some of the questions that she has posed to me today, but for the moment I will address some of the issues with which I am able to deal.

We have articulated clear ambitions for improving children’s mental health services, but, as the hon. Lady outlined extremely well, this follows decades of under-investment in those services, and there is a way to go from where we are now to where we need to be. The waiting times that Jane has experienced, which the hon. Lady outlined, really are not acceptable.

We will be very clear about our ambitions, but the hon. Lady is also right to highlight that we are very dependent on the performance of individual trusts in terms of delivering that. She set out the challenge as regards the Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust very well. The Care Quality Commission is giving quite a lot of attention to that trust for one reason or another, and the trust will be made much more accountable. I always say that sunlight is the best disinfectant, and one of the issues that we collectively face is that because mental health has for so long been something we have not talked about enough and has been stigmatised, mental health services have been a bit out of sight, out of mind, and have not had the scrutiny that they should have had.

The comparison the hon. Lady draws with an A&E, saying if it was turning away patients like this there would be an absolute scandal, is right, and part and parcel of achieving parity of esteem is that we must expect the same high performance and standards of our mental health services as we do of our physical health services. I know that the hon. Lady will not let me get away with not taking that as seriously as I possibly can.

We have made some progress, but, as the hon. Lady has heard me say before, I am in no way complacent about where we are. It is not just that we need overall improvement; there is great disparity between various regions and areas across the country, and the hon. Lady represents an area that is particularly challenged. She made some points about waiting time standards, and I am getting quite an inconsistent picture as regards the performance of that trust, which suggests to me that there is something wrong with the data and how things are being measured. Again, we need to hold everyone to account so we can be sure that our waiting list and waiting time data are accurate.

Mrs Hodgson: When I spoke to Mr Buckley about the sentence in the letter that said a waiting list was not operated, he explained that that probably was not very accurate, because when everyone is seen and triaged, if they need an appointment to see a therapist they are given one in, say, six weeks, eight weeks or 12 weeks. He said that the fact that they are given an appointment explains why there is no waiting list. So as the Minister rightly pointed out, we will have to drill down on that, because I do not think we are measuring the same thing across all trusts if they are all using different forms of words.

Jackie Doyle-Price: There might be something we can do on standardising the approach, but that brings us to another challenge. We apply these targets to try to achieve a standardised service and to ensure that people get treated when they need it, but that encourages some perverse behaviours, and the hon. Lady has just outlined one of them. The challenge for us is how we apply standards of behaviour and targets without driving perverse outcomes and bad outcomes for patients. I still think we have a lot to do on that, and probably a lot of learning. We need to identify those areas that really are doing it well so that we can spread good practice throughout the system.
But there is obviously a good reason why we must make sure we get children and adolescent mental health services much better. Because we know that people who suffer from mental health issues tend to develop those conditions when they are children—when they are young. We all know that early intervention is the best way, not least for the individual concerned, because they will suffer less harm, but it is also good for the taxpayer because it costs less money to help people sooner. So we must make sure that we continue to give children’s mental health much more priority than it has had hitherto, and central to that will be greater provision of services in the community.

I am really concerned about the story the hon. Lady has just told. The process that Jane has been taken through appears to have completely failed, and the communication with her and her father appears to be extremely poor. Again, I think we can go away and look at how we communicate with patients and their families, and particularly at the tone that is used. We are dealing with people who are in a very vulnerable position, and to put it bluntly, it should not be “take what you’re given”, should it? Ultimately, our NHS is there to serve all of us. It needs to do so with sensitivity and tact.

The hon. Lady rightly challenged me about money and the need to ensure that it delivers extra appointments. We are ambitious to see many more children, through the investment we are making, but unfortunately I do not have a magic wand and I cannot roll it all out overnight. As she points out, we need to ensure that we are investing in the appropriate workforce to deliver these services.

I would like to make another point about NHS commissioners. While we are delivering this real step change in mental health provision for children, there are other things that can be done by local health commissioners—and by local authorities, for that matter—while people are waiting for referrals and appointments. There is still additional support that can be given by organisations doing good voluntary work to give wraparound support and take some of the pain out of the experience. I often say that good mental health care is not all about clinical interventions; it is about the wider support that can be given in the community as well.

Our reforms to mental health in schools have that kind of support very much in mind. We are rolling out a new workforce, which is going to be based on people who are trained in psychology and therapies, but the ethos will be very much that they are working with voluntary sector organisations that will be able to provide that additional support to people who are going through periods of mental ill health. We want to ensure that many more children who are going through mental ill health are seen, not least because we are seeing increased prevalence and it will take substantial extra effort to ensure that we are providing that service.

I turn specifically to waiting times. We have introduced new standards for mental health services, and in particular, we have introduced targets with regard to eating disorders and to a first episode of psychosis. We are making good progress on those, but as the hon. Lady says, Jane had clearly gone through significant trauma and it would not be unanticipated that that would impact on her mental wellbeing. Our targets for psychosis and eating disorders would perhaps not capture someone with that level of need, but it is still important that she has access to that support. Sunderland clearly has longer waiting times than many other areas of the country. I understand that the trust has been successful in bidding for additional NHS England funding as part of a national waiting list initiative, and I sincerely hope that that will improve access for the hon. Lady’s constituents.

When we hear of cases such as that of Jane, I can understand why people feel that our commitments on transformation ring a bit hollow. I know the hon. Lady will understand that we see this as a long-term process of rolling out improved services. That is the only way we are going to embed the change in culture that we really need in how we prioritise mental health, but we need to redouble that progress, as she says. We are determined that NHS funding for children and young people’s mental health services will continue to rise.

The hon. Lady asked me about making sure there is a proper ring fence. We have demanded that CCGs increase mental health spending on children’s services by more than their budget rises, but I think we will be taking a more interventionist approach. I know that NHS England is having robust discussions to ensure that all commissioners do exactly what is expected of them. We expect to have been able to treat an additional 345,000 children by 2024 through the additional funding, and we are already seeing some benefits.

I understand that in Sunderland, local commissioners have commissioned Mind to work with young people aged 11 to 25 and give direct support in that way. In addition, there is the new Lifecycle service, which includes access to adult therapies—one of the issues the hon. Lady raised. I am told that in Tyne and Wear 90% of young people are seen within five days for triage into the service, but on the basis of what the hon. Lady has told me, I would like to do a bit more digging to make sure that the figure is robust.

We know that the mental health sector is showing imagination and innovation in filling the gaps in mental health nursing and psychiatry, but it is worth noting that one of the upsides of us talking about this subject and giving so much more attention to mental health is that it is raising the profile of the sector as somewhere to work. The really nice thing is that people do care about it. Applications for psychiatry are increasing, in part, I guess, because would-be psychiatrists can see that there will be plenty of demand for their services. Although we are making the sector more attractive, providing the workforce will be a big challenge, so we need to encourage more imagination about how that is delivered.

New roles are emerging, such as peer support workers, making use of lived experience. It strikes me that people going through mental health issues often find it intimidating to talk about it and to respond to treatment. Getting support from someone who has been through a similar experience can be enormously important to their recovery, and we want to encourage much more of that. We have the new nursing associates, and we want to encourage more mature workers—perhaps women re-entering the labour market—to explore careers in mental health. We will need much more imagination in the coming years if we are to continue to deliver the workforce we need.

**Mrs Hodgson:** I am sure the Minister can guess what I am about to say. Previously, the nursing bursary was so important for older people going back into the
workforce or making a career change, and especially the group of people who now do not even apply for those opportunities. Is there any influence she can exert on the Government, any hope that at some point in this Parliament they will bring back that bursary?

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** I walked right into that one, didn’t I? The hon. Lady is right in the sense that we need to enable people to learn and earn. That is the key. I have conversations with Health Education England about how we can meet our ambitious workforce targets, and I am sure that it will have noticed what she just said and my reply. Applications are increasing despite the removal of the bursary, but I believe we could do more to encourage people who are considering entering the sector, perhaps later in life, when they have a family and they need to earn.

The NHS long-term plan, which contains some very ambitious commitments on mental health, is a huge opportunity for commissioners to think much more creatively about how they deliver their local services, because we are going to have to deliver a step change in the provision of services available in the community.

I have talked a bit about the mental health support teams going into schools, and it is pleasing to see that they are being rolled out. I do not believe we currently have a trailblazer that serves the hon. Lady’s constituency, but clearly if the local trust could work with local schools on delivery, it would make a huge difference to delivering services for children and young people. I believe teams are now covering Newcastle Gateshead, Northumberland and south Tyneside, and they will be testing the four-week waiting time, which she will believe is important, particularly when viewed through the prism of Jane’s experience. Later this week, we will be delivering the next wave of those sites, so let us watch this space—hopefully we will be able to get more provision.

The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) mentioned the issue of suicide and self-harm, which is clearly a considerable priority for me. We have been fortunate in seeing declining rates of suicide for a number of years, but we are beginning to see it on the rise again among children and young people. We could all speculate as to the reasons for that. They will be complex, because every suicide has its own story, and it is usually an escalation of factors that leads to someone taking their own life. We need to take a good look at exactly what pressures our young people are facing. Clearly, Jane had had adverse childhood experiences. We know they contribute to mental ill health, but other things are involved, too. If we can identify people who are at risk early—clearly, adverse childhood experiences are a good indicator—we can make sure we give that support sooner and then we will genuinely be able to tackle suicide prevention. We are on it, but we have a lot more learning to do on that.

I am really grateful for the sensitivity with which the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West has outlined Jane’s case, and I will take that away and respond in detail to the issues she has raised. As a pathway of experience, that clearly is not good enough, but I suspect it is all too common. Sometimes it is useful to use a particular case study to see exactly what is going wrong and what we can learn from. I would, however, say that I am proud of the progress we are making on improving services. We need to do much more. I wish I could do it quicker, but I will do the best I can.

*Question put and agreed to.*

6.53 pm

*House adjourned.*
Dr Fox: I would go further than my hon. Friend and say that free trade is beneficial for prosperity, stability and security, in the United Kingdom and beyond. The creation of Her Majesty’s trade commissioners is one of the most important elements of the Department for International Trade, and I am passionate about increasing the size of the DIT’s overseas network, including in the Commonwealth. Therefore, this morning I am proud to announce the creation of a new HM trade commissioner for Australasia. The post will be a senior civil service 2 director role and will be externally advertised later this year, to attract the best and brightest talent.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): To return to the subject of continuity agreements, a number have been put in place but they do not apply to some of our biggest trading partners. Does the Secretary of State really think that by the end of October we will have a significant number of agreements in place with those countries with which we do the most trade?

Dr Fox: Well, 10.7% of our trade is done under EU trade agreements with third countries. In fact, the largest of those, with Switzerland, and some of the other largest—for example, with the European economic area and South Korea—have already been concluded or signed, and I expect further agreements to be reached.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I do not know whether the Secretary of State saw the alarming report in yesterday’s Financial Times on the impact on the Amazonian rain forest of the EU-Mercosur trade deal. Of course free trade is a good thing, but not if the cost is climate change. Does he agree?

Dr Fox: This Government have been very consistent in our approach to this matter. In fact, next week I will be setting out, at a slightly lesser level, moves that the Department for International Trade intends to take to mitigate our own international travel. We all have a responsibility, at international, national and personal level, to take climate change absolutely seriously. In international agreements, the environmental impacts are very much looked at. Of course, that agreement has not yet been finally concluded.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State and his Department on the latest export figures, which have reached another new high, but there is clearly potential for further growth, particularly post Brexit. What plans does he have to ensure that we have sufficient staff and personnel in high commissions and embassies throughout the world looking for those opportunities and feeding them back to British firms?

Dr Fox: For Britain to be able to sell abroad, we need to be able to do two things simultaneously: understand what Britain has to sell abroad and understand the markets we are selling into. That is why my Department is bringing in a major change to rotate our staff from our international posts through our sectors in the UK, so that they can understand what the UK can do in terms of services and goods in a real-time way as well as understand the markets. It is not just about how many people we have in the market, but about how well they understand what is happening in the UK. I hope that
this innovation will lead to an increased capability for the UK and improve our competitiveness vis-à-vis other exporting countries.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): We recognise the need to reform the WTO, not least in the area of speeding up dispute resolution. We also recognise the benefits of regional trade agreements and bilateral agreements that can be WTO-compliant. However, it remains essential that we have a fully functioning WTO implementing globally agreed trade rules, so may I ask the Secretary of State to take on board and to agree with me that in these negotiations on reform he should reject some of the approach of the United States, which is to suggest that it will walk away from the WTO if it does not get its own way?

Dr Fox: I absolutely agree that we need an international rules-based system based on the WTO. It does require reform, but the fact that it needs reform is not an excuse to leave—it is an excuse to be more engaged in those reforms. It is worth pointing out that the United States has done very well, winning around 90% of the cases it has taken to dispute at the WTO. I hope that we all understand that the alternative to a rules-based system is a deals-based system, and the biggest casualties of that will be developing countries.

Renewable Energy Exports

3. Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What plans has he to increase exports by the renewable energy sector.

Dr Fox: The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): Promoting renewables is, of course, one more function of a dedicated trade Department, and we have export campaigns targeting renewable energy opportunities across Europe, Latin America and south-east Asia, along with support programmes. For example, the offshore wind sector deal commits the Department for International Trade and industry to increase offshore wind exports fivefold to £2.6 billion by 2030 and puts in place support mechanisms to help UK suppliers grow.

Chris Elmore: I thank the Minister for his answer. In Wales, the low-carbon and renewable energy economy employs nearly 10,000 people. However, as he has already said, this could be hugely expanded if there were more opportunities to explore and to export renewable energy, so what steps are the UK Government taking to boost the economy and export more to provide more jobs across Wales and the wider UK?

Graham Stuart: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on championing those employers and, more importantly, employees in his constituency across the world. We are absolutely dedicated to doing that. As I said, the offshore wind sector deal puts a lot of that in place. UK Export Finance now has a dedicated team to support renewables. Colleagues from across the Department worked with Taiwan, and I was there last year at the signing of a memorandum of understanding that opens up its offshore wind opportunities for local companies.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Society of Maritime Industries says that export finance support in the UK lags behind what is available in other countries. It is calling for a much-needed follow-up detailing the specifics of the export strategy. If the Government are serious about the UK being a zero-carbon economy, where is the detail, the coherent plan and the investment into exports of our world-leading renewables sector? Labour believes in the industry; when will the Government start to?

Graham Stuart: I shall try to give a straight answer to a not entirely straight question. As I said, we have the sector deal. We have the export strategy and we are putting enormous effort into that. I am pleased to say, Mr Speaker, that in this 100th centenary year of UK Export Finance, it has, under this dedicated trade Department, been rated the best export credit agency in the world.

Mr Speaker: It is good to know that a centenary year marks 100 years and that 100 years would be considered to constitute a centenary. I wonder whether a 100th centenary year might be in danger of being a tautology.

Leaving the EU: UK Trade Policy

5. Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): What plans he has to use the Board of Trade to ensure that the constituent parts of the UK benefit from UK trade policy after the UK leaves the EU.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): Re-establishing the Board of Trade has been one of this Department’s major achievements over the past three years, and it will continue to meet in all UK nations and regions. Included as advisers to the board are the Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland, for Scotland and for Wales, and it has representation from business advisers from across the UK. We will make sure that all parts of the UK benefit from the jobs and investment that come with an independent UK-wide trade policy.

Trudy Harrison: My right hon. Friend will know that Copeland is home to a thriving agriculture sector. Will he tell us more about what is being done in his Department to open up new markets?

Dr Fox: There are a number of ways in which we can do that. The traditional trade agreements are one of them, but market access is another. For example, countries such as China are huge markets for Northern Ireland dairy products and Scottish beef, and the Department is focusing increasingly on identifying regulations that, if removed, will automatically increase market access for UK exporters.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): When the Foreign Affairs Committee met businesses in Hirwaun, south Wales, they were very critical of the Board of Trade. They said that it simply did not listen to Welsh concerns and did not project Wales on the international market. Is there not a danger that the Welsh Assembly might take it into its head that it wants to do that work instead of—and, I would argue, less effectively than—the United Kingdom?
Dr Fox: The hon. Gentleman may be slightly confusing the Board of Trade with the Department for International Trade. They have slightly different functions. When the Board of Trade met in Wales recently, we presented a number of awards to Welsh exporters, but the Board of Trade is an augmentation of the DIT in that it is able to take its own trade missions abroad. The advantage of the DIT to Wales is that it provides access to a much bigger network than could ever be achieved by the Welsh Government, and thus gives Welsh business a far greater capability than it would otherwise have.

Dr Fox: As I have said, the Board of Trade’s advisers—which is what they are technically called—are the Secretaries of State for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We have visited all the English regions, and I intend in future to be constantly moving around the regions and nations of the UK, to thank the businesses that have contributed to Britain’s record export performance, to consult those businesses and to create a network of business people who will act as champions and mentors for companies that want to export.

**Export Strategy**

6. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What recent progress the Government have made on implementing its export strategy. [911900]

8. Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): What recent progress the Government have made on implementing its export strategy. [911902]

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): This summer marks three years since the DIT was established and one year since the publication of the Department’s export strategy, which sets out how the Government will encourage, inform, connect and finance UK businesses to take advantage of the international demand for British goods and services. Last month, we announced a new package of financial support from UK Export Finance to help businesses, and small and medium-sized enterprises in particular, to do just that.

Peter Aldous: Does the Department’s export strategy make provision for promoting the expertise of British business in the emerging markets of offshore wind and the late-life decarbonising management and decommissioning of oil and gas fields?

George Hollingbery: Yes, the offshore wind sector deal announced earlier this year will support UK companies to seize the export opportunities generated by the rapidly expanding market. The DIT is working with markets such as Taiwan, with which I recently hosted an offshore wind roundtable last month, to support their engagement with the UK supply chain. On oil and gas production, the DIT is engaging with the industry and stakeholders on export opportunities across the full industrial lifecycle.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: We have already heard that our trade agreements with the EU amount to about 11% of our trade, which is significant. Will my hon. Friend update the House on where he expects to have got with rolling over all the existing trade agreements by the time we are able to make our own independent trade policy?

George Hollingbery: Since the Department’s formation three years ago, the DIT has grown its trade negotiating capability from a standing start to a fully trained core of specialists. That has allowed us to negotiate the transition of EU free trade agreements, representing almost two thirds of trade covered by these agreements, and we continue to work intensively on the balance.
Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What is the Secretary of State doing in relation to manufacturing in the west midlands, which has the Jaguar Land Rover and black cab companies, to increase their exports given the market has had a slight downturn as a result of Trump’s sanctions on China?

George Hollingbery: Of course, Jaguar Land Rover remains an extraordinarily important company to the UK. It has faced some challenges recently, but the announcement of the new electrification programme in the west midlands is extremely welcome. As the hon. Gentleman might expect, the DIT has been very heavily involved in that process.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): But what has the DIT been doing through its export strategy about the automotive sector in Wales and in particular in Bridgend, with the announcement that Ford will close the engine plant? What can the Department do to try to persuade Ford to change its mind about this and to ensure that we have a thriving export sector?

George Hollingbery: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has been very heavily involved with Ford at Bridgend; in the end this is a matter for the company itself, but I have no doubt that BEIS has had productive conversations with it. The DIT is, along with BEIS, investing very large amounts of money across Government in electrification and the automotive market of the future. That involves huge amounts put into research and development at universities, and we believe that will put the UK car industry in a very good position for the future.

UK-US Trade and Investment

7. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his counterpart in the US Administration on trade and investment between the UK and the US; and if he will make a statement. [911901]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): Over the past three years, the DIT has laid the groundwork for an ambitious free trade agreement with the US once we have left the EU, including through the UK-US trade and investment working group, which met for the sixth time in London yesterday. This week, I have been in Washington to discuss the progress of these preparations with my American counterparts and make sure we are ready to grasp this golden opportunity once we have left the EU.

Michael Fabricant: Is it not the case that, notwithstanding the little local difficulty—or even large local difficulty—in Washington DC at the moment, the underlying facts remain that the United Kingdom is the biggest investor in the United States and vice versa, that military and intelligence integration between the United Kingdom and the United States is bigger than any other in the rest of the world and that our strength remains with the United States?

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend is correct. The UK and the US have a deep long-standing relationship with a strong and enduring bond. We have a shared heritage, legal system and language, and we co-operate extensively in security, prosperity and defence, and at many levels of our society, culture and economy, our co-operation is closer than that of any other two countries—something that my hon. Friend contributed to in his time as shadow Trade Minister.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Has the Secretary of State woken up to the fact that when we trade with America, and with other countries, we have to take manufacturing very seriously indeed? This also involves our universities. I have a good memory and I remember that, on his first outing, he refused to meet the all-party parliamentary group on manufacturing. He has still not met it. Why does he not take manufacturing seriously? It matters for our trade relationship with America, which is very close.

Dr Fox: When it comes to the manufacturing element, we take it very seriously. Our goods exports have actually exceeded the growth in our service exports in recent times, which is testament to the way in which the manufacturing sector has been encouraged and grown under this Government, in stark contrast to what happened under the previous Labour Government, when it shrank substantially.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Secretary of State is obviously aware of the unprecedented way in which our ambassador in Washington was removed from his post yesterday by the former Foreign Secretary and the President of the United States. Does he think that that will harm or hinder our trade investment with the United States?

Dr Fox: I deeply regret the resignation of Sir Kim Darroch, whom I was with actually in the time before his resignation. He was a great, dedicated and professional public servant. I hugely decry the leak that led to that resignation. The leak was unprofessional, unethical and unpatriotic, and I hope that, if we are able to discover the culprit, we will throw the book at them.

Arms Sales: Saudi Arabia

10. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the Court of Appeal’s ruling on the process of granting licences for the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia. [911904]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): We disagree with the judgment and are seeking permission to appeal. Alongside this we are considering the implications of the judgment for decision making. While we do this, we will not issue any new licences for exports to Saudi Arabia or its coalition partners which might be used in Yemen.

Patricia Gibson: Given the evidence from organisations such as the Red Cross, and given what we know about the humanitarian violations in Yemen, does the Secretary of State not think it is time, once and for all and...
regardless of any review, to look at the international evidence, and stop selling arms to Saudi Arabia to break international law?

Dr Fox: We take a rigorous and robust view in this country, as the court said, and we are very aware of any potential breaches of international humanitarian law. I think the hon. Lady will find that the United Kingdom has one of the most stringent sets of rules around arms exporting anywhere in the world.

Topical Questions

T1. [911910] Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): My Department is responsible for foreign and outward direct investment, establishing independent trade policy and export promotion. I am proud to announce that, on 17 July, my Department will be launching the MP Exporting toolkit. This will highlight the role that all MPs can play in helping to promote local businesses in their own constituencies. It says “Become a Trade Minister for your constituency”, and 650 Trade Ministers would be even more effective than the Department for International Trade.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My right hon. Friend is a brave man to let us all loose like that. He will be aware that the Royal Navy has done incredible work in the past couple of days to protect our British shipping as it moves through the Strait of Hormuz. Does he agree that, given that 95% of our goods travel by sea, it is imperative that our armed forces have the resources they need to keep all those exports and imports safe?

Dr Fox: Contrary to international law, three Iranian vessels attempted to impede the passage of a commercial vessel, British Heritage, through the Strait of Hormuz. HMS Montrose was forced to position herself between the Iranian vessels and British Heritage and to issue verbal warnings, which caused the vessels to turn away. Our thanks go to the crew of HMS Montrose and to all those who protect the safety of vital international maritime traffic. It is our duty as a Parliament to ensure that all those forces are adequately resourced.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Last month, the Department released the worst foreign direct investment statistics in five years. New projects were down 14%, new jobs were down 24%, and investment to safeguard existing jobs was down 54%. I know that the Secretary of State will want to explain the reasons for this to the House, but will he also tell us whether he still thinks he was right to announce that, in the event of a no deal, he would unilaterally drop more than 80% of our tariffs to zero for a period? I ask this because Canada has said that it will not now conclude a roll-over agreement conceding preferences to the UK because the Secretary of State is offering market access for free. In June, he boasted to the Select Committee that the roll-over was 99% there. Now, it is 100% not there. Was he right, or is Canada?

Dr Fox: As ever, it is nice to know that the hon. Gentleman is consistently wrong. He talks about our investment figures, but investment into the United Kingdom was the third highest of any country in the world, and it was the highest in Europe. At a time when global foreign direct investment fell, it continued to rise in the UK. When it comes to tariffs, one reason the Government introduced the temporary tariff scheme was to stop a price shock in the UK, and one of the reasons for that is that those on lower incomes spend more on goods than services. Introducing liberalisation will help to protect consumers on lower incomes, and I would have thought even today’s Labour party might have supported that.

T2. [911911] Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Can market access agreements be even more important than free trade agreements?

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are some huge opportunities in market access. Indeed, we have identified one potential change in China that, if negotiated, might be worth £10 billion of turnover over a considerable period through one regulation alone. Resources at the Department at the moment are necessarily skewed towards FTAs, because of the trade agreement continuity process, but they will in due course shift towards market access, which is terribly important.

T3. [911912] David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Can the Secretary of State explain what his Department is doing to encourage the EU and US to resolve the Airbus and Boeing subsidies dispute without resorting to tariff retaliation in unrelated sectors, including UK agri-food products?

Dr Fox: I had a number of discussions in the United States about that issue this week, as the hon. Gentleman may have guessed. It is likely that tariffs will be applied following the WTO determination of the level of tariffs that the US is allowed by law to set following the judgment on Airbus. Of course, the judgment on Boeing, to which he alluded, is also coming. At some point, we must ensure that both European countries and the United States are able to give appropriate support to their aircraft industries, because the alternative will be market access for China, which will be in the interests of neither.

T4. [911913] Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): As South Korea is the third largest export market for ceramics, does the Secretary of State agree that the recently signed outline free trade agreement with South Korea is a huge boost for the ceramics industry?

George Hollingbery: The transition agreement will replicate the effects of the preferential market access in the existing EU-South Korea FTA, providing certainty for businesses and allowing them to continue trading on preferential terms. It will provide a firm basis for the further strengthening of our ambitious trade and investment relationship as we work together in future.

T6. [911915] Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Secretary of State promised this House that all bilateral trade deals between the EU and other countries would
be rolled over by 29 March, including a bilateral trade deal with the EU itself. How many will be done by 31 October?

**George Hollingbery:** I could just ask the hon. Gentleman to look up the answer that I gave a few moments ago. We have signed roughly two thirds of the deals already and we expect there to be more. As for the number, it is well over 50%, and a large number of the countries in there are agglomerated into blocs, but we are confident in terms of trade that we will have two thirds or thereabouts.

**TS. [911914] Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con):** The Secretary of State rightly said that we will need an agreement with the EU to allow a GATT 24 basic deal to apply, but does he not accept that GATT 24 and a temporary FTA would save the EU £13 billion in tariffs and the UK just £5 billion, so the EU has every incentive to back it?

**Dr Fox:** My hon. Friend makes an important point, but an article 24 agreement would cover tariffs and quantitative restrictions; it would not cover services, standards and regulations. An agreement covering those latter elements would have to be negotiated separately and would probably take longer to strike. In the meantime, the UK would be subject to the full array of existing third-country checks and controls carried out as standard by the EU. In other words, even if we both did agree an article 24 continuation, it would not cover access to the single market—it would not be trading as usual.

**Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab):** Further to the question from the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), is it not time that the Department for International Trade undertook a thorough review of all 29 or 30 countries identified as countries of concern for human rights by the Government’s own Foreign Office?

**Dr Fox:** We do, and we act in line with the consolidated criteria of the EU. We look at all those elements. In fact, the Court of Appeal was clear that the Government were rigorous and robust in doing so.

**WOMEN ANDEQUALITIES**

*The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—*

**Pension Inequality**

1. **Mr Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support women facing pension inequality.

**Mr Seely:** Equalising the pension age has been very painful. We understand the reasons for it, but it is very painful for many of my constituents—females born in the 1950s. What has the Minister’s Department done to mitigate against that? What more can be done to avoid hardship for that age group?

2. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of the availability of British Sign Language courses.

**Will Quince:** My hon. Friend is a strong advocate for his constituents. This Government have already introduced transitional arrangements costing £1.1 billion; this concession reduced the proposed increase in state pension age for more than 450,000 men and women, and means that no woman will see her pension age change by more than 18 months, relative to the original Pensions Act 1995 timetable. For those experiencing hardship, the welfare system continues to provide a safety net, with a range of benefits tailored to individual circumstances.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Minister must recognise that, particularly for working-class women in the north-east who started work earlier, sometimes at the age of 14 or 15, and are in manual trades, which take a huge toll on the body, this pension inequality is really affecting lives. What is he doing to meet the just claims of the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—women and provide support for those women so disproportionately affected?

**Will Quince:** As I say, the Government have already introduced transitional arrangements costing £1.1 billion. We have considered the alternative options and found that there are substantial practical, financial and legal problems with all alternative options offered by stakeholders so far to mitigate the impact on those affected.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): In addition to the Lionesses, will the Minister also congratulate the Scottish women’s football team on their efforts and wish the Scottish Thistles netball team all the best in the netball world cup, which is coming up this week?

The WASPI women have already been cheated out of their pensions by this and previous Governments, but a further issue is emerging, with the Association of British Insurers talking of £20 billion of unclaimed pensions, in 1.6 million pension pots. That will disproportionately affect women, as they are more likely to have changed jobs multiple times during their careers. What is the Minister going to do to make sure that those women do not also lose out on pensions to which they should be entitled, in unclaimed pension pots?

**Will Quince:** I will certainly echo the comments made by the hon. Lady about those sporting teams in Scotland. Her question is better related to the Pensions Minister, so I will ensure that he responds fully to the points she raises. However, I would say, on WASPI women, that any amendment to the current legislation that creates a new inequality between men and women would be unquestionably highly dubious as a matter of law, and the Government’s position on the changes to the state pension age remains clear and consistent.

*British Sign Language Courses*
The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): A range of qualifications in BSL are available, but of course it is for schools and colleges to decide whether to offer these qualifications or other courses in BSL. The Department for Education is working to develop draft subject content for a potential GCSE in BSL.

Justin Madders: Cheshire College South and West, in my constituency, has had to cancel the BSL courses altogether, due to cuts in the adult education budget. That pattern is being repeated all over the country, so may I urge the Minister to look carefully at the impact of the cuts his Government are implementing?

Nick Gibb: I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the particular issue regarding that college. He will be aware that the exam board Signature has a number of BSL qualifications at different levels. He will also know that the DfE funds the I-Sign project, which has developed a family sign language programme course, which is available online, and post-16 funding is of course a priority in the upcoming spending review.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), as nobody in the Portcullis House atrium yesterday can have failed to have been moved by the signing choir, who performed to great acclaim. Will the Minister join me, the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), as a very special case, so will the Minister help them?

Nick Gibb: I did enjoy meeting Daniel Jillings’ mother, Ann, and I am only sorry that I could not go to the performance of the Lowestoft Signing Choir last night. The hon. Lady will know that in February the Department announced that it would begin the process of developing draft subject content for a GCSE in BSL, which will need to be considered against the requirements that apply to all GCSEs.

Equities Hub

3. Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle inequalities through the new Equities Hub.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): The new Equities Hub includes the Government Equalities Office, the race disparity unit and the new disability unit. Not only does it bring together the parts of Government that lead on gender, race, disability and sexual orientation, but it will use the convening power of the Cabinet Office to drive action plans to address the specific problems that men and women face, whether in recruitment, retention, or progression to senior leadership roles, in those sectors.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman raises a very good point. My hon. and learned Friend the Minister for State, Ministry of Justice recently visited some women’s prisons and spoke to people there about further things we need to do. Part of the work of the Government Equalities Office is to create better networks across the whole of the UK in all these policy areas.

Gender Bias: Employment

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Which employment sectors are most gender-biased against (a) women and (b) men; and if she will take steps to tackle those biases.

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): My hon. Friend has asked a deviously difficult question, in that there are many ways to interpret it. I have taken it to reflect the gender split in sectors. The worst sectors in terms of the gender split for women are construction; mining and quarrying; and water supply, sewerage and waste management. All those sectors have workforces that are more than 80% men. The worst sectors in terms of the gender split for men are education, human health and social work. We are working with all those sectors to drive action plans to address the specific problems that men and women face, whether in recruitment, retention, or progression to senior leadership roles, in those sectors.

Mr Speaker: Brilliant though the Minister is, she cannot be expected, any more than any of us can, to know the inner workings of the sophisticated mind of the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone).

Mr Hollobone: There is a highly disproportionately low number of male primary school teachers. What can the Government do to address this?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend asks a good question. There is interesting research on what and how gender stereotypes form at early ages. By the age of seven, girls tend to think that they should be in what we call very loosely the caring industries, and boys tend to think that they should be in what we call very loosely the engineering-type industries. So it starts at the very beginning. We have to work on, and we are working on, ensuring that the gender stereotypes for boys and girls are not allowed to continue. That is precisely why the gender equality road map that we published last week will help with those limiting and
limited stereotypes. We must very much encourage boys to grow, and to be great teachers in our schools and colleges.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I am sure the Minister would agree that in the care sector—where my mother has worked for the past 30 years—the focus tends to be purely on women working in that sector, often because it is part-time and low-paid work. What more will the Minister do to make sure that the care sector is seen as a real profession, with good qualifications and a decent salary?

Victoria Atkins: The care sector is such an important sector in our economy—all the more so as we age and live for longer—so through the gender equality road map we are very much looking into how we can help to ensure that the part-time roles are paid properly, and also that there are career opportunities. A tiny step is, of course, the gender pay gap regulation reporting, which helps to set out the disparities between pay, not only within industries and sectors but across the economy. It is through that that we will start to get much better quality.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Only 1% of the tradespeople who work in building maintenance in housing associations are female, so will my hon. Friend endorse the work of the Guinness Partnership and its ambassador tradeswomen who are trying to drive up that figure by going into schools and colleges, encouraging women to pursue a career in construction?

Victoria Atkins: I endorse not only the work of the Guinness Partnership, but the work of my hon. Friend, who is a powerhouse himself for trying to ensure that women and girls see construction as a really good industry and a really good employment opportunity for them.

Prison Officer Training: Women's Mental Health

5. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on trends in the level of training for prison officers working with women with mental health needs.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): From April of this year, a new specialist training package known as Positive Outcomes for Women: Empowerment and Rehabilitation has been devised to support prison officers working with women in custody and the community. That will help staff to have the necessary skills and knowledge to deal with those with specific needs.

Liz Twist: Given that women in prison account for a disproportionate amount of self-harm incidents, it is increasingly important that they are given support in prison. When will the Minister commit to enhancing support for vulnerable women with a mental health need in prison?

Robert Buckland: The hon. Lady will have heard what I just said about the new training programme, but it is part of a wider policy framework. In particular, there is work on the Lord Farmer review to improve family ties for female offenders and a further investment of £5 million for community provision. My experience last week at Her Majesty’s Prison Eastwood Park taught me a lot about how women can help each other and support each other through the process, which can often be a very traumatic time for them.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): This year’s inspection of HMP Foston Hall identified that 74% of women had mental health problems, but only two thirds were receiving any help. At the same prison, only half of officers had received any mental health awareness training despite a general feeling that they would like more. What more can be done to improve mental health training across the estate to reduce self-harm and suicide and to improve on the current position?

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that important point. As I have said, the roll out of the new POWER scheme is going to be very important in terms of giving prison officers the tools they need to help support women with mental health needs. I do think that our overall strategy is now translating into real change, with the key worker scheme allowing prison officers to work with individual prisoners to identify their needs, so there is progress, but I accept that much more needs to be done.

Windrush: Home Office Investigation

6. Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): Whether her Department is supporting the Home Office internal investigation into the causes of the Windrush scandal; and if she will make a statement.

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): The Home Secretary commissioned a lessons-learned review to consider the key policy and operational decisions that led to members of the Windrush generation becoming entangled in measures designed for illegal immigrants and appointed Wendy Williams as its independent adviser. We understand that Wendy Williams has been considering a great deal of material during the course of the review and has spoken with a wide range of people. We will publish her report following its receipt.

Emma Dent Coad: The Government seem obsessed with pushing through a damaging no-deal Brexit, and Windrush victims feel ignored, as they have to make do with an apology, or perhaps another review, then a report, and then a consultation on the report and the review. Words are cheap; actions count. Can the Minister please explain how the process of compensating Windrush victims is progressing?

Victoria Atkins: I am glad that the hon. Lady has asked this question, because it gives me the opportunity to inform her that more than 6,400 people have been granted some form of documentation by the Windrush taskforce and more than 4,200 people have successfully applied to become British nationals through the Windrush scheme. We have announced that the Windrush compensation scheme is open for claimants. The forms, rules and claimant guidance were published in April and the free phone helpline is available for those wishing to receive printed copies of the forms or for any other queries.
Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): The Government said that it would take two weeks to resolve the Windrush cases; it has been over 84 weeks thus far. I have a live petition, which garnered more than 800 signatures a day, which I plan to present to the Prime Minister next week. Will the Minister join me in fighting for justice and fairness for the Windrush generation, and support the call to get all cases resolved before we break for recess?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. As she knows from the work she has done, every case is complex. We want to ensure that they are being thoroughly considered. We will continue to update the Select Committee with work and progress on this, but I refer her back to the fact that more than 6,400 people have been given some form of documentation and more than 4,200 people have successfully applied to become British nationals through the scheme.

Abortion Clinic Buffer Zones

7. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): When the Government plan to announce a decision on their review of proposals to introduce buffer zones around abortion clinics.

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): It is a pleasure to answer this question from the hon. Lady. In September 2018, having considered the evidence of the review, the Home Secretary reached the conclusion that introducing national buffer zones would not be a proportionate response given the experience of the vast majority of hospitals and clinics, and considering that the majority of activities are passive in nature; but we of course watch with great interest the incidents that are happening in her constituency.

Dr Huq: Ealing’s buffer zone is pioneering, but it is a local byelaw and its renewal process will have to start next year, notwithstanding its High Court challenge next week. Women up and down the country—clinic users and staff—need the certainties of protection from harassment by national, lasting legislation, and the evidence of the Minister’s review does not bear out what all the pressure groups are saying. So when will the Government have the guts to act?

Victoria Atkins: It is not a question of having the guts or otherwise. We looked at this very carefully. We looked at the range of hospitals and clinics across the country that offer these services, and the overwhelming majority did not report the sorts of activities that the hon. Lady has described taking place outside the clinic in her constituency. However, we of course keep the matter under review, and I am always happy to discuss this with the hon. Lady, because I know she takes such an interest in it.

Workplace Gender Equality

8. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to enable employers to increase gender equality in the workplace.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): The cross-Government gender equality road map sets out our plans to address the persistent gender barriers that people face at every stage of their life. It addresses the cumulative impact faced disproportionately by women as a result of gender barriers at every stage of their life.

Peter Aldous: Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the Ogden Trust, participating businesses, higher and further education providers and John Best on their sterling work in promoting the coastal energy internship programme, which in three years has grown from providing five to 50 internships, and which is ensuring that female interns have every opportunity to work in an industry that has long been male-dominated?

Penny Mordaunt: I would be delighted to join my hon. Friend in highlighting that fantastic example and congratulating all involved on its success. In order to improve gender representation in STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—industries, we are raising awareness of the opportunities that these career paths present, through the Government careers strategy.

Sexual Violence Support Services

9. Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on the provision of support services for people who have experienced sexual violence.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): The Minister for victims, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), and the Minister for mental health, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), meet quarterly, and in their most recent meeting they discussed mental health support for victims of serious violence and sexual assault, as part of the Government’s continued work to implement an integrated system of care for victims.

Wera Hobhouse: A recent public petition brought by campaigner Fern Champion on the issue of funding for rape crisis centres has attracted more than 150,000 signatures. Fern’s experience, echoed by many, is that rape crisis centres are so oversubscribed that survivors are being turned away or are told to wait for up to two years before they can receive support. Will the Minister commit to meet me—preferably before the summer recess—to discuss how we ensure that all survivors of sexual violence can access support?

Robert Buckland: I am happy to commit the victims Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), to that meeting; I am sure he will be very pleased with me. This is an important and serious issue, because rape crisis centres form an invaluable part of the service. I am glad to say that from April this year my Department has increased funding for specialised rape and sexual abuse support services by 10%—up by £8 million a year—and that, for the first time, we will have centrally funded services in all 42 police and crime commissioner areas. That is a sign of our deep commitment, but we will work further with the hon. Lady.
**Flexible Working**

10. **Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure that businesses offer employees their legal right to request flexible working. [911881]

   The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): All employees with 26 weeks’ continuous service have the right to request flexible working—that is over 90% of employees. Employers can refuse a request for flexible working only if they have sound business reasons, which are set out in statute. We have also established the flexible working taskforce to promote wider understanding of implementation of flexible working practices. Earlier this year, we launched a flexible working website specifically aimed at helping working mothers to find flexible jobs.

   **Helen Goodman:** Women who work at Asda in Bishop Auckland and Spennymoor, and indeed across the whole country, are currently facing dismissal if they do not accept a new contract that would end the flexibility they currently have. In view of the helpful answer that the Minister has given, will she join me and the GMB union in calling on Asda to think again and have a proper negotiation?

   **Kelly Tolhurst:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising the concerns among her constituents with regard to the change of contract. As she well knows, that is a debate and a negotiation between the employer and the employees and their representatives. I am sure that the unions involved will be making their feelings clear. I advise those of her constituents who have any concerns about the practices that are happening within Asda to ring ACAS, which will be able to give them good, sound advice.

**Maternity Discrimination**

11. **Kirstene Hair** (Angus) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help ensure that women are protected from maternity discrimination. [911883]

12. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to tackle maternity discrimination. [911884]

   The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The law is absolutely clear: pregnancy and maternity discrimination against women in the workplace is unlawful. The Government recognise the importance of tackling pregnancy and maternity discrimination more widely, and have consulted on extending redundancy protections. We have received over 600 responses, which we are currently reviewing, and we will set out the next steps very soon.

   **Kirstene Hair:** Flexible working enables women to stay in work and develop their careers after they have children, and helps to prevent maternity discrimination. It could also help to close the gender pay gap. It has made a huge difference to a member of staff in my constituency office with regard to getting back into work after having a child. What steps can my hon. Friend outline to ensure that flexible working is offered in employment contracts, and is also a priority when advertising the job so that people understand that it is a possibility?

   **Kelly Tolhurst:** My hon. Friend is quite right. This Government recognise that we need to do as much as we can for working families, and particularly for women who may suffer from discrimination. She is right to talk about flexibility. She will know that the Government have committed to consulting on a duty on employers to consider whether a job can be done flexibly and to make that very clear in the advertisement for the job.

   **Diana Johnson:** Following the long overdue consultation on the rights of pregnant women and new mothers, does the Minister expect the Government to support the recommendation made by the Women and Equalities Committee that the German model offers the best solution for protecting women from the worst employers?

   **Kelly Tolhurst:** The hon. Lady is right: we have had the consultation, on which we will hopefully make further announcements soon. It is absolutely right that we have consulted on the extension of the pregnancy and maternity protections for up to six months. The Government have looked at the German approach to enforcement, which uses a state body to grant permissions to make new mothers redundant. This would diverge from the UK system of enforcement of individuals’ employment rights through employment tribunals.

**Topical Questions**

T1. [911885] **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

   The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): All workers should be safe and able to thrive at work. Workplace harassment reflects an unacceptable sense of power, entitlement and disrespect towards others. Today I have launched a consultation on sexual harassment in the workplace. I am seeking views on whether the law is fit for purpose and how we can ensure that we have the right processes in place to keep people safe at work. We want to hear from people affected by this issue and design solutions that work for them. I urge everyone with an interest to go on to gov.uk and help us in this exercise by filling out the consultation questionnaire.

   **Mr Cunningham:** According to the Home Office, only 15 police forces have had training in relation to domestic abuse and violence. What discussions has the Minister had with the Home Office to ensure that all police forces receive that training?

   **Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. There is work going on to build further capacity in police forces across the four nations. The UK is also making a major contribution to deliver that capacity in the police forces of other nations. I will get my hon. Friend the Minister for Women to write to him with the specifics.
passenger information on buses, which would allow those with sight loss to travel independently. There was a consultation on the Bus Services Act 2017, which finished in September last year. Could my right hon. Friend update the House on when those recommendations will be made public?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The consultation has finished, and some funding is ring-fenced as part of the inclusive transport strategy for ensuring that audio-visual equipment is installed on buses. The Department for Transport is in the process of bringing forward regulations and publishing guidance. That will be later this year. In the meantime, we are encouraging operators’ efforts to ensure that there is accessible information on their services.

**Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister cites the race disparity audit and the gender pay gap regulations as some of her proudest achievements, seemingly not realising that they are symbolic of her failures. The report highlighted the systematic institutional racism of her Government’s policies, and we now have the real possibility of a casual racist and misogynist entering No.10—[Interruption.]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Let me be absolutely clear: nothing disorderly has occurred. People have free speech within the rules of the House. I will adjudicate the enforcement of those rules. Nothing disorderly has taken place, and I certainly do not require any assistance from occupants of the Treasury Bench.

**Dawn Butler:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I could go through the list of things that have been said, but we do not have time. I hope the Minister will give assurances that the women and equalities agenda will not go backwards under the new Prime Minister. To adapt Stormzy lyrics:

“We have to be honest
Rule number two, don’t make the promise
If you can’t make the deal, just be honest
Equities will never die, it’s like Chuck Norris
Rather, chuck this Government and chuck Boris.”

**Penny Mordaunt:** Although I am sure that there will be a lot of column inches and debate about the Prime Minister’s legacy, one of the things she can be proud of is setting up the Race Disparity Unit and the work she did to shine a spotlight on practices in particular parts of Government and public services. She has also supported me in setting up the equalities hub, which brings together that disparity team with disability, women and equalities and LGBT issues at the heart of Government. She should be very proud of that.

I gently point out to those on the Opposition Front Bench and all Members of the Labour party that they really should have come to the House today with a bit of humility, following the shocking and, quite frankly, chilling things we saw last night. There are Members of the Labour party—a once great political party—who are standing up for the Jewish community, and long may they continue to do that, but those on the Front Bench have to understand the gravenss of what we saw. It is one thing to be incompetent and fail to grip a situation. It is quite another to be complicit in it.

**T5. [911890]** Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What steps is the Minister taking to protect people from sexual harassment at work, particularly in the charity sector?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend, particularly for the work she has done in focusing both domestically and internationally on this issue. As I said in my opening statement, we are today issuing a consultation, which will apply across every sector, to protect workers against harassment, particularly sexual harassment. Of course, the Department for International Development has done a tremendous amount in the wake of the Oxfam scandal, ensuring that the victims’ voices can be heard, but we are also building the systems we need globally to protect people from predatory individuals.

**T2. [911886]** Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): A constituent of mine was involved in several car accidents, leaving them disabled. After going through the difficult process of claiming disability benefits, they are now being denied legal aid in relation to these accidents. This constituent is a veteran. Is the Minister not ashamed that my constituent, after serving our country, does not have his years of service impacting on his wellbeing, but this Government’s hostile environment towards disabled people, who, as confirmed by the UN, are disproportionately denied justice?

**Penny Mordaunt:** If the hon. Lady would give me the details of that case, I will be very happy to look at it.

**T6. [911892]** Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): As we have heard from the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), the Lowestoft Signing Choir produced a moving and superb performance in Portcullis House last night. Its members Ann and Daniel Jillings have been passionately campaigning for a GCSE in British sign language. While preparatory work is under way, will my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities work with the Department for Education and with the Minister for School Standards, who has been very supportive—he is in his place—to ensure that this exam, which will transform so many people’s lives, is put in the curriculum as soon as practically possible?

**The Minister for School Standards** (Nick Gibb): I am delighted to confirm that we are committed to the development of a BSL GCSE. Daniel Jillings and his mother Ann have been formidable campaigners on this issue. Daniel in particular, despite his young age, has been very influential indeed with his campaign. We are pushing this work forward as soon as we can, while also ensuring that it can be completed to the highest standard. My hon. Friend will be aware that the development of a new GCSE is a complex and lengthy process, but, as I say, we are committed to it as a new GCSE.

**T4. [911888]** Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): In case it is her last Question Time, may I thank the Minister for Women and Equalities for the leadership she has shown on LGBT equality during her time in post to date, which I know will continue? However, may I press her and the Government on sex and relationships education guidance to schools? The message from headteachers is overwhelming: they desperately need clearer, simpler, straightforward guidance that they can hold up to parents,
governors and everyone else to make sure that no child in this country goes without inclusive relationships education.

**Penny Mordaunt:** First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. It will not be my last Women and Equalities questions; I just may be sitting in a different place. I agree, absolutely, that guidance is incredibly important. The work that the Department for Education has been doing has been making good progress on that. I think we need to have absolute clarity on these issues, and I am confident that the Department for Education is doing that.
Resignation of UK Ambassador to USA

10.38 am

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the resignation of the United Kingdom’s ambassador to the United States.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): It was with deep regret that, yesterday, the Government accepted the resignation of Her Majesty’s ambassador to Washington, Sir Kim Darroch. Over a distinguished 42-year career, Sir Kim has served his country with the utmost dedication and distinction. He brought dispassionate insight and directness to his role. It is an outrage that a selection of his very professional reports back to London should have been leaked.

Quite rightly, Sir Kim received the full support of the Prime Minister and the entire Cabinet. In an act of selfless duty, Sir Kim made the decision to resign in order to relieve the pressure on his family and colleagues and to protect the UK-US relationship. The Government profoundly regret that this episode has led Sir Kim to decide to resign. The tributes that have been paid to him from across both Houses, which I would add to, and from so many other corners of this country and others, have been fitting and rightly deserved.

Mr Speaker: Before we open to general questioning, may I thank the Minister of State for that pithy but very gracious statement? Many people in the Chamber will have had personal interaction with Sir Kim. He is an outstanding public servant, a point that has been beautifully encapsulated by the Minister of State. I call Liz McInnes.

[Interruption.]

Mr McFadden: I thank the Minister for his opening statement. The resignation of Sir Kim Darroch marks a dark moment for our democracy and for the standing of the United Kingdom. He is a hugely respected professional diplomat with an exemplary record of serving both Labour and Conservative Governments. In writing his dispatches, he did nothing wrong. He was doing his job. It is his job to tell it as he sees it. He carried out his duties in the finest traditions of the civil service. These traditions are not just rustic relics from the past; they are essential to the proper workings of our parliamentary democracy. His response has been characterised by dignity and professionalism, which is more than can be said for others in this affair.

Any other President would have brushed this off and seen the importance of the bigger picture, but the response that we got was the opposite of mature leadership. Thankfully, the relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States is bigger than this matter and bigger than this President. The response of the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) was an appalling abandonment of someone in the firing line. Real leaders protect their people; they do not throw them to the wolves because they can sniff a prize for themselves. His actions were a chilling warning of what is to come if he becomes Prime Minister.

How can those in the civil service be expected to do their jobs properly now? How can they operate if they fear leaks, followed by abandonment by our political leaders? What are our ambassadors supposed to write home, from whatever country they are in—“The President is perfect. The people are happy. They sing his name in the street”? What use would that be from our postings abroad? How can civil servants advise Ministers at home if they feel that candid advice will be taken as evidence of disloyalty and treachery?

Those who welcome Kim Darroch’s departure believe that we need a civil service of true believers. They are profoundly wrong. We do not need a civil service of true believers; we need a civil service able to do its job without fear or favour, and that has become much harder this week. Does the Minister share the concern that this attack on the civil service is part of a broader attack on institutions essential to the functioning of our democracy—judges called enemies of the people; MPs called traitors to their country; broadcasters vilified as having hidden agendas?

Our democracy is under fire. Those who value and cherish it must speak up and defend it. Whipping up anger against one institution after another and dressing it up as an attack on the establishment is doing profound harm to the country. We must call it out for the insidious agenda that it is. I conclude by asking the Minister whether this is understood by at least some in Government, so that the damage done this week does not continue into the future.

Mr Speaker: My apologies to the right hon. Gentleman, whose question it was my privilege to select.

Sir Alan Duncan: The right hon. Gentleman has spoken with authority and wisdom. What he said should be pinned on every wall as an instruction to people on how to act, respectively, in public life and about public life. I commend him for what he has just said.

We have emphasised throughout the importance of ambassadors being able to provide honest, unvarnished assessments of the politics in their country, and to be able to report without fear or favour. We will continue to support civil servants in carrying out that duty. On Tuesday and again today, I have been very grateful to those on the Opposition Benches for the support and cross-party unity they have shown. Their decency, with all those across the whole country who support officials when they are under attack, is something for which I personally am very grateful. When I spoke to Sir Kim yesterday, he was too. He asked me to pass on to the entire House his gratitude.

The right hon. Gentleman is right about the decay in our institutions. We can have a ferocious contest across the Floor of the House, but we have to do that under certain rules and certain codes of conduct—being able to say hello in the bar afterwards, having expressed our differences. So many codes of conduct are in freefall. It is leading, as the right hon. Gentleman rightly says, to unacceptable attacks on judges, Members of Parliament and broadcasters. Attacks of that sort are a fundamental attack on all the basic freedoms within the democracy in which we operate.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): While the failure of the former Foreign Secretary to leap to the defence of Sir Kim shows a lack of leadership that is lamentable, is not the priority now to restore the shattered confidence of our diplomatic corps? Is not the best way
to do that to identify the miserable perpetrator of this act and then to see them charged with a criminal offence?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I hope the House will understand if I hold back today from making any further comment on my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). I said enough yesterday to make my position entirely clear.

In terms of the confidence we need to have in our officials and their morale, the permanent under-secretary in the Foreign Office, Sir Simon McDonald, had an all-staff meeting yesterday, which included people who were able to come in on phones and by video conference. The mood was palpable. There is deep upset, but a fantastic united defence of Sir Kim Darroch. I think and I hope that the very, very deft manner in which the PUS handled that meeting will have absolutely reassured our diplomats and officials everywhere that they have our full support. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the leaking. I really hope that we find who did this, and that their name and the consequences of what they did become very, very clear indeed.

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) on securing it. He spoke for almost the whole House, and certainly everyone in the country, as indeed did the Minister in his response, in expressing his dismay about the circumstances that have led to the resignation of Sir Kim Darroch—who has had to resign, let us remember, simply for doing his job and telling the truth about what is happening in Washington.

While Sir Kim is entirely innocent and can leave office with his head held high, there are many guilty parties in this affair who should be hanging their heads in shame. First, there is whoever is responsible for leaking the memos. Then there is Donald Trump, and his ridiculous temper tantrums. Then there is the outgoing Prime Minister, who has indulged Donald Trump so much but received nothing but disrespect in return.

For me, however, the biggest villain of all is the man who is about to become our Prime Minister. He had the chance on Tuesday night—not just once, but six times—to defend Sir Kim and oppose Donald Trump, but instead he made an active choice to throw our man in Washington under the bus. It was the most craven and despicable act of cowardice that I have seen from any candidate for public office, let alone someone running to be Prime Minister. It sends the worst possible signal to our diplomatic service abroad, and it should send warning signs to our whole country—if we thought that the current Prime Minister was bad when it came to her spineless attitude towards Donald Trump, then things are about to get a whole lot worse.

Will the Minister therefore ensure that a new ambassador to the US is appointed before the next Prime Minister takes office, so that we still have at least one UK representative willing to speak truth to power in Washington?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady—at least for her kind words about me. I do feel obliged to defend my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. I think that in these difficult times the relationship between the Prime Minister and the President has obviously seen us disagreeing on some things, such as the Iran nuclear deal, so it is inevitable that that relationship has needed a lot of work. But I do not think that my right hon. Friend has been spineless; indeed, I think that she has been very skilful. She has done her utmost, with a high degree of success, to ensure that the relationship has been functioning in the best possible way. The next ambassador will be appointed in the usual way: by the Prime Minister, on the Foreign Secretary’s recommendation, with the approval of Her Majesty the Queen.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): May I first welcome the comments of my friend the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) and my right hon. Friend the Minister? This has been a very difficult moment for British diplomacy, and it is worth thinking about why that is so.

This is a direct challenge to a sovereign nation and its ability to nominate its own representative. If sovereignty does not allow a nation to choose its own representative, frankly, what is it but servitude? That is why Britain must stand up for our envoys. If we do not think that they are up to it, we must replace them, but we must not be bullied into seeing them kicked out or silenced. May I therefore ask my right hon. Friend to assure me, and everyone in this House, that Her Majesty’s Government will always stand up for those we send abroad, military or civilian, and back them as necessary, in the interests of the British people and no one else?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I thank my hon. Friend for what he has said consistently over the past few days. I thank him for his response and his support, and for that of the Foreign Affairs Committee, which he chairs. I am also grateful for his kind words about the permanent under-secretary when, at short notice, he appeared before his Committee yesterday as a witness about these leaks. The permanent under-secretary very much appreciated that the Committee was able to appreciate what he said to it in that session.

Yes—we appoint ambassadors. Nobody else does. They are Her Majesty’s ambassadors and nobody else’s. We will also stand up for them, and I can tell from what has been said by Members on the other side of the House that if ever there were a Government of a different colour, that Government—I hope—would too. It appears that they would.

**Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) not only for securing the urgent question but for his remarks, which I think reflected the views of many of us in this House. I also thank the Minister for his strong remarks over the past few hours, and the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee for his remarks. They have put some members of their own party to shame over these past few hours. I also want to thank Simon McDonald. The letters he exchanged with Kim Darroch show a dignity that is lacking in some members of the Conservative party.

It is so important that ambassadors and other officials know that they have our support and that of their colleagues. I hope—and I hope that the Minister will give us a fuller answer on this than he gave the Labour spokesperson—that we will have a speedy replacement,
because the role of ambassador to the United States is a key one. The civil service system has been damaged; they must be able to speak truth to power.

I think that it is a disgrace that a member of the Conservative party, who sits on the Minister’s own Benches, said that we do not need to defend diplomats when they are doing their jobs. What is the Minister’s message about that? Good governance relies on candour. People from all parties might not like that sometimes, and might hear things we do not like, but it goes to the heart of what makes good government for everyone.

The Shadow Minister was right to say that the former Foreign Secretary threw the former ambassador under the bus. President Trump cannot be held to account by this House for his actions and his words, unfortunately. Others can. Time and again the former Foreign Secretary has shown that he is unfit for office. Does the Minister agree with me that he should never be allowed to hold the role of Prime Minister?

Sir Alan Duncan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bowling me such easy balls and I will endeavour to answer as frankly as I can. He will forgive me if I do not commit to a timescale, simply because I do not know: I am not in a position to inform the House with authority. I would merely observe that if one makes a speedy appointment, it is very likely that one would create a vacancy elsewhere, so what is solved in one corner of the world becomes a gap in another. It is very important that we appoint a new ambassador in the proper way so that we get the very best person appointed in the best possible way for the long-term interests of the UK and our relationship with the US.

Where I can totally agree with the hon. Gentleman is in saying that it is everyone’s duty—and that of everyone in this House—to defend our ambassadors. They are our ambassadors doing their duty. If they do something terribly wrong and break all the rules, that is altogether different, but Sir Kim Darroch was, as the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) said from the Labour Front Bench, doing his job and appears to have been punished, as it were, for doing so. We must defend every ambassador who is properly doing their job. We will and we should. As for his final question, I hope that the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) will allow me to defer that a little.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): A leak is, by its very nature, a conspiracy. Who benefits?

Sir Alan Duncan: There are those who break all the rules of decency who think they can benefit from it themselves. Quite who is benefiting from this, I cannot see, but what is quite clear is that the interests of the country do not benefit. This is an absolutely unacceptable leak that has had a very significant consequence that is detrimental to our interest as a country and of course, in an utterly unfair way, to the personal life of a highly capable ambassador and his family.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) on securing this important urgent question and on the manner in which he put it, and I thank the Minister for his remarks. Sir Kim Darroch was and is a distinguished and principled man who has given huge service to our country, and we must all thank him.

Does the Minister understand the deep concern about the fact that the man who is about to be our Prime Minister repeatedly refused to back Sir Kim and the civil service? That concern is not only about the implications for this case and for our diplomatic service more generally, but about the implications of our potentially having a Prime Minister who will be pushed about on all sorts of issues by the bully that is President Trump. I agree with the Minister that that is the behaviour of an utter wimp.

Sir Alan Duncan: I seem to recall that that was one of the kinder words that I used yesterday. [Laughter.]

There is one thing that I have omitted to say today, which I hope I can say now in response to the hon. Lady’s comments. Sir Kim Darroch’s career is not over. I hope the House will recognise that although this is a difficult moment, it does not mean that that is the end of his career, and I hope that the Foreign Office and the entire apparatus of government will look after him, appreciate his merits, and ensure that he can be redeployed somewhere else for the benefit of our United Kingdom.

As for the hon. Lady’s somewhat more party political questions, again, I think I would prefer to concentrate on the specific details of the question put by the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), and to concentrate on the merits of Sir Kim Darroch rather than the—merits of anyone else.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for what he said earlier about the critical importance of the impartiality of the civil service. I do not feel that he needs to add to those comments, so may I ask him instead to expand on how he sees the special relationship going in the next few weeks?

Sir Alan Duncan: Swimmingly.

I commend to Members Henry Kissinger’s book “White House Years”. Among the many thousands of pages of his memoirs is, as I recall, a remarkable description of the special relationship. In essence, he says that the relationship is not just that between two people who are Heads of State, or Heads of Government. It is really about how, on so many layers and in so many areas—security, culture, business—so much between our two countries works from day to day, on an assumed foundation of trust. That will continue, and that is why the web of affection and activity between our two countries will never be destroyed by a difficult moment such as this.

I think that I can, in all honesty, answer my hon. Friend’s question by saying that the relationship will remain special—that a relationship between two English-speaking nations with histories that are so entwined, and friendships and activities which will never be destroyed, will continue. I hope that it does continue, and I hope that both countries thrive and flourish.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I commend the Minister for the integrity with which he has conducted himself over the last 24 hours. He rightly drew the House’s attention to the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), but may I draw the country’s attention to Sir Kim Darroch’s resignation letter and the response from the permanent under-secretary, which are two very good examples of why our Foreign Office is respected
around the world? People’s attention should be drawn to them, rather than to the comments of the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson).

The Minister said that the application process for a new ambassador in Washington would be undertaken in the “proper way”. May I encourage him to ensure that the “proper way” means a proper application process through the Foreign Office, advertised externally, so that the Foreign Office can choose the most appropriate person for the job, rather than making a political appointment and choosing someone who would be a stooge of the next Prime Minister?

Sir Alan Duncan: Again, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and agree with him, and I thank him for his comments about Sir Kim Darroch and Sir Simon McDonald, who have both conducted themselves in such an exemplary way; we can be proud of both. In terms of the application, it would be normal to do exactly as the hon. Gentleman has said, and that is what I expect will happen. It will be a proper appointment process in the normal way, so that from the pool of talent that we have we can, I hope, find the very best person to go as Her Majesty’s ambassador to Washington.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): As my right hon. Friend has outlined, it is absolutely fundamental that Foreign and Commonwealth Office employees remain candid, irrespective of the issues that they face in their host countries, but what further steps can he take to reinforce the imperative message that they can continue to do such an important job without threat?

Sir Alan Duncan: To a large extent, elsewhere it is business as usual. On a daily basis exactly that sort of process is happening: our ambassadors and consuls across the world will send in their perceptions, their process is happening: our ambassadors and consuls around the world will send in their perceptions, their comments about Sir Kim Darroch and Sir Simon McDonald, who have both conducted themselves in such an exemplary way; we can be proud of both. In terms of the application, it would be normal to do exactly as the hon. Gentleman has said, and that is what I expect will happen. It will be a proper appointment process in the normal way, so that from the pool of talent that we have we can, I hope, find the very best person to go as Her Majesty’s ambassador to Washington.

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Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): As my right hon. Friend has outlined, it is absolutely fundamental that Foreign and Commonwealth Office employees remain candid, irrespective of the issues that they face in their host countries, but what further steps can he take to reinforce the imperative message that they can continue to do such an important job without threat?

Sir Alan Duncan: To a large extent, elsewhere it is business as usual. On a daily basis exactly that sort of process is happening: our ambassadors and consuls across the world will send in their perceptions, their advice and their views of what they think is happening in their host country. The key thing that I can assure my hon. Friend of is that we as Ministers will fully defend our officials in doing that to the high professional standard that they always have done.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The loss of Sir Kim Darroch in this way diminishes our standing in the world; it also diminishes our vision of ourselves, and there are further implications. The Minister, who has spoken eloquently, must acknowledge the concern about having a Prime Minister who is capable of such craven cowardice leading our negotiations with the US, and that would refuse to deal with a British envoy sent by the British state. This is behaving worse than Chavez’s Venezuela, which would never have done such thing; it is behaving worse than Iran. And to be honest the concatenation of events has humiliated this country. I want to stand shoulder to shoulder with the United States of America, but I also want to stand shoulder to shoulder first with our Foreign Office diplomats, and for that matter with our Prime Minister, who has been humiliated directly by the United States President. When we are appointing a new ambassador to the United States of America, in these truly exceptional moments, will the Minister make sure that the candidates for that post appear before the Foreign Affairs Committee so that this House can take a view?

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that this is unprecedented. I do not think that this has ever happened before. As the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East said, a lot of these codes of conduct and assumed rules of the game are rather being turned on their head. This means that the normal process of diplomacy has become extraordinarily complicated by such trends in the world. The normal responses and expected reactions have to be crafted differently in circumstances such as this. In that sense, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. In terms of having approval hearings before his Committee, of course I cannot give that guarantee—

Chris Bryant: Go on!

Sir Alan Duncan: I see that he is trying to entice me to do so. I can but say that the appointment process will be of the sort that has taken place in the past.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): While acknowledging Sir Kim’s exemplary public service, may I ask my right hon. Friend whether he agrees that
we must now move on from this serious event and start to rebuild our relationship with our most important and closest ally?

Sir Alan Duncan: Of course we have to draw a line under this, because the world does not stop and diplomacy is needed to ensure that such an important relationship as this has a proper functioning diplomatic structure. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we have to move on from this and draw a line, and I hope that having a new ambassador will enable us to do so at all the layers, once the new appointment is in place.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I entirely agree with the sentiments expressed by the Minister earlier. Does he agree that in failing to support Sir Kim Darroch, the former Foreign Secretary was putting the American President first and the United Kingdom second? Surely this damages the United Kingdom’s influence in the world.

Sir Alan Duncan: The House is certainly aware of my view that everybody should have been there in full support of Kim Darroch and should continue to extend that full support to him without any kind of criticism whatever or any stain on his character because, as the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) said, he was doing his job and doing it well.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Like everyone else in the House, I have nothing but the highest respect for Sir Kim Darroch. Does the House agree that he has acted in the highest tradition of the civil and diplomatic service in so far as he has laid down a job that he must have considered to be right at the top of his career in the interest of his country?

Sir Alan Duncan: My hon. and gallant Friend understands chivalry, decency, duty and honour, and that is precisely what we saw yesterday in the personal conduct of Sir Kim Darroch.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): These attacks on, and the undermining of, the legislature, the judiciary, the civil service and the press are profoundly worrying. They have frightening historical echoes of dangerous political forces, and I applaud my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East for his wise and moving comments. His illustration of what happens when we have a cowed diplomatic service should haunt us. The Minister has responded with dignity and cross-party inclusivity, so what else does he think we in this House and the other place, and particularly the new Prime Minister and Cabinet, should do to reverse those damaging and worrying trends?

Sir Alan Duncan: We should stick together in defence of the standards that apply to us all. We should ensure that we all uphold those standards in everything we do, and try to keep our political attacks on a higher and non-personal plane than we so often see in this House, in our politics and, more deplorably, on social media.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): How right the Minister is to deplore personal attacks, especially those on senior colleagues in my party. The attacking of colleagues is completely wrong, and the people involved should be ashamed of themselves. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) on asking this urgent question, but there should have been a statement. The Government should not have been dragged here; they should have volunteered a statement. This is an unprecedented event. Confidential, sensitive cables have been leaked within the Foreign Office. The Minister has to tell us what he is doing to discover the culprit, because if we do not get the culprit, what ambassador will ever trust sending cables to the Foreign Office again?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am not sure where my hon. Friend has been over the past couple of days, but this is my second response to an urgent question on this topic, and the Prime Minister made her own comments yesterday in Prime Minister’s Question Time. There have been several clear statements to this House on this issue and about the nature of the inquiry, so that should satisfy my hon. Friend for the time being.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): One can only imagine what the American ambassador’s cables say about governance in this country. Maybe we shall find out some time—but hopefully not, eh? How confident is the right hon. Gentleman that this is a leak, not a hack? Will he also please rule out any suggestion that Nigel Farage will be the new ambassador in Washington?

Sir Alan Duncan: Perhaps the only cheering moment in this unfortunate episode was when I learned that Nigel Farage had ruled himself out of becoming ambassador to Washington. Was the hon. Gentleman asking about the inquiry?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Leak or hack?

Sir Alan Duncan: We do not at the moment have any evidence that this was a hack, so our focus is on finding someone within the system who has illicitly released these communications, which cover periods both very recent and from two years ago. That is where the inquiry is primarily focused.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Sir Kim Darroch is the epitome of all that is the very best about Britain and our institutions. Notwithstanding the enormous pressures of Brexit and all its consequences, does my right hon. Friend agree that our diplomatic and civil services are fundamental and vital cornerstones of British governance that none of us must ever undermine?

Sir Alan Duncan: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. In my years as a Minister, I have always seen ambassadors serve the interests of their country and the Government they serve. I have seen that in terms of diplomacy, and I have also seen that whatever their private views—by and large, one never knows their private views—on the issue of Brexit and preparation, they have gone full tilt in support of the requests and requirements of Ministers to take all the steps that may be necessary to cope with that process. They are the envy of the world. One of the great components of our soft power is the reputation of our diplomats for professionalism and integrity, and we must never see that undermined. I know perfectly well that if the
Government were of a different colour—looking across the Chamber—our ambassdors would serve them just as well.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman, whose conduct this week has been exemplary, just said that there is no evidence that this was an attack rather than a leak. With respect, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee’s investigation into disinformation has seen a whole web of connections, which include many of the characters involved in this very sad tale, so will he at least retain an open mind about the fact that this may well have been an attack, either from an enemy or even from an ally?

Sir Alan Duncan: I do not, in any way, dismiss what the hon. Gentleman says. I take it at face value as a perfectly legitimate observation about where we face risk and about what might have happened. I have absolutely no doubt that, under the terms of the inquiry, it will do everything to investigate the elements he describes. It is just that we have not seen it yet. Although I do not want to give a running commentary, I want to advise the House of as much as I know so that I do not hold anything back.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Now that we no longer have an ambassador to the United States, who is in charge of the British embassy in Washington? Do they have the same level of ambassadorial access to the US Administration, or do we have to wait for a formal ambassadorial appointment?

Sir Alan Duncan: We have an enormous embassy in Washington. It is standard practice in the diplomatic world that when an ambassador is away or being replaced, a chargé takes over. We have a highly capable deputy ambassador called Michael Tatham, who is assuming the responsibilities that Kim Darroch had until yesterday. I can absolutely assure my hon. Friend that this will work seamlessly and that all the diplomatic functions we expect of an embassy will continue in very capable, professional hands.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): It is important for the House to pause and reflect on the fact that this is the first time in modern British history that a third country has been able to dictate who should be Her Majesty’s ambassador, and this is not a hostile state but an ally. Is the Minister concerned that other countries might now seek to take a similar approach? What more could the British Government do to make it quite clear that appointments of Her Majesty’s ambassadors are made by the United Kingdom, and not by anybody else. Once they are appointed, we will defend them to the hilt.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I went to Washington in November 2018, and I met Sir Kim Darroch. He had very warm words to say about Donald Trump on that occasion.

Does my right hon. Friend not feel it is incumbent on every Member of Parliament to back our excellent diplomats and civil servants and that my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) should come to the House and apologise?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his words. He points out what is evident to anybody who visited Washington when Sir Kim was ambassador. There was a very cheerful team and a great esprit de corps. He was very popular, and there were very good parties, which I hope will continue.

Chris Bryant: If you’re invited.

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, I hope I am allowed back.

The other thing my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) allows me to point out is that one of the great tragedies of this is that the leaked communications were not at all representative of the tenor of the vast majority of those emanating from Washington. If the President were able to read them, I think he would have been perfectly happy.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Attacks on the fundamental pillars of our democracy, whether it is Parliament, the judiciary, the civil service or the media, are coming not just from an organised alt-right but from the left. Silence in the face of that is complicity, so may I commend the Minister, the shadow Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) and the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for what they have said?

Would not the best way to send a message about the independence of this country and our ability to choose our own ambassadors and, frankly, to defend the Prime Minister and her office be for the Prime Minister to immediately nominate her ambassador to Washington, to represent the Queen, this Government and, indeed, the next Prime Minister?

Sir Alan Duncan: I absolutely understand what the hon. Gentleman says about the stamp of authority that would be secured by doing this very speedily, but I reiterate that we want to make sure that we get the very best person. It would be a pity if, in the interest of alacrity, we chose a No. 2 rather than a No. 1. It is not for me to make any further comment on that. I do not know whose name might be in the frame, but that is a matter for the Prime Minister to decide.
Business of the House

11.25 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride): The business for the week commencing 15 July will include:


Tuesday 16 July—Second Reading of the Courts and Tribunals (Online Procedure) Bill [Lords], followed by a debate on a motion relating to the inter-ministerial group on early years family support. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Wednesday 17 July—Second Reading of the Census (Return Particulars and Removal of Penalties) Bill [Lords], followed by a general debate on the Gemma White report, followed by a debate on a motion relating to the changes to the independent complaints and grievance scheme.

Thursday 18 July—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by a debate on a motion on the Bishop of Truro’s review on persecution of Christians overseas, followed by a general debate on the spending of the Department of Health and Social Care on non-invasive precision therapies. The subjects for these debates were recommended by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 19 July—The House will not be sitting.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the business for next week. I note that the Government have found time for the debate on the Gemma White, QC, report and the amendment to the independent complaints and grievance procedure. The report came out at 10 am today, I have not had an opportunity to look at it in detail, but Labour Members wish to thank Gemma White, QC, for the time and effort she has put into her report. We will look seriously at the detail of the recommendations and work on a cross-party basis to make Parliament a modern workplace, and I encourage all Members to undertake the Valuing Everyone training, as it is a very good training session.

Just two weeks are left until this House rises for the summer recess, but we still do not have the conference recess dates. Can the Leader of the House give us any advance on returning on 3 September? Will he give an undertaking that when a new Cabinet is formed, on 24 July, a new list of ministerial responsibilities will be published as soon as possible? The last one was published in December 2018.

I am sure the Leader of the House would like to correct the record: last week, when I raised the Conservative candidates’ spending spree, which totals £100 billion—these are uncosted policy changes—he claimed that the Labour Opposition are spending “£1 trillion”. As a former Financial Secretary, he can do better than just pulling figures out of thin air. He will know that Labour’s 2017 manifesto was the only one that was costed. I would be happy to arrange a meeting for him with the shadow Chancellor to go through all the costings.

What chaos: a future Prime Minister refusing to support his own ambassador in the face of verbal abuse. It is disgraceful that there was a malicious leak of emails Sir Kim Darroch was doing his job. The Secretary of State for International Trade vowed to apologise to the President’s daughter, an un-elected representative. What on earth is he doing meeting the President’s daughter, and why is he apologising to her and not to Sir Kim Darroch? Was this an official visit, when he met the President’s daughter, and was Sir Kim excluded from that meeting? Was the abuse of our ambassador about removing an obstacle because they would rather negotiate in a golden lift away from those who serve our country and want the best for our country? As the head of the diplomatic service has said, we stand in solidarity with Sir Kim Darroch.

On Monday, the Leader of the House said that he would “take on board” my request to find time for a debate on the message from the House of Lords on setting up a Joint Select Committee, and that he would give it “further thought.” Does he have any further thoughts? We are happy to debate it on an Opposition day, if he will give us one. I do not think that it is for the Opposition to go to the Backbench Business Committee to request time for a Backbench Business debate.

The Leader of the House will know that the Bank of England estimates that a worst-case Brexit will involve border delays and markets losing confidence in Britain, which could shock the economy into a 5% contraction within a year—nearly as much as during the global financial crisis. Simon Coveney, Ireland’s Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, raised the “ugly prospect” of customs checks and political instability in Northern Ireland in a no-deal situation, which he said would “put many businesses and many people under a great deal of strain”. Philip Rycroft, the former permanent secretary at the Department for Exiting the European Union, said this week that “everybody should be worried about what happens in a no-deal situation. We would be taking a step into the unknown.”

Mr Rycroft said that leaving with no deal would be “fraught with difficulty”. The economy is going backwards: we have now had a third quarter of falling productivity, which decreased by 0.2%, and manufacturing has hit a six-month low. Deutsche Bank is sending people home with boxes; the last time we saw that was in the global financial crisis of 2008. Before the Leader of the House says anything, let me remind him that it was not Labour brothers who did that; Lehman Brothers was responsible. The right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) has repeatedly refused to rule out no deal, so I ask again: please will the Leader of the House give us time to debate the Lords message?

Will the Government explicitly rule out proroguing Parliament to force a no-deal Brexit? The Opposition stood with Sir John Major, who said that he would seek a judicial review in the courts if the new Prime Minister tried to suspend Parliament to deliver a no-deal Brexit. The former Attorney General, the right hon, and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), said that, were that to happen, it would be “the end of parliamentary democracy”.


Yesterday, United Nations experts voiced their “deep concern” over Iran’s “consistent pattern” of denying life-saving medical treatment to detainees, and the UN said that the continued detention of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is a mockery of justice. Will the Leader of the House update the House on what steps the Government have taken this week to free Nazanin?

Finally, the UK Parliament newsletter reminds us that on 11 July 1859, Big Ben rang out for the first time. We wish to hear him or her again.

**Mel Stride:** I echo the hon. Lady’s comments on Gemma White, whom I thank for that report. As the hon. Lady pointed out, we received it only at 10 o’clock this morning so, as you will appreciate, Mr Speaker, I have not had time fully to digest the full findings of the Gemma White report on the bullying and harassment of MPs’ parliamentary staff, but I am sure that Members from all parties will share my concern at the initial reports, at least. Let me be clear that there should be absolutely no place for bullying and harassment in this place. We all bear a responsibility to uphold the proper standards of dignity and respect in Parliament.

As you know, Mr Speaker, over the past year, we have made significant progress that will help to bring about meaningful culture change, but more remains to be done. Indeed, as I have announced today, we are bringing forward a motion that will implement the important recommendation in Dame Laura Cox’s report that historic cases should be in scope as part of the independent complaints and grievance scheme. Our Parliament must be a safe place, free of bullying and harassment, and I am determined to play my part in delivering that.

The hon. Lady raises a number of other points. First, I thank her for welcoming the three hours of protected time that we have set aside to debate the Gemma Wright report on Wednesday next week. That will be followed immediately by one hour of protected time to cover the motion that will be tabled on the Laura Cox 2 recommendation.

The hon. Lady rightly raises the importance of the Valuing Everyone training. I urge everybody in the House to go on that training course. It is relatively short, but extremely important. I have written to all my Conservative colleagues in this House to urge them to take on that training, and I raised the importance of it at—let me just say—a very senior level of government.

The hon. Lady asks about the recess. The answer is that we will come back in due course with an announcement on the recess arrangements post the recess when the House rises on 25 July. She raises—as I think she did with my predecessor, to be fair—the publication of ministerial responsibilities. I will look into that and undertake to come back to her very quickly with an answer on when we expect that to be updated online.

The hon. Lady raises the profligacy—although she did not term it in that way—of the Labour party’s spending commitments and my £1 trillion price tag. I imagine that I will decline the invitation to meet the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer on this matter, because I have a volume of information that supports the assertions that I have made in this respect, not least, I believe, the £175 billion price tag on the nationalisations of the various utilities that the Labour party has in its sights.

The hon. Lady raises the important matter of Sir Kim Darroch. The Minister of State has clearly just answered an urgent question very thoroughly on that matter and put forward the Government’s very firm and resolute view on what has happened. She raised specifically the conversations that the Secretary of State for International Trade has had with members of the White House, and I know that he will be aware of the comments that she has made.

The hon. Lady raises the Joint Select Committee and the message from the Lords that we have received and asks when we will be responding to that. I am keen that we do so this side of the recess, and I am in discussions currently with our end of the usual channels in that regard.

The hon. Lady raises the matter of Deutsche Bank. I think that some 18,000 job losses are anticipated there, although it should be pointed out that this is a global retrenchment, not just one that affects the City of London. The Government’s record on employment is, of course, exemplary. We have the highest employment in our history and the lowest unemployment since 1974.

Once again, the hon. Lady also raises the issue of proroguing Parliament. The main thrust of her point was that this should not be used as a device for us to go into a no-deal situation without Parliament expressing its opinion on the matter. As I have said from this Dispatch Box in the past, I do not believe that that would be a desirable situation. The Government do not believe that that would be a desirable situation, not least because it would put the monarch in the awkward position of being involved in what is essentially a political decision given that it is Prorogation based on the advice of the Prime Minister, but ultimately granted by the Queen. I will also say, as I think you have suggested, Mr Speaker, that it seems inconceivable that Parliament will not have its opportunity to ensure that it has appropriate time to debate at the appropriate time these very, very important matters for our country.

The hon. Lady returns to Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I can assure her that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office remains very robustly engaged with the Iranian authorities, and I have now taken it upon myself to ensure that my office keeps closely in touch with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in that regard, as indeed it has done very recently, particularly and not least because of the totally understandable concern that I share with the hon. Lady about her welfare and the desire that we all have in this House that she be released as quickly as possible.

Finally, Big Ben was mentioned. May I share the hon. Lady’s joy in referencing 11 July 1859? We do want to hear the bells again. An interesting fact that not many people may know is that this bell can actually be heard all around the world because the World Service has a live feed of it when it chimes, and that is the live bell that we hear when Big Ben is alive and whole.

**Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the report issued by the Centre for Responsible Credit? It highlights...
a consumer debt crisis and recommends that the Financial Conduct Authority put a cap on the credit card market, similar to the cap on payday loan costs.

**Mel Stride:** I thank my hon. Friend for that question. It is typical of him that he should go out to bat for those who are least able to afford the consequences of high interest rates. The FCA has—or we have, as a Government—already placed a limit on payday lending. The FCA has particularly expressed concerns about the volume of credit that is being taken on to credit cards. In February 2018 it announced a package of remedies related to giving customers more control over credit card limits, encouraging customers to repay more quickly and other measures.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the next episode in the not-so-thrilling franchise, “Business for next week”. Thank goodness there are only two weeks left to endure this purgatory. I have to say that the Leader of the House’s holiday bus gets more and more appealing and alluring, and I would even be prepared to endure all his rotten jokes if we could just escape this oblivion for the summer.

Thankfully, the Tories’ pointless leadership contest is at last coming to an end, as the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) will soon secure his coronation. Last week both candidates were in Perth in my constituency telling me that they were going to put me on the run and take the run out of Runrig. The only thing running in Perthshire are the votes of soft Tory voters and Tory remainers, appalled at the prospect of this buffoon’s Brexit.

**Mr Speaker:** We are now at least on our way to stopping them proroguing Parliament and suspending democracy to get their no-deal Brexit through. The Government are now obliged to issue a bi-weekly report to Parliament from October, and that should just about be enough to see off these democracy-wreckers. We have Lords amendments scheduled for next Thursday, and I think we are all anticipating the Government will get up to their usual tricks and try to thwart that progress, but my plea to the Leader of the House is: just get up to their usual tricks and try to thwart that development, but ended up just dropping another clanger, not least by drawing attention to his slim majority—a very unwise thing to do in this place. I think his majority is 20 or thereabouts, but I suppose 20 is enough. I am pleased, though, that he offered to join me on the bus trip. It is more like a car trip at the moment—I have been deserted by just about everybody I have offered that opportunity to, but if it is just the two of us, so be it; I will look forward to it.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of Prorogation. I refer him to my earlier comments, in which I was clear as to where the Government stand on that matter. However, I am intrigued to hear about the Bill that he is bringing forward for the appointment of the Prime Minister from this House, because it reveals, nakedly, the hon. Gentleman’s ambition. At one point he issued a manifesto to become Speaker, Mr Speaker, and now we find that he clearly has designs on being held aloft and marched to Downing Street, on a majority vote of this House. He might be slightly delusional but, were that to happen, the ultimate and rather beautiful irony would be that he would, of course, become Prime Minister of our wonderful United Kingdom.

**Mr Speaker:** You know, I must say to the Leader of the House, I always thought that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) was very content in his existing role as Scottish National party shadow Leader of the House and as a magnificent practitioner on the keyboards in that illustrious parliamentary rock band, MP4, which has been my great privilege to host in Speaker’s House and which has performed with panache and aplomb in the Buckingham parliamentary constituency, but obviously his ambitions extend further.

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Like Members across this Chamber, I hold regular surgeries at which I try to give advice and assistance to constituents on any number of sensitive, emotionally charged, and for them, very often, vital, life-changing issues. So it is with GPs. For all of our lifetimes, we have gone to see doctors, sometimes in very harrowing circumstances, sometimes for minor conditions—but gone to see doctors, sometimes in very harrowing circumstances, sometimes for minor conditions—but no longer, it seems. We are now being told that rather than that kind of personal and very private interface with a real person, we are going to have a virtual doctor. We are being told to ask Alexa— whoever it, she or he might be. This is a breach of the personal relationship that everyone deserves to have with their local doctor, and it has been described by one critic as a “data protection disaster waiting to happen”. Patients’ groups, doctors and privacy campaigners have said that this is a bad idea, and once the Secretary of State for Health thought so too—he said that we needed to preserve the “essential humanity” of that relationship. Now he says that we should embrace the technology of the information age. Well, T. S. Eliot said:

“Where is the wisdom...lost in information?”

He might say now, “Where is the wisdom lost in Government?”
Mel Stride: I know that the Secretary of State will have heard my right hon. Friend’s comments about the importance of, as I might express it, the human touch in the interaction between patients and GPs, and the dangers of the use of technology. As a rejoinder to his poetic contribution, let me perhaps reach to paraphrase John Donne, the great metaphysical poet—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): And MP.

Mel Stride: Yes, and MP. He said, on this issue of us being connected to humanity: “No man is an island entire of itself; any man’s death diminishes me for I am involved in mankind; therefore do not send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

Mr Speaker: Well, well, well—previously hidden talents of the Leader of the House. One wonders whether he will regard as the litmus test of his poetical arrival being of very grave concern and not right?

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week—in particular, the Backbench business for Tuesday and Thursday. I also thank him for the very constructive meeting that we had on Monday to discuss how we can try to get some Backbench time if Government business in particular looks a little light. Can I be cheeky, though? The Backbench Business Committee has had a very good run of getting time, but we have already pre-allocated time for Thursday the 25th, should that come our way, when we would have debates on motions on women’s mental health and on the role and sufficiency of youth work.

My constituency of Gateshead is a place where asylum seekers and refugees are sent by the Home Office for settlement and the National Asylum Support Service finds them somewhere to live, so I have an awful lot of immigration cases. Can we have a debate in Government time about those who are refused the right to remain but whose countries are regarded by the Foreign Office as too dangerous to send them back to, so they are left in places like Gateshead without any support whatsoever? They are not going to be deported but not going to be assisted. Can we have a debate about that, because it is of very grave concern and not right?

Mel Stride: Likewise, I thank the hon. Gentleman for the very constructive meeting we had recently. I reiterate what I said to him then: my door remains entirely open. I have noted his cheeky bid for a debate on 25 July, on the very important matter of women’s mental health, and his suggestion of a debate on immigration, particularly the right to remain. I will consider those.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Will the Leader of the House note concerns about legislation that affects the lives of many people going through this House without adequate parliamentary time for scrutiny? We have seen examples this week. Will he comment on the progress of the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Bill? The Bill’s Second Reading took place in only a short time. Line-by-line consideration in Committee took about 47 minutes. This is a piece of primary legislation potentially affecting the lives of millions. Will he ensure that there is proper parliamentary time for scrutiny in the Bill’s remaining stages?

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. She and I have discussed that Bill. She makes reference to the time in which it went through Committee. There was an evidence session as part of its Committee stage. Time is also available for the tabling of amendments and further debate on Report but, if she would like to make any further points to me outside of this questions session, I would be happy to discuss those.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I am afraid to tell the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) that introducing his Bill today is a waste of time. Because we are in this exceptionally long Session of Parliament, there are no more private Members’ Bills days. Will the Leader of the House tell us when this Session is going to end, so that we can get a Queen’s Speech and, more importantly, get private Members’ Bills back on the agenda?

Mel Stride: I congratulate Ms Gulamali on achieving that award and wish her all the best, and I recognise the importance of the Speaker’s internship scheme, which is both popular and extremely helpful. I wonder whether the right hon. Lady might consider approaching the Speaker’s Office about an Adjournment debate, where she can raise that issue with a particular Minister.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am afraid to tell the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) that introducing his Bill today is a waste of time. Because we are in this exceptionally long Session of Parliament, there are no more private Members’ Bills days. Will the Leader of the House tell us when this Session is going to end, so that we can get a Queen’s Speech and, more importantly, get private Members’ Bills back on the agenda?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises the important matter of private Members’ Bills. I should point out that in this Session—albeit it is a very long one—we have had the highest total of private Members’ Bills receiving Royal Assent since 2003. He asked me when the Session will end. I think the answer to that will become clearer when we have a new Prime Minister in place.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I know that the Leader of the House is a man who believes in innovation. It worries me that we are coming to a long recess, and over that time really important issues are not going to go away. Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is still in prison, and we will not have the ability to debate that over the summer. The other Sunday morning, I stood outside the Iranian embassy to protest about that, and shortly I will be standing outside the Japanese embassy to protest about the disgraceful decision to kill hundreds of whales, many of which are endangered species.
I have an idea: we could run Westminster Hall as a place for debate on special issues in recess. We already have the petitions system. If we kept that little part of Parliament running through the recess, we could keep the campaign going on issues like Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s imprisonment and the poor whales being exterminated.

**Mel Stride** (Con): The first point I would make to the hon. Gentleman is that when the recess actually occurs is of course a matter for the House, and it was subject to a motion that the House has agreed to. He makes a specific point about Westminster Hall and the use of Westminster Hall facilities for the purposes of debate during the recess. I think it is fair to say that it is a fairly radical idea, but that does not necessarily mean that it should not be fully and carefully considered. If he would like to write to me, or indeed come to see me for a cup of tea, we can talk about it. The final point I would make is that of course the work of government never stops, whether there is a recess or otherwise.

**Kirstene Hair** (Angus) (Con): More than 800 bikes and thousands of visitors descended on my home town of Brechin for the Harley-Davidson in the City festival last weekend to celebrate the birthplace of that iconic bike. The Leader of the House would be very welcome to look out his leathers and join us for the festival next year. Ahead of that, may we have a debate in this place about support for the people who put on these very important festivals, such as Bill Sturrock, the chair of the committee, as well as Angus Council and local stakeholders, because without them we would not be able to celebrate these successes?

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Leader of the House.

**Ian Mears** (Leader of the Pack): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing his Westminster Hall debate, and I look forward with great interest to reading it in Hansard. He raises the specific achievement of the work of the first land-based, clean water prawn farm in Balfron in my Stirling constituency? From this summer, Great British Prawns in Balfron will be delivering prawns in the UK, saving them a 6,000 mile frozen journey from the far east and central America, and thereby slashing their carbon footprint.

**Mel Stride**: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing his Westminster Hall debate, and I look forward with great interest to reading it in Hansard. He raises the specific achievement of the work of the first land-based, clean water prawn farm. I wish it success, and it is good to know that prawn food miles are being kept to a minimum, as he has outlined.

**Colleen Fletcher** (Coventry North East) (Lab): We had a Westminster Hall debate on Monday on the Government’s proposal to increase the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving from 14 years’ imprisonment to life. The debate highlighted a clear cross-party consensus for the change in the law, with an unambiguous message: introduce this much-needed legislation immediately and it will be straightforward to implement, with a clear, unimpeded passage through the House. Unfortunately, the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, ignored that message in the debate and failed to set out a timetable for introducing the Bill. Will the Leader of the House speak with colleagues in the Ministry of Justice and urge them to bring forward a short Bill simply to raise the maximum sentence without further delay and assure them that parliamentary time will be made available?

**Mel Stride:** The Leader of the Pack, indeed. I think my hon. Friend’s question is just a cunning attempt to see me in leathers, isn’t it? That is probably what this is all about. However, I should declare a personal interest in that, well before I had my mid-life crisis, I used to own and cherish a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, which, sadly, I no longer have.

My hon. Friend raises an important point. I know that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has taken a number of steps in recent years to support festivals of various kinds, particularly through the national Heritage Lottery Fund—specifically, for example, celebrating Shakespeare in Birmingham and Alfred Hitchcock in Walthamstow.

**Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): The conflict in Kashmir is now in its 72nd year. This is a great concern to many of my constituents. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on this important subject, so that we can try to stop this senseless loss of life?

**Mel Stride**: The hon. Lady raises an extremely important matter. It was good to see the debate, as well as the cross-party support for the measures that she is keen to see introduced. I am not therefore surprised by her dealings with the Ministry of Justice, but if she would like me to assist in facilitating contact and further discussions with the Department, I would be happy to do so.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have raised the issue of HELMS—Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Systems—and green deal mis-selling time and time again in this place. Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Ministers have promised me that they would intervene to ensure that investigations into victims’ cases would be expedited. As my constituent Lynne McLellan and many others can testify, that simply is not happening. May we have a statement on this issue to allow us to interrogate Ministers about why that is the case?

**Mel Stride**: The hon. Gentleman raises a specific point, relevant to one of his constituents. I would say two things. If he would like to write to me or discuss it with me, I would be happy to see what I can do to assist him with his endeavour. I would also point him to BEIS questions, which is next week, on Tuesday 16 July.
Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Yesterday it was my pleasure to meet Gary, the head porter at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and to congratulate him on his imminent visit to Buckingham Palace to collect his MBE, which was awarded for services to the Foreign Office. Yet Gary was forced to take strike action yesterday, fighting for proper pay, terms and conditions, and recognition of his trade union, the Public and Commercial Services Union. May we have an urgent statement from the Foreign Secretary setting out what action he will take to force Interserve, to which portering, estates and cleaning services in his Department are outsourced, to treat these valuable and loyal staff in a proper manner?

Mel Stride: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating Gary on his award of an MBE and wish him all the very best for that special day and special moment when he goes to Buckingham Palace to receive that award. As to the employment issues that she raises, I know that Foreign and Commonwealth Office Ministers will have heard her comments.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): London City airport plans massively to increase the number of flights going in and out of east London over the next few months. This will profoundly affect a great arc of east London, going across the river, particularly in my constituency, yet London City airport is refusing to hold a consultation, which it is bound to carry out, in Redbridge and Waltham Forest, about which there is a great deal of anger. May we have a statement from a Transport Minister?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of the frequency and volume of flights from London City airport. I would point him to Transport questions, which will be held on Thursday.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Six months ago today, I visited my GP with a small mole on the back of my head. I was very fortunate that the GP passed me straight on to the dermatologist and everything happened quickly, but since then I have met dozens and dozens of people for whom the most galling thing about their cancer diagnosis is being told that is quite late—stage 3 or 4. I have met young women who have lost their mother, including one last week who was still in tears, because she felt that if only the diagnosis had been faster, they would have been able to save her life. Yet 97% of pathology units in England say that they are understaffed, we have about 600 too few dermatologists in the country, and in Wales we have 22 consultant pathologist posts empty. How can we make sure that we save people’s lives if we do not have enough staff? Can we have a debate on this?

Mel Stride: I join the whole House in saying how pleased we are that the hon. Gentleman received prompt and appropriate treatment, and that he has had a full recovery. The Government’s record on cancer survival rates generally is good, but there is always room for improvement. What is really important is the additional funds being put into the national health service: £84 billion over the next five years, the largest single cash investment in its history. Cancer features prominently in the NHS 10-year plan, both in terms of getting survival rates up still further and ensuring we prevent cancers in the first place, and, as he rightly points out, in early diagnosis of cancer in all its forms.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Today, the Government announced that they will be reviewing the benefits system for terminally ill people. My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) has worked tirelessly on this issue for many years. Instead of taking more time, why do the Government not simply adopt her Access to Welfare (Terminal Illness Definition) Bill and the comprehensive research already conducted by the all-party group for terminal illness, which is supported by Marie Curie and the Motor Neurone Disease Association?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises a very important matter. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has written movingly about this particular issue and the availability of benefits for those who have little time remaining. I know the review will be thorough. I think the hon. Lady can take comfort from the fact that the Secretary of State has personal and powerful feelings about the importance of these matters. We should allow the review to take place and see what the conclusions are.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Earlier this week, the Secretary of State for Defence confirmed that her Department’s policy on intelligence-sharing that has derived from torture or could lead to torture has changed after it was revealed six weeks ago that the Ministry of Defence internal guidance was potentially illegal. She also announced to the media new troop deployments to Syria. May we have a statement on both those matters at the earliest convenience?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. As he will know, the Prime Minister requested that the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, Sir Adrian Fulford, review Government policy in this area. That review has now concluded and there will be an announcement to the House in due course. The Ministry of Defence will continue to be fully aligned with that, and any future, guidance.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Dr Jennifer Garden, who won the L’Oréal-UNESCO Women in Science Fellowship for her work on finding alternative sustainable uses for polymers and plastics? May we have an urgent debate or statement from the Government on how better we can support innovative research and development that will help our climate?

Mel Stride: I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Dr Jennifer Garden on her achievement and her important work, and on serving as an exemplar for other women. We wish to encourage more women to work in science, not least in the area of the environment. He will know that we are leading the pack in the world on getting to net zero carbon emissions by 2050, which we have legislated for in this House. This would be an excellent matter for debate, perhaps in Westminster Hall.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): This August bank holiday weekend, the north of England plays host to the Ashes at Headingley, the Ebor festival at York...
racecourse and the Leeds festival. Meanwhile, rugby league fans will be heading to Wembley for the Challenge cup final. On the same weekend, Network Rail has chosen to shut the east coast main line for engineering works. This baffling decision, with such short notice, will cause misery to thousands of northerners. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a Minister to make a statement on this decision as a matter of urgency?

Mel Stride: May I first say how delighted I am that so many of our important sporting events are held in the north of our country, where there is a huge and enduring tradition of exactly that? On the rugby and the matter of trains, I point the hon. Lady to Department for Transport questions on Thursday 18 July.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Leader of the House might be aware that there have been a number of deaths on the Clyde in recent weeks. It is to the frustration of many people—the council, campaigners and the Glasgow Humane Society, which has spent 229 years campaigning to save lives on the Clyde—that signs recently installed to discourage people from tampering with and moving water safety equipment have themselves been damaged. Will he agree to a debate on tampering with water safety equipment? Does he agree with the campaign that “Taking a lifebelt is taking a life”?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady makes an important point: nobody wants to see anyone behaving dangerously or recklessly around water. I commend all the efforts that have been made, particularly on the Clyde, to ensure that such instances are minimised. Perhaps an Adjournment debate would be appropriate.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The St Rollox railway works in my constituency are due to close permanently on 26 July, ending 163 years of continuous railway engineering excellence in Springburn. Time is of the essence to find a solution and save hundreds of jobs at the site. I urge the Leader of the House to communicate with his Scotland Office colleagues and the Glasgow Humane Society, which has spent 229 years campaigning to save lives on the Clyde—that signs recently installed to discourage people from tampering with and moving water safety equipment have themselves been damaged. Will he agree to a debate on tampering with water safety equipment? Does he agree with the campaign that “Taking a lifebelt is taking a life”?

Mel Stride: Clearly, this is a matter for the Scotland Office and perhaps other Departments. The most useful thing I can do is extend an invitation to the hon. Gentleman to meet me and talk about this in a little more detail. I will see what I can do to ensure that doors are opened for him to have the discussions across Government that are needed to maximise the opportunities and move forward in a positive way.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Next Tuesday, the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough clinical commissioning group will hold an emergency meeting to discuss how to meet its current deficit of £33 million a year. It will consider cuts to early intervention, the Alzheimer’s Society, carers organisations and the Stroke Association. May we have a debate in Government time on how it is that when the Government claim there is more money for the national health service, there seems to be less money for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough?

Mel Stride: In the first instance, I direct the hon. Gentleman to Health and Social Care questions, which are next Tuesday. On the general issue of funding, as I have already said in answer to a previous question, we are the Government who have now put more money, in cash terms, into the national health service than at any point in its history, and certainly more than was suggested in the Labour party’s last manifesto.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Dewsbury Memories, a group that helps older sports fans who are suffering with dementia, was established by Allison Simpson after her beloved dad, Tony Boothroyd, was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. Although Tony could barely remember current events, he was in his element when recalling the great sporting events of his past. Sadly, Tony has since passed away, but Allison is absolutely determined to keep growing the group. Will the Leader of the House allow Government time for a debate so that we could encourage others to take up these opportunities and discuss how such volunteer organisations provide so much for our society?

Mel Stride: I welcome the hon. Lady’s contribution, because I totally recognise that dementia is an increasing issue for the health of our nation and—although she did not express this—the cruel nature of the condition. I know that a huge amount of work is being done, particularly by volunteers: through memory cafés, for example—like me, she probably has some in her constituency. They do such wonderful work to find those areas where people with dementia can remember, enjoy and reflect. It might be a rather good subject for a Westminster Hall debate.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): May we please have a debate on the responsibility of the Post Office to engage with the communities it is supposed to serve? Hope Farm Road post office in my constituency has been shut at random times without explanation, and the other day I heard on the grapevine that the post office in Willaston, which is an isolated, rural community, is being shut next month, with no consultation or forewarning. How are communities expected to access these vital services if there is no dialogue?

Mel Stride: Post offices are absolutely vital. I think that, in terms of national affection, they rank second only to the national health service in the passion that people feel about what is almost an institution. That is for good reason, particularly in rural areas, because post offices often provide services, including banking services, to local traders and residents that would otherwise have been hollowed out and become unavailable due to the absence of banks.

I take the issue extremely seriously. The Government have generally protected the size of the post office network; there are nearly 13,000 branches across the country, and the vast majority of people live within 1 mile of a branch. How the Post Office is handling that network might be a rather good subject for a Westminster Hall debate.
Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): A number of my constituents transferred from AstraZeneca to Avara Pharmaceuticals when the Avalon Pharmaceuticals site north of Bristol was sold. They did so because they were promised that if the business failed, they would still be entitled to their full AstraZeneca redundancy package. That has not happened and those workers are now being made redundant on statutory pay only, although AstraZeneca still has a legal contract with Avara to enforce that right, which expires in October. I have written to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and received a wholly unsatisfactory answer, and I have applied for an Adjournment debate four weeks in a row without success. Does the Leader of the House agree that the matter deserves ministerial attention, and that that should be given before the summer recess?

Mel Stride: Clearly I am not in a position to comment on the specifics of the hon. Gentleman’s experience with BEIS Ministers, but I accept that it is very important that he has appropriate contact with them and a proper opportunity to explain the situation fully and see whether something can be done to help. I have two points to make. First, BEIS questions are on Tuesday 16 July, and I think that would be an excellent matter to raise then—I recommend that he give the Department advance notice of his question, if he intends to raise it in topical questions. Secondly, if he would like to meet me to have a quick discussion about the matter, I would be happy to do so, to see how I could otherwise assist.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am sure that the Leader of the House will agree that, despite the chaos and paralysis of Brexit, there are new opportunities ahead of us. In that spirit, will he make a statement setting out the need for whoever is our next Prime Minister to take the opportunity to put in place very much needed transitional arrangement payments for women born in the 1950s who have been robbed of their pensions and, as a result, thrown into unexpected hardship and poverty?

Mel Stride: With regard to the pension arrangements to which the hon. Lady alludes, the Government have already provided £1.1 billion for the introduction of transitional arrangements, but I know that the Department for Work and Pensions and other Departments will have heard her comments.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Last Friday, at my advice surgery, Polly Davies and five of her friends from Nantymoel Primary School in the Ogmore valley in my constituency came to lobby me on the reduction, and hopefully the removal, of single-use plastics from society, and on their particular concerns about plastic in our rivers and oceans. They are also working on a scheme to try to get rid of single-use milk bottles from their school. I promised Polly and her friends that I would ask the Leader of the House for a debate on getting rid of single-use plastics from society, so will he oblige and guarantee us a debate before the recess?

Mel Stride: I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Polly and all those at her school on all the work they are doing to try to see an end to single-use plastics. I point to our own record in this respect: the use of single-use plastic carrier bags has fallen by 86% as a consequence of the charges we have levied. As he will know, we are now looking to go further still by ensuring that we rid our country of single-use plastics as quickly as possible. An Adjournment debate might be a useful avenue for him to pursue.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): And the prize for patience and perseverance goes to Hugh Gaffney.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Leader of the House will be aware that PCS members who work in the Foreign Office took another round of action this week. These are dedicated, hard-working staff who face financial hardship because of the actions of the contractor, Interserve. Cleaners who work at the Foreign Office have seen their guaranteed overtime removed with no warnings or consultation. Will the Leader of the House urge the Foreign Secretary to intervene and support the work of his own Department, and to come back here with a statement?

Mel Stride: I think the hon. Gentleman has shown his tenacity by waiting to be the last Member to be called and by raising this issue over time in the way that he has. I know that his words will have been heard by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and other Departments.

BILL PRESENTED

PRIME MINISTER (Nomination) and Cabinet (Appointment) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Pete Wishart, supported by Deidre Brock, Tommy Sheppard, Gavin Newlands and Patrick Grady, presented a Bill to make provision for the House of Commons to nominate the Prime Minister and approve appointments to the Cabinet; to establish the office of Acting Prime Minister; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 420).
Points of Order

12.21 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. From documents lodged in a Barcelona tribunal by the Spanish Government, it appears that Members of this House from the Conservative party, the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru have been the subject of covert surveillance by agents of that Government in respect of their activities as members of the all-party parliamentary group on Catalonia.

Reference is made to meetings of the APPG, including one addressed by Josep Costa, the Deputy Speaker of the Catalan Parliament, who on that occasion also met the Chairman of Ways and Means. The APPG meeting was a public event and there was no need for participants, even those from the Spanish Government, to hide their identities. Reference is also made to Elin Jones, Llywydd of the Welsh Assembly, to the First Minister of Scotland, and to many others, including our own Speaker, who, in responding to my point of order on 13 February about the imprisonment of Carme Forcadal, the Speaker of the Catalan Parliament, gave me a very favourable response.

The reference in the document is summed up by the headline this morning, “El speaker no es imparcial”. That was the Spanish Government’s opinion of our Speaker. For today, however, I seek your support, Madam Deputy Speaker, in confirming that the principles of openness and free debate are the bedrock of the workings of our House and its APPGs, and that “spying” by a supposedly friendly country—for that is what this is—has no place here.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his very serious point of order. Of course, I confirm that the principles of openness, honesty etc. are the bedrock of how our democracy works and must be respected at all times. I cannot take responsibility from the Chair here in the Chamber this morning for matters that occur in Catalonia, but I take very seriously the points the hon. Gentleman has made. I would suggest perhaps that he ought to make his points in writing to Mr Speaker, so that Mr Speaker can give this matter his proper, full consideration, rather than just momentary consideration here in the Chamber. That is what it deserves.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. That point was very important. Do you agree that Mr Speaker could perhaps make the point to the European Union that it is banning elected Members of the European Parliament from Catalonia, as reported in The Guardian? I am sure that the SNP and Plaid Cymru will want Mr Speaker to raise that issue with the European Union.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I understand that the hon. Gentleman makes a further and important point of order, but when allegations are made I cannot comment on them from the Chair. I do not know whether they are true or not, but if these allegations have any substance, I am quite sure that Mr Speaker will want to know about them. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman brings them to his attention. It is a matter of great importance that any elected representative from anywhere in the United Kingdom should be heard, wherever they are elected to.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will have heard in business questions that I asked the Leader of the House urgently to facilitate a statement from the Ministry of Defence about its policy on intelligence sharing when that intelligence is derived from or could lead to torture. The reason for that was that the policy was found to be almost certainly illegal. This week, the Defence Secretary told us that the policy has been reviewed and changed. Members of the House do not know what it has been changed to.

The issue was the subject of an urgent question some weeks ago from the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), and rightly so. Given that the rules and laws surrounding torture, both domestic and international, underpin the rules of engagement of the British armed forces and that such an important change in Government has occurred without Parliament even being told, would you expect, Madam Deputy Speaker, that a Minister should make a statement and should do so urgently?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, which again is an important point. I recall the urgent question brought to the House by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) and how seriously the matter was taken by the House and by Ministers. The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) will know, of course, that if there is a significant change in Government policy, there is a duty on Her Majesty’s Ministers to come to the House and inform it of that change.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will also know that if a Minister has not volunteered to come to the Dispatch Box, the mechanism by which he can require them to do so is to submit to Mr Speaker an application for an urgent question. I am quite sure that he will do so and that Mr Speaker will consider it with gravity.

We come now to the Backbench Business debate on 20 years of devolution—goodness me, is it really that long?
Backbench Business

20 Years of Devolution

[Relevant Documents: Eighth Report from the Scottish Affairs Committee, The Relationship Between the UK and Scottish Governments, HC 1386; Fifth Report from the Welsh Affairs Committee, Devolution of Air Passenger Duty to Wales, HC 1575; and Eighth Report of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, Devolution and Exiting the EU: reconciling differences and building strong relationships, HC 1485.]

12.28 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered 20 years of devolution.

It is with great pleasure that I open this debate on 20 years of devolution on behalf of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs and the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs. Twenty years of devolution—it is hard to believe. It has been 20 years since our Parliaments opened their doors, transforming our nations and redefining the political culture of our countries. Our nations are better because of devolution. Our national life has been transformed, and we now have a distinctive voice because we have Parliaments within our nations.

Devolution has come of age and there will be no going back to before our Parliaments opened their doors to the world. I remember that day 20 years ago: I was going to be a candidate for the Scottish Parliament, and it was only the finishing of a Runrig album that got in the way and delayed my parliamentary career by two years. I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I had managed to secure a place in the Scottish Parliament—[Interruption.] I am hearing that there is still time yet, but as someone approaching the autumn of their career I will maybe just think about that one.

I remember the expectation in the air that day—the sense of anticipation and excitement that at last we could get down to the business of designing our own future because we had our Parliaments. I will never forget the look on Donald Dewar’s face when he said, “There will be a Scottish Parliament,” and he just had to add, “I like that.” And I will never forget Winnie Ewing taking the chair for the first time—Winnie Ewing, whose 90th birthday was yesterday, a celebrated figure in Scotland to whom we owe a great debt—and saying: “the Scottish Parliament, which adjourned on 25 March 1707, is hereby reconvened.” —[Scottish Parliament Official Report, 12 May 1999, c. 5] We have had our disagreements like any other normal Parliament or Assembly, and we have scrutinised Governments just as they do everywhere else, but we have worked with a great deal of consensus. There have been fantastic examples of cross-party work, pioneering and innovation in the Scottish Parliament, and it is worth looking at some of the things that we have achieved in the course of those 20 years.

There has, for example, been pioneering health work. We were the first country in the United Kingdom to introduce a ban on smoking in public places, and we know about the health dividend that has resulted from that piece of legislation. We recently introduced minimum unit pricing for alcohol, and there is already reasonable evidence that that is starting to have an impact on health outcomes. We have also made democratic reforms: 16 and 17-year-olds in Scotland now have votes, and we have proportional representation in local government elections, just as we do in the election of the Parliament itself. Then there is the social agenda: free personal care for our elderly in Scotland, free higher education, and free prescription charges. All those initiatives, and many more, are helping to make ours a better and fairer country.

This is often credited to Donald Dewar, but it was in fact a Welshman, Ron Davies, who said:

“Devolution is a process…not an event”.

What a process it has been, and what a journey we have been on! As a legislative body, the Scottish Parliament is an entirely different creature from the one that opened its doors back in June 1999. Two further Scotland Acts—the 2012 and 2016 Acts—followed the 1998 Act, which established the Scottish Parliament, and have significantly increased its powers. It now controls large swathes of welfare legislation, and its taxation powers mean that we can set our own income tax rates in Scotland. The Welsh Assembly is about to become the Senedd, and Scotland now has a Government. We in Scotland have had coalition government, majority government—although the rules are supposed to forbid such a thing—and two episodes of minority government, and still we move forward.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Welsh Assembly has advanced even further, given that we were somewhat behind our Scottish friends at the start of the process? It has travelled from being essentially a glorified county council to being a law-making body, which will hopefully proceed very quickly to take on many more law-making and tax-raising powers, leading eventually to independence.

Pete Wishart: I am more than happy to agree with my hon. Friend. As we observe what has happened in Wales, we see that the pace of the change has been quite dramatic. My hon. Friend is right to point out that Wales now has a law-making Assembly. There was some discussion yesterday about its being renamed the Senedd, which I think will prove very worthwhile and valuable. We are on a journey, and it is not finished yet.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a strong case for what has been achieved in the last 20 years, and I welcome that. Does he agree that, by virtue of the make-up of the Scottish Parliament and the system by which we elect our MSPs, it is right for parties to work together—that there should be no demarcation lines for who will work with whom, but that we should always be working together for the benefit of Scotland?

Pete Wishart: There is nothing in what the hon. Gentleman has said with which I could possibly disagree. We have seen examples of coalition government in the Scottish Parliament, and, indeed, it was designed on that basis. When Labour and the Liberals, in the main, put together the Scottish constitutional convention, that was what was anticipated. The fact that we have been on a particular journey and have had a variety of different arrangements for government demonstrates our resilience.
Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: I will not, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind. I want to make sure that the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), who chairs the Welsh Affairs Committee, has a chance to speak.

There has been a flurry of devolutionary activity recently. A review initiated by the UK Government is to be conducted by Lord Dunlop, and there is an ongoing debate about completing the powers of the Scottish Parliament with independence for Scotland. That continues to be the most debated and defining issue in Scotland's political and public life. One thing that can be said about devolution is that it is never boring. Our Parliament has brought Scotland to the attention of the world. Our international footprint has increased because of devolution, and as a consequence more people know about our beautiful country and what it does.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I think it is still the case, and it was certainly the case at the time, that when the Scottish Parliament passed the Bill that became the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014, there was a larger majority in favour of equal marriage in that Parliament than in any other legislature in the world. In fact, the Scottish Parliament is the only legislature in the world which, whenever it has been presented with legislation to extend equality to its citizens, has voted in favour of it. Is that not a good thing, and does it not constitute progress that should always be protected in future?

Pete Wishart: My hon. Friend has made a valid and strong point. He is absolutely right about equal marriage, and about the way the Scottish Parliament responded. There have been other progressive developments on social issues, and I am particularly proud that our Parliament has taken up such causes so dramatically, and consistently. I look forward to seeing further examples of progress in the future.

Pete Wishart: It is right for us to keep devolution under review, and I am proud of the work that my Committee has done over the past few months in assessing it after 20 years. We focused particularly on intergovernmental relations, and suggested a number of far-reaching reforms. We believe that, if implemented, our conclusions will make a significant difference in the quality of the intergovernmental relations that currently exist throughout these islands.

I think we can all agree that, institutionally, the Scottish Parliament has functioned well and is now an immovable feature, secure in the fabric of our democracy. It is there to stay. However, the relationship between the two Governments has not kept pace with developments, and the machinery for dialogue and engagement has not kept up with the evolving dynamics of devolution. What we have found is that intergovernmental relations are under pressure as never before. It seems that, having emerged from the experience of the independence referendum, they have been challenged to within an inch of their lives by Brexit.

Before I go into that further, I will give the House the good news. The relationship between the two institutions seems to be functioning well at a sub-political level: the work between civil servants, for example, continues unabated. Our Committee heard solid evidence from senior civil servants that everything was being conducted perfectly well, and that work was being done behind the scenes. However, we were concerned about the quality of the relationships across these islands, and we made a number of recommendations in that regard.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a very strong case, but does he agree that responsibility for the relationship between the two Governments is not something that we should dictate through paperwork, or something for which we should have to resort to legislation? Is it not up to the two parties in government to be grown up, to sit around the table and to take part in constructive discussions, rather than engaging in what we often witness here—petty bickering about just about everything when an excuse can be found for it?

Pete Wishart: The hon. Lady is an assiduous member of the Scottish Affairs Committee, and as I look around the Chamber I see other assiduous members. I agree with what she has said, but I think it is incumbent on us to have the mechanism, the infrastructure and the machinery to ensure that when Governments disagree—as they will when they have particularly different policy objectives—we can accommodate that disagreement, shape it up, and resolve some of the tensions and difficulties that are encountered.

Let me now go back to the beginning, because, as the hon. Lady knows, the Committee looked into this in great detail and heard a great deal of evidence. In the early days of devolution, everything was straightforward and easy. The Labour party was in government in Cardiff, Edinburgh and London, and intergovernmental relations were conducted among comrades, friends and colleagues who would just pick up the phone and get in touch with each other to resolve any difficulties. They were generally resolved very easily; I am sure that you remember those days, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Only one issue was not resolved, and it remains in the name of the bar in the Scottish Parliament. In a dramatic rebuke to Scottish colleagues who dared to suggest that they should become a Government, Big Brother down here—in the form of Labour Members—said, “They can call themselves the White Heather Club, but they will never be a Government.” To this day, the bar in Holyrood is called the White Heather Club as testimony to that fantastic rebuke from our Big Brother Westminster Labour colleagues.

It took the UK Government three years to keep up with developments and acknowledge the change when Alex Salmond rebranded the then—it has to be said—pathetically named Scottish Executive the Scottish Government.

I think it is fair to say that the cosy relationship that existed in the early days of devolution was pretty much shattered with the arrival of the SNP minority Government in 2007. This was an SNP Government who were prepared to push the boundaries of the devolution settlement and who tried to define a new means and method for us to assert ourselves as a nation, and they were not content being restricted to what was available in the then devolution settlement.

Then of course came the independence referendum, and who will ever forget that? Curiously, inter-Government relationships survived the referendum relatively intact,
and that was because there was a need for engagement between the two Governments and we had the Edinburgh agreement and rules were set up for that. That taught us the lesson that things can be done if there is structure, rules and a means to come together for agreed objectives, and the agreed objective during the independence referendum was that it would be done properly and constitutionally.

Brexit has broken that, however. What we have with Brexit is two Governments, one in Scotland and one in London, with totally different objectives on the issue of leaving the European Union. Scotland wants nothing whatsoever to do with Brexit; it returned one MP with a mandate for an EU referendum, and we have consistently said we find this counter to our national interests. But of course we have a UK Government determined to deliver Brexit. We should have in place, however, a means to be able to accommodate that—to be able to ensure that these types of differences can be dealt with and negotiated smoothly.

That brings us to the machinery of all this. At the very top is the Joint Ministerial Committee. We looked at a number of options for transforming or even replacing it, but came to the conclusion that replacing it would not serve any great purpose. So we suggested a number of things that we could do to improve the functioning of the JMC, because it is not working properly; it does not have the confidence of the Scottish Government and it does not particularly have the confidence of the Welsh Government. The UK Government set the agenda, and they are responsible for all the dispute resolutions, and they seem to be the arbiter of what happens and how things are conducted.

We said that things have to change dramatically, and there is one phrase that runs through almost every chapter of our report: “parity of esteem”. We therefore propose that the JMC be a body where all four of the Governments are treated as equals, and as such we recommended that JMC meetings should be hosted and chaired by each of the UK Administrations on a rotating basis, and that meetings should be held frequently and have a set schedule with agendas agreed in advance between all parties.

We also asked the Government to explore third-party mediation, because again we received a number of pieces of evidence that suggested that this was not working. We also said that the JMC should look at dispute resolution and made a number of recommendations about Whitehall Departments becoming devolution-proof.

Hywel Williams: Further to that point, the JMC has been described as not fit for purpose in its current form. Its fitness for purpose would be greatly aided if it had its own secretariat, and if it had a statutory basis as well.

Pete Wishart: We have recommended that the Government look at the JMC having its own secretariat, and the UK Government have now said they are prepared to explore that. However, I want to come back to the Government’s response to our report, and I think that what the Government are prepared to do will delight the hon. Gentleman.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: Yes, of course; I give way to the Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee.

David T. C. Davies: Under the suggestion the hon. Gentleman is making about everyone having an equal say, presumably the First Minister of Northern Ireland, when that Assembly is set up again, would have a veto over what was happening in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Pete Wishart: With all great respect, I think that the hon. Gentleman misunderstands and possibly does not really appreciate what we are saying. We suggest in our report that parity of esteem be established. It is not right that the UK Government should chair all proceedings and set the agenda; that should be the responsibility of all Governments and the chairing should be rotated—just the chairing, so not having a veto but just ensuring that that sense of equality exists between the four Governments in a setting and a forum that is supposed to be able to accommodate that.

What we said about the Scotland Office and the Secretary of State’s role probably got most of the headlines and caught most of the attention when our report came out just a few short weeks ago. When we looked at the Scotland Office and the Secretary of State’s role, we found a Department that has more or less been bypassed in two very important functions. One of them is at the highest level of inter-Government relations such as the bilateral meetings between First Minister and Prime Minister. That now seems to be conducted by the de facto Deputy Prime Minister; he does all that and there does not seem to be much of a role for the Scotland Office in those proceedings. The second thing we found, which is probably more important, is that bilateral arrangements between Ministers from Scotland and Whitehall were being conducted by themselves and they were not going through the Scotland Office. If a Minister in Scotland wanted to deal with an issue that was of importance to the UK so it was something that needed to be done together, that would go straight to the relevant Whitehall Department down here with no role for the Scotland Office. So we asked what the Scotland Office therefore really does, and why it is in place, with all the paraphernalia of a civil service and so on.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): An additional point is that there needs to be formal consideration of the interplay between legislation that is created here and that now being created in the Welsh Assembly. There is a recent example with the Joint Committee on the draft Domestic Abuse Bill: there is a piece of legislation in Wales concerning violence against women. There is no formal mechanism to examine how legislation created here and legislation being created in other places intermeshes and to ensure they do not contradict one another.

Pete Wishart: That points to some of the evidence we took in the Committee. It is an important point, and I know that it will be looked at when these matters are being progressed.

We found, however, that the Scotland Office did the following. It is its right and prerogative to do this, so of course it can, but it wanted to make sure that the role of the UK and the workings of its Government are asserted
in Scotland. That seems to be the basis of the Dunlop review: how we can make Scotland better love what the UK does. This seems to involve a relatively large resource and budget, and it seems as though we will have to expect a lot of new UK branding with all the associated flagging paraphernalia that goes with it. It seems like some sort of bold attempt to make us love that just that little bit more by visibility.

We asked the Secretary of State about this yesterday, and I got the sense that the UK Government are trying to do a rebranding exercise. [Interruption.] Scottish Conservative Members do not like that and are saying that is not the case. We shall hear their opinions about what the Dunlop review will do, but we are very encouraged by the Secretary of State’s response to our report. I think they have agreed to look at almost every recommendation we made; we are excited that they have said they will look at most of the things around the JMC and that that will form part of the review. They are even prepared to look properly at a review of the United Kingdom Government work better to bring the report, but the Dunlop review is about how the United Kingdom knows that I welcome and support his Committee’s Chairman of the Scottish Affairs Committee, he has read my mind, because he anticipates that that is exactly what I was going to come on to, in closing this short introduction to the debate. He is right: this is a matter for the people of Scotland to determine.

We have to agree that the Scottish people should always get what the Scottish people want. We have now said that we agree on the sovereignty of the people of Scotland through the claim of right, and I am delighted that this House passed that. However, there is an ongoing debate just now, and what I do not like hearing is people saying that democracy will be denied in Scotland and the Scottish people will not get their way if that is what they decide. We have to end that sort of talk. We have to say in the House that the Scottish people should always get what they want, and that it is right that the future of Scotland remains in Scotland’s hands. We have had 20 years of a Scottish Parliament. It has been thoroughly good, and we all agree that it is a transformed Scotland and made such a difference to our national life. We now look forward to the next 20 years and whatever future awaits.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The House will appreciate that a great many people wish to speak this afternoon and we have limited time, so we will have to start with a time limit of six minutes. I apologise to the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) for not having been able to give him notice of this.

12.50 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) for bringing forward this important debate, although I cannot see the past 20 years in quite the same positive light that he has set out. Slightly more than 20 years ago, I was part of the anti-Welsh Assembly no campaign. That was one of my first entrées into politics. We lost, but I felt as a democrat that it was important to respect the will of the people of Wales, so there was no suggestion afterwards that we should try to challenge the result in the courts or say that people had been tricked by Welsh Labour—although I think to some extent that they were; I will come back to that in a minute—or say that people had changed their minds the next day.

We simply respected the fact that the people of Wales had spoken, and I want to put on record right now as a Conservative and as somebody who opposed the Welsh Assembly 20 years ago that it would be absolutely wrong to try to undermine the Welsh Assembly, take away its powers or get rid of it in any way at all. I say that as somebody who was very strongly opposed to it 20 years ago. It would be wrong to do that because the people of Wales voted not once but twice to have a Welsh Assembly and it behoves us all as democrats to respect the voice of the people of Wales, to work with the National Assembly for Wales and to make sure the whole thing is a success. Similarly, had Scotland voted for independence in its referendum, we would have been expected, quite rightly, to respect the voice of the people of Scotland.

It is a bit of a disappointment to me that, having made this clear over the past 20 years, the Welsh Assembly Members who owe their jobs to a referendum that took
place 20 years ago are now doing their utmost to try to ignore the will of the people of Wales in the subsequent referendum on Brexit, where a much larger number of people turned out and voted by a much clearer majority in favour of Brexit. I hope that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire, who believes that we should to listen to the will of the people, will agree that Wales spoke clearly for Brexit, that Britain spoke clearly for Brexit and that Members of Parliament have an obligation to honour the result and bring it in in some way.

One could build an argument—one would be wrong to do so—against the Welsh Assembly on the basis that it has failed to deliver on the promises that were made 20 years ago. We were told that we would have a better health service, better education, a better economy, better transport and so on. The reality in Wales at least has been that we now have longer hospital waiting lists, longer responses and waits for ambulances, longer waits in accident and emergency units and less access to cancer drugs.

**Hywel Williams:** Will the hon. Gentleman clear up some confusion? He is referring to the Welsh Assembly as achieving or not achieving those aims, but clearly they are matters for the Welsh Government, who have been Labour since the inception of the Assembly.

**David T. C. Davies:** Absolutely; that is a very fair comment. I consider myself told off, and rightly so. The hon. Gentleman is correct to say that it is the Welsh Government who have failed on the health service. They have also failed on education—

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**David T. C. Davies:** I will in a moment, but let me just make this point because it may be relevant to Scotland as well.

We were promised that we would have better standard of education, but in reality, the independent programme for international student assessment—PISA—tests have shown that Welsh pupils are less likely now to get GCSEs and A-levels, or to go to the best universities, than their counterparts in England.

**Patricia Gibson:** The hon. Gentleman has expressed disappointment in the health service in Wales. Does he have any disappointment with the English health service?

**David T. C. Davies:** I would be very happy if I had to wait only 18 weeks instead of 26 weeks for an operation, and I would be very happy if I could get access to the cancer drugs that are available in England but not in Wales. As the hon. Lady should know, many people in Wales come to our surgeries to ask to be treated in England. As far as I am aware—I have tabled a question about this—nobody from England has ever asked to have their health service treatment delivered in Wales. The reality is that the people of Wales are voting with their feet because they know that a Conservative Government are delivering a better health service than Welsh Labour—

**Hywel Williams:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**David T. C. Davies:** I will not, as I have apparently got only one minute left, and I am still on my first page.

There has been a failure on transport in Wales. There has also been a failure on the economy. Even the Economy Minister in the Welsh Government has said that we do not know what we are doing with it. There has also been a significant failure on value for money and an inability sometimes to see through the boasts and exaggerated claims that are made by people who are seeking grants. That is a matter of some disappointment to me, but of course it is actually Welsh Labour that is responsible for this, not the National Assembly for Wales. That is why I am looking forward to seeing Conservatives being elected into government at the next Welsh Assembly elections and, yes, if necessary, to working with members of Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats to ensure that we get a change from the one-party rule that has dominated Wales for far too long.

By a strange irony, here I am 20 years later making an argument for more powers for the Welsh Assembly, because where there is a case to be made for it, I am happy to see the Assembly getting powers over issues such as air passenger duty, which is something that we recommended strongly in our report. It is a pity that I have not got time to get on to Brexit and to point out the obvious contradiction in the fact that, while the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru rightly make points about Catalonia, it is the European Union that is opposed to regional entities such as Catalonia becoming nation states. The real supporter of devolution is the Conservative and Unionist party. Not only are we handing powers over to the Parliaments of Scotland and Wales, but we want to hand more powers over to them, because the biggest exercise in devolution is going on right now. We are taking powers away from Brussels and bringing them back to London, whereupon we will start to distribute them out to Edinburgh, to Cardiff, to Belfast and, of course, to the regions of England. So all those who support devolution and believe that power should be brought back closer to the people should also be supporting Brexit and democracy.
I was eight when the Scottish Parliament reconvened in 1999—I am glad that nobody in the House can do maths—but the big question 20 years later has to be whether we now have home rule within the United Kingdom. That is the big question, because for all of us who are devolutionists and not nationalists or Unionists, devolution is a journey. The Calman commission and the Scotland Act 1998 were always a journey and the question has always been about whether the Scottish Parliament should progress and where devolution should go on that journey.

There was lots to celebrate in the first part of the Scottish Parliament in terms of the laws it was able to pass. About 280 laws have been passed since the Parliament came into being, and we should look on that as progress, because there was never any ability in this place to pass anywhere near 280 laws for Scotland in a 20-year period. It is probably accurate to say that 10% of that number could have been passed under the previous arrangements. We have had land reform, feudal law reform, the smoking ban and free personal care for the elderly, as well as proportional representation for local government, which was huge. We have also had world-leading legislation on domestic violence, as well as more schools, teaching assistants, nurses and doctors, and the abolition of tuition fees in Scotland. All those things have been better for Scottish life and have cemented the Scottish Parliament as the centre of Scottish politics and the centre of Scottish civic life. Anybody who argues that Westminster is the centre of Scottish politics and civic life has not moved on over the past 20 years, because that can be seen in the way the Scottish Parliament operates.

Now is a good opportunity to reflect on what the Scottish Parliament is delivering. I always thought that the Scottish Parliament should be part of a devolution journey that would provide subsidiarity, and everyone would have a grown-up conversation about the powers that lay at the Westminster Parliament, the EU level, the Scottish Parliament, our local authorities or even local communities—I firmly believe in the idea of subsidiarity—and about where powers are best placed to lie. I am slightly disappointed that that is not being performed by the Scottish Parliament, because all our arguments about powers are never about powers for a purpose, but about powers for where power should lie.

I firmly believe that, since the formation of the Scottish Parliament, Scottish local authorities, which used to be the vanguard of local service provision, have turned into administrative arms of the Scottish Government. That may be by design, or it may be by accident, but we should reflect on that. Councils no longer have the ability to shape the lives of their local services, not only because of significant financial constraints that have been placed on them, both by this place and by the Scottish Parliament, but because they do not have the ability to shape new policies in the way they once did. The Scottish Parliament, certainly in the past 10 years, has sucked up power into Holyrood, rather than being a devolutionist Parliament that moves things back down to local government. Whether a nationalist who believes in independence, a right-wing Conservative who believes in scrapping the Scottish Parliament, or anywhere in between, we should have a discussion about the best place for powers to lie.

Powers are not being used, and it frustrates me that we have not had an honest argument about that. If somebody stands up and says, “We are not using power A because we do not believe that it should be used for the reasons of sorting problem B,” I will argue all day about the principle of that and whether it is the right thing to do, and then the vote will be decided. To say that the Scottish Parliament does not have the powers to do something when it does is disingenuous and undermines not just the Scottish Parliament, but the whole Scottish political system and, indeed, our entire civic system.

For example, the Leader of the House was asked a question earlier about the WASPI women, and the Scottish Parliament has the power to do something about that issue. It could look at a whole range of issues. If it so wished, it could set up a commission to look at how to deal with pensioners in Scotland, but it chooses not to use that power. Let us argue about why the Parliament may decide not to choose that or why it wants to choose it, but let us not say that there is no power to do anything about it. Sections 25, 26, 27 and 28 of the Scotland Act 2016 say that the Scottish Parliament has the power to introduce any top-up benefit to any reserved benefit, and pensions are a reserved benefit under section 28.

I turn to the questions about what we should do next. Intergovernmental relations is a big one. I fundamentally agree with the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire that there are devolutionists and not nationalists or Unionists, that that is just a talking shop for how to get to independence. For example, the Leader of the House was asked a question about what the Government are doing to help with homelessness. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire would have a grown-up conversation about the powers that have not been used and the powers that are being used and the powers that have not been used. Let us look at whether the Scottish Parliament needs a second Chamber. Let us look at what the Committee system provides proper scrutiny. Let us take an audit of the powers that are being used and the powers that have not been used. Let us look at whether we should examine the subsidiarity and reflect on what other powers should be considered. Let us look at reform of the UK. Let us look at a federal structure or at the House of Lords or at a senate of the nations and regions that could help deal with some of the big issues. Twenty years on, we should sit and reflect honestly and on a cross-party basis.

Stephen Kerr: Is that not the whole point of the Dunlop review? We have an opportunity to look at how we are working at this end of the country and make the necessary adjustments, so that our Union can work better in this devolved arrangement.

Ian Murray: The hon. Gentleman is right, because where devolution goes next is not really a problem for Scotland; it is a problem for England. That is why when we are looking at devolution and where it goes next, we have to look at what England does. We cannot look at this in the context of the United Kingdom without dealing with England. That is why we need a senate of the nations and regions and a proper constitutional convention. What we do not need is a citizens’ assembly that is just a talking shop for how to get to independence. We need a proper, sober assessment 20 years on. Let us celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Scottish Parliament, but let us look to the next 20 years.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Just across the road, parents whose children are dying from cystic fibrosis are lying in Parliament Square to bring this House’s attention to the urgent need for their children to have access to drugs that could save their lives. The campaign has been supported by the Daily Express and thousands of our
[Andrew Griffiths]

constituents. Could you advise me on what I can do to raise this issue, so that all parliamentarians are aware of the vital need to support the parents and the children suffering with cystic fibrosis?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and I am sure the House will agree that he has just achieved what he set out to achieve. I do not think he needs my advice on how to bring this matter to the attention of Parliament, because he has just done so most eloquently and effectively. I am sure he will consult the Table Office about questions and the possibility of an Adjournment debate or, indeed, an urgent question to a Minister, but we all heard what the hon. Gentleman said, and I am sure that his remarks will be noted widely.

1.5 pm

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): May I first associate myself with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) about cystic fibrosis?

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), and I join him in saying that this is a celebration. Unlike my good friend the Chairman of the Welsh Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), I was in favour of establishing the Welsh Assembly. While it has not been perfect, I would place the blame for its failures primarily on the Welsh Government, not on the institution itself. However, some of the failures highlighted by my hon. Friend are issues that we should be worried about. In education, for example, we genuinely need to look carefully at ourselves in Wales and ask whether we are delivering the educational standards to which we actually aspire.

However, I took one exception with my hon. Friend’s comments about the health service. It is fair to have a political debate about the health service in Wales, and it is fair to say that people can be genuinely disappointed with the health service in Wales. However, we must be honest enough as politicians to recognise that some of the challenges facing the health service in Wales are unique. The age profile of my constituency and many others in north Wales brings particular problems, and I speak as somebody who is represented from a health perspective by a health board that is both the largest in Wales and probably the most problematic in Wales. Although many of those problems are blamed, rightly, on decisions made by the Welsh Government, it would be naive and wrong to blame all those problems on the Welsh Government. Some of the problems we face in north Wales are unique.

David T. C. Davies: In fairness, the Assembly Government are doing some good things in that regard. For example, they are using the Rutherford group to offer cancer care in parts of south Wales, which is an excellent example of using the private sector within the NHS. Of course, that is completely different from nationalising the NHS. The Conservatives are often accused by Labour in England of nationalising the NHS, when Labour is doing exactly that, and quite rightly so, in Wales.

Guto Bebb: I agree with my hon. Friend.

Turning to how the Welsh Assembly has worked over the past 20 years, I will first touch upon some of the successes. More and more powers have been offered to the Assembly and the Welsh Government. That has happened in a piecemeal fashion, and it has been frustrating in many ways, because it has taken time, but I am proud of the fact that this Government and previous Governments since 2010 have actually delivered more powers to the Welsh Government, and rightly so.

I was pleased to be one of the Ministers who took the Wales Act 2017 through this place, and I am particularly proud of the fact that the way we worked in tandem with the Welsh Government resulted in that legislation being the first piece of constitutional law to pass through both Houses without amendment. That was testament to the fact that we worked in a co-operative fashion, which is important. Co-operation between the two Governments needs to develop quite significantly, and there is no doubt that the challenges of Brexit mean that that is becoming more and more important. We want services to be delivered to the people of Wales effectively, and the way to do that is to acknowledge that both Governments actually have an impact.

When I was at the Wales Office, I kept on making the point that Wales has two Governments and that we should take advantage of that, not see it as a problem. I will provide an example from when I was the Minister for Defence Procurement, because I saw how contracts awarded to Welsh companies by the Ministry of Defence led to those companies being supported by the Welsh Government through their economic development remit. We saw seamless working between the Government in Westminster and the Government in Cardiff Bay for the benefit of communities in Wales, which is exactly how we should aspire to work. We should aspire to acknowledge where the devolution boundary lies, and obviously we can have political arguments on where we need to change that devolution boundary, but we should see the potential of working together and how having two Governments serving the people of Wales is an advantage, not a disadvantage.

I welcome the work of the Welsh Affairs Committee on the growth deals and city deals, and so on. This is a fantastic opportunity to make a difference for the Welsh economy, and that difference is being made by the two Governments working together. The funding coming for those growth deals is coming from Westminster and from Cardiff Bay. More importantly, it is proper devolution, because the ideas and the initiatives are coming from the regions.

If there is one thing I would like to say, and I concur with the hon. Member for Edinburgh South on this, it is that the first 10 years of the Welsh Assembly probably saw powers being sucked into Cardiff Bay to make up for the original settlement in Wales being very weak. Every new institution has this need to feel it can make a difference, and in Wales we often saw powers being taken into the Assembly from local government, and I still believe that far too many decisions are demanded of the Government in Cardiff by local authorities, such as my own local authority in Conwy, rather than their being allowed to be made by the people on the ground.

Yes, we need co-operation between the two Governments, but I strongly argue that we need a more mature attitude in the Welsh Assembly and the Welsh Government, which should trust their partners in local government. That is entirely the right thing to do. The growth deals are seeing the three partners—Westminster, the Welsh Government and local authorities—working constructively together, and we should try to build on that.
On the powers of the Wales Office and how it works for Wales within Westminster, I remember listening to a speech by Lord Elystan-Morgan back in 2013. He highlighted that the creation of the Wales Office in the 1960s was, in fact, the first step towards devolution.

The powers of the Wales Office have changed quite dramatically, and it was advantageous for me to be a Wales Office Minister and a Government Whip, because the Wales Office, in effect, has a cross-Government remit. That cross-Government remit is challenging, because Wales Office Ministers often find themselves being the nuisance who turns up in another Department to say to a spending Minister, “Do not forget that this issue has an impact on Wales as well.”

The Dunlop report is extremely important because, if we want to govern well for Wales from Westminster and from Cardiff, it is imperative that we understand the role of the Wales Office. We genuinely need to ensure that the understanding of Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish issues in Westminster is enhanced, and the way to do that is either by accepting the need to strengthen the Wales Office and the Scotland Office or by acknowledging that we need to change how we do things. I look forward to that report, which is important for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

1.13 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb), my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) and other right hon. and hon. Members.

This is the 20th anniversary of devolution, but it is a bit more than that really, because I refuse to believe that that devolution started 20 years ago. There is a real history to it, and one thing I praise Plaid Cymru colleagues for is how they have often acknowledged the work of their predecessors Gwynfor Evans, Lord Dafydd Wigley and Lord Dafydd Elis-Thomas, who kindly supported my 2017 election campaign in Clwyd South. Lord Elis-Thomas is now serving in the Welsh Government, and he is a good man.

The Labour party does not always do that quite enough. I read the book by my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) about his predecessor, “Morgan Jones: Man of Conscience,” and I was struck that, in his 1922 general election address, Morgan Jones supported self-government—not separatism, but self-government—to address Welsh needs in an appropriate and distinctive way. In June 1938, he was part of a cross-party delegation that met Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to put the case for a Secretary of State for Wales. Neville Chamberlain did not accept the proposal, but perhaps his judgment was not too good anyway.

Of course, it was not until the reforming Harold Wilson Government of the 1960s that there was a Secretary of State for Wales and a Wales Office. Jim Griffiths was the first Secretary of State. It came from that Keir Hardie tradition of Home Rule all round.

I want to be partisan, not as a Labour Member of Parliament but as a north Walian, in paying tribute today to those great devolutionists: Cledwyn Hughes of Ynys Môn; Coronwy Roberts of Caernarfon; Eirene White of Flintshire; Robert Richards, James Idwal Jones and Tom Ellis, representatives of Wrexham, although the latter two came from Rhoslanerchrugog; Thomas William Jones and William Edwards, representatives of Merioneth, with T.W. also coming from Rhoslanerchrugog. All Labour and all north Waliants.

I also pay tribute to Wales’s first female MP—Liberal, and later Labour—Megan Lloyd George, who once recorded a party political broadcast for the Liberal party that ended “hunan lywodraeth i Gymru. Nos da.”

Or, “self-government to Wales. Good night.” I shared that story when I did occasional Welsh-language voiceovers for Welsh Labour, and people were very interested in my observations.

There are three things we need to consider. Six minutes is not very long, and two minutes and fifty seconds is even shorter. First, devolution offers a real chance for distinctive policies—not distinctive for their own sake but distinctive because they can be innovative and they can work. We have seen it with the minimum pricing of plastic bags, which was an innovative policy introduced in 2011, and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. We have to look to the future, considering all the factors.

The Human Transplantation (Wales) Act 2013 introduced the principle of presumed consent, and it saved lives in doing so. There was the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016 and now, with our excellent First Minister, there are proposals for social partnerships. Those policies are distinctive, and they are good.

Secondly, let us not fall into the trap of seeing devolution through the prism of the home nations. It is fine for the rugby, but we miss out when we just look at England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Our late, great colleague Paul Flynn was a passionate devolutionist, and he once told me he felt there was no problem in Wales that could not be solved by an east coast. I think he was joking but, whether he was or not, we do not have one.

Some 50% of Wales’s population live within 30 miles of the border, so devolution has to interconnect between the nations and regions of our country. We see connections between north-east Wales and north-west England in the economy, health and so much more. We also have to see the debate in terms of London, and we have seen greater moves towards devolution. It may not help us, but we have to look to London and the home counties, which want to keep more of their tax take.

Guto Bebb: The hon. Lady is making some important points. Does she agree that, on social care, Wales has much to learn from the Greater Manchester devolution debate? We can learn from them, rather than just thinking that we are ahead of the game.

Susan Elan Jones: It is an intelligent contribution to the debate that we consider good policies, wherever they come from, on both sides of the border, in Scotland and, indeed, elsewhere in the world. We must not become insular.

Thirdly, and this is especially true for those of us who fall in the social democratic or democratic socialist traditions, structural and constitutional devices are never an end in themselves. It is about empowerment, wellbeing, connectedness, education and culture. I pay great tribute to all those who are fighting the campaign to reach
1 million Welsh speakers—it is not a maximum, and we can go above it—in Wales, which is very important. It is also about the ability to reach out globally, across continental Europe, the UK, NATO, the Commonwealth and so much more. What was important about the initial devolution settlement was the sense that we had to work consensually. Sometimes the electoral system was devised for that and sometimes, to be honest, that consensual working could be a pain in the neck, but I do believe that without it we would not have had that breadth of support for devolution.

If I am quick, I will be able to end—stereotypically, being Welsh—with a quote from a poem: a not-very-good translation of a Welsh poem. It reads:

“Old Welsh customs need must change
As years progress from age to age.
The generations each arrange
Their own brief patterns on the page.”

That is not how Ceiriog said it, but that is the English translation. Most of us will not be here in this place in 20 years’ time, but what is important is that we work together, we get the best for our country and we do it through that devolved settlement.

1.20 pm

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) and, in particular, to hear the translation of some Welsh poetry at least. I am pleased that the Scottish Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, and the Welsh Affairs Committee have secured this debate to mark 20 years of devolution. It is an important landmark in the history of the United Kingdom and an appropriate time to reflect on the progress we have made towards more representative and more effective government in Scotland and Wales—and Northern Ireland, when we get its Assembly back.

Over the past 20 years, Scotland has seen multiple rounds of devolution. It was a Conservative-led Government who oversaw the Scotland Act 2012 and the Scotland Act 2016, which devolved additional powers to the Scottish Parliament, making it one of the most powerful devolved legislatures in the world today. The Scottish Affairs Committee’s recent report on intergovernmental relations highlighted the many other upheavals that have influenced the devolution settlement during that time, including the change of Government in 2007 and the independence referendum in 2014. It is clear that the devolution settlement that Scotland enjoys today is very different from the one created back in 1999. With 111 additional powers due to be devolved from Brussels to Holyrood as we leave the European Union—87 immediately and another 24 to follow—it will soon be changing further.

As the Member of Parliament for Banff and Buchan, the heartland of Scottish fishing, I know that my constituents will be glad to see overall fisheries policy being determined closer to home, rather than by distant bureaucrats on the continent. I also know that many of my constituents have been frustrated by the SNP’s apparent desire to keep all those powers in Brussels, by keeping us in the EU and, by association, in the common fisheries policy.

Brexit or no Brexit, however, it is right that the UK and Scottish Governments should be investigating how intergovernmental relations can be improved, but this is not the time for talk of radically rewriting the devolution settlement. While we are celebrating the 20th anniversary of devolution as a whole, it is worth recognising that the last Scotland Act came into force just three years ago. In fact, we are still implementing that last rewrite of the devolution settlement, and earlier this year it emerged that the SNP-run Scottish Government will not be ready for the full devolution of welfare powers until 2024. This from the same party that told voters in 2014 that it could set up a whole new country in just 18 months.

Instead of plotting a rematch against the voters on independence or devising increasingly left-field proposals to overhaul the devolution settlement yet again, the focus of this review should be on ensuring that the devolution settlement we have got is implemented smoothly and effectively.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting point about the devolution settlement. We in the highlands and islands have identified something of a democratic deficit: we feel our voice is not being heard by those in power in Edinburgh and that power is being dragged out of the highlands to Edinburgh. That does not suit highland people, and what we get is elected Members turning around and blaming the Highland Council, but it gets its money from the Scottish Government. I believe there should be a Minister for the highlands and islands, in whatever Government, of whatever colour, who would speak up for the highlands and islands and would actually exercise some power to the good of the highlands and islands. We do not have one at the moment and we should.

David Duguid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. I am going to raise a similar one about the north-east of Scotland, where I come from—that will come as no surprise.

The work involved in this review is vital if the Scottish people are to enjoy the good governance they deserve, from both the Westminster and Holyrood Governments.

I was pleased, therefore, with the UK Government’s response to the Committee’s report on intergovernmental affairs, which showed their commitment to such a review. It remains to be seen whether the Scottish Government will put the interests of the Scottish people first and work constructively with the UK Government. We may see more of the same from the SNP: this is the party that is delaying the implementation of the Scotland Act 2016—particularly on welfare, as I have mentioned—and is desperately trying to keep agricultural and fisheries policy under Brussels’ control. This is the party whose own Brexit Minister has said he does not like the devolved settlement. This is the party that ran roughshod over the procedures of the Scottish Parliament and the advice of its Presiding Officer to ram through its continuity Bill, only for swathes of it to be struck down by the Supreme Court.

The choice is the SNP’s, and I hope for the sake of the Scottish people that the SNP chooses a more constructive path. If it fails to do so, I suspect that come 2021, when we have the next Holyrood elections, the Scottish people will bring that nationalist era to an end and elect a new Government who will take that constructive approach—
Pete Wishart: You guys?

David Duguid: With Ruth Davidson as First Minister, yes. Like the majority of people in Scotland, the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party supports the Union. We are invested in the devolution settlement and we want it to succeed. That is because localism is a core Conservative principle.

It is a source of endless disappointment to me and to my constituents in the north-east that the spirit of devolution, of decisions being taken closer to home, has not taken root entirely within the Scottish Government. Successive Labour and SNP Scottish Governments have hoarded power in Holyrood and, it has been suggested, governed primarily for the central belt. While English city regions are getting more control of their own affairs, to accompany growth deals, Nicola Sturgeon is ensuring that Scotland remains rigidly centralised.

Scotland’s diversity, from region to region, across the whole of Scotland, is one of the many things that makes Scotland a nation that I and my immigrant wife are proud to call home. It is tragic that the political structures that the SNP has imposed on our nation do not reflect that. When the revenue grant for local authorities in the north-east is falling by £40 million this year, even when the SNP have made Scotland the highest taxed part of the UK, with the north-east taxed more than most areas in Scotland, it is clear to see that the north-east is missing out.

My message for the Scottish Government on this anniversary is simple: it is time to work constructively with the UK Government to make the most of the existing devolution settlement, and ensure that the new powers coming to Holyrood from both Westminster and Brussels are transferred.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): My colleague on the Scottish Affairs Committee talks a lot about constructive working of the two Governments together. The SNP tabled more than 100 amendments in the debates on the Bill that became the 2016 Act and they were completely ignored by the Government. Would the hon. Gentleman describe that as constructive working?

David Duguid: I thank my fellow Committee member for her intervention but I would not necessarily recognise voting against those amendments as ignoring them. We just voted against them because we did not agree with them, and that is how democracy works.

In summary, it is time for a fair deal for the north-east, and more powers for local and regional communities across Scotland. It is time to respect the fact that although the Scottish people voted for devolution 20 years ago, at no point—either in 2014 or in any election since—have the people of Scotland expressed a desire to break up the United Kingdom.

1.27 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dyfed Meirionnydd) (PC): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), and I congratulate the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) on securing this debate.

Twenty years ago, our Parliament, Y Senedd, opened its doors for the very first time, and with it a new door was opened in Wales—to possibility, to hope and to a new radical kind of politics. We had decided that, yes, we wanted Wales to be out there as a country in its own right on the world stage and that, yes, we could govern ourselves. Devolution has created so many opportunities: space for greater policy experimentation, and potential for different Governments to learn from each other. The devolved legislatures tend to be more representative and politically balanced, which was of course the designed intention; there was the opportunity to put that into effect.

However, devolution has evolved in a piecemeal manner, with separate devolution processes in the separate nations. There is an absence of guiding principles, and an over-dependency on convention, which has led to disagreement about the nature of the post-devolution constitution. The 2016 referendum and its aftermath have made it more urgent that these big questions be considered by the Governments, by political parties and, potentially, through a deliberative exercise involving citizens from across the UK. I have made the case before, and I will make it again, that it is time for a formal written UK constitution and of course a new Wales Bill.

Yesterday, Plaid Cymru Assembly Members held a debate on strengthening our Senedd. We called for clear, positive and urgent reform. We also called for an increase in the number of Assembly Members, so that the Senedd can properly hold the Welsh Government—we have seen the problem of the dividing line between the Welsh Government and the Welsh Assembly—to account, to improve policy development and fulfil the Senedd’s potential as a Parliament for all the people of Wales. Policy and its implementation depends very much on the quality of scrutiny. If the scrutiny is not there, we can guarantee that the policies formed and the way they are carried out will not be up to scratch. Increasing the number of Assembly Members has been recommended by every commission that has examined devolution since 1979.

Plaid Cymru Assembly Members also called for an immediate move towards a fully proportional electoral system. Implementing a single transferable vote system by 2021 will ensure that we have a strong Senedd that is able to operate as an effective Parliament by reflecting the diversity of the population it represents.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The hon. Lady makes an important point about accountability. Is she not dismayed, as I sometimes am, that in Wales the true test of accountability, which is the ability to remove a party of government, has not been exercised under devolution? Throughout the past 20 years and all the turbulence of British politics, during which we have seen big changes in Scotland and in Westminster, we have not seen any major changes in Welsh politics. We still have, basically, one-party rule, so accountability is not ever fully exercised.

Liz Saville Roberts: The dynamic of change is a critical aspect of how we have accountability, quality of policy and innovation of ideas. We have yet to see that—it can be interpreted in many ways—in Wales. I believe we can very much strengthen democracy in Wales in that respect.

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): Let us be honest: a change of Government in Wales would demand a coalition between parties other than Labour. Is the hon. Lady of...
the view that the right way forward should be a coalition, and that that coalition should not exclude the Conservative party?

Liz Saville Roberts: From Westminster to every Parliament of the United Kingdom, the adversarial way in which we operate is not serving any of the nations of the United Kingdom effectively. I urge us all to find new ways of working, rather than this duality of adversarialness, which frankly does nothing but score points.

The reforms that Plaid Cymru put to the Senedd yesterday are evidently—it was interesting to hear agreement from Conservative Members—in the interests of our country and of Wales, yet Labour refused to support our motion. Instead, Labour put in place obstacles to avoid achieving immediate reform. Many of us present feel that the need is urgent for Wales. Wales deserves a world-class Parliament and a Senedd that makes decisions in the best interests of the country, not in the best interests of the Labour party.

With the impending threat of a no-deal Brexit and the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) as Prime Minister, change is more vital than ever. Brexit has shone a pitiless light on the inadequacies of the UK constitution. The European Union (Withdrawal) Act will, with the aiding and abetting of the Labour Welsh Government, weaken the devolution settlements that the people of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have enjoyed for the past two decades. Not only did the Labour Welsh Government capitulate on the withdrawal Bill; they withdrew the only means of protection that the Senedd had against the Tory Government: they repealed the Welsh continuity Act.

First Minister Mark Drakeford’s whole argument for repealing the Act was premised on his belief that the Scottish Government would lose the Supreme Court case over their equivalent legislation. He said that if Scotland lost it would have nothing, while Wales would still have its paltry agreement with the UK Tory Government. It is sad to recount that his wager backfired in spectacular fashion. Scotland won the case, meaning its powers are legally protected. It is Wales that is left with nothing, defenceless. We have nothing left but a bad deal that gives away Welsh powers to Tory Ministers, with no guarantee that we will ever get them back.

My party’s position for Wales’s future is clear: we want the people of Wales to run our own affairs. In all honesty, who aspires to come into politics and into government but would not aspire to that? In truth, who would not aspire to that? Sometimes, when we spell this out, we are told that to call for independence is somehow irrational and unreasonable—something to which we should not aspire—but in all honesty, who among us would ever have come into politics unless the people we represent had the chance to represent themselves? Why would we ever tell people that they do not have the means, the means to aspire or the potential—that they do not have it in them to manage their own affairs? That is what motivates many of us here on the Opposition Benches.

I acknowledge that, in the interim, we need a collaborative procedure for the creation of UK-wide frameworks, given that the Government are so determined to press ahead and remove us from the already functioning EU frameworks in which we know where we stand. Such UK-wide frameworks would have a significant impact on the existing evolved devolution settlements and therefore must be created jointly by all the sitting Governments, not dictated from this place by Ministers of the Crown. This is only the first step to ensuring that devolution is not just respected, but upheld in the upheaval that the Government are creating and forcing on us by leaving the European Union.

In future, there must be no first among alleged equals, but equality of respect, means and potential. Welsh democracy is facing its biggest existential threat of its 20-year anniversary. We face a stark choice of two futures: will Wales be a peripheral geographic unit, crumbling under the pressure of an increasingly London-centric Unionist Government, or will we be an independent European nation, with a fit-for-purpose and dynamic Parliament? I know which future I would choose for the people of Wales and the people I represent.

1.36 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The first thing I wish to say is that devolution has been a very good thing for Scotland. The Scottish Parliament has matured over the past 20 years, and so has also grown in the affections of the Scots. I am proud of the fact that the Conservative and Unionist Government have given more powers—and yet more powers—to the Scottish Parliament. I am also proud that so much has been achieved in the Scottish Parliament on a cross-party basis. I am certain that the best legislation in any Parliament is legislation that commands the broadest possible support.

On the subject of supporting the principle of devolved power, I was proud earlier this week to stand and be counted for the devolution settlement in the votes on the amendments that were hung on the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill. It looks like adornments on a Christmas tree. I understood then and understand now that my votes would be wilfully misinterpreted and misrepresented, but I do not regret for one moment defending the devolution settlement. Those who did not defend the devolution settlement may have reason at some future point to regret that. This place is driven by precedent: to drive a coach and horses through the devolved settlement was a big mistake for every Scottish Member of Parliament.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you and I are probably among the few current Members who put the devolution Bill through around 20 years ago. Since then, I have served on the Scottish Affairs Committee and got to know some of the difficulties that Scotland faces. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the biggest problems is that we somehow have to stop people leaving Scotland, because Scotland’s population is falling? Something has got to happen to change that, but does he agree that, by and large, the devolution settlement is working quite well, regardless of political parties?

Stephen Kerr: It is important that we make Scotland the best place to live in the United Kingdom, and that people aspire to live in Scotland, to build a business in Scotland and to have their family grow up in Scotland.

I am certainly very proud of Scotland and I feel keenly my responsibility and duty to speak for my constituents in Stirling and to speak up for Scotland's
place at the heart of the United Kingdom. That is why I was delighted last week to welcome my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to Stirling, where she gave an important speech on the Union. Among other things, she outlined the nature of the Dunlop review—I recommend that text to the House.

Jamie Stone: I am proud to be the only person present in the Chamber who was elected to the Scottish Parliament in 1999. I served there for 12 years. I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that the best years under Governments of whatever colour were the first three terms. When in the fourth term one party had absolute power in Holyrood, that was when we got almost a dictatorship, which was very much to the detriment of the highlands and islands.

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. I think specifically of the first SNP minority Government who were sustained in power on many occasions by the Scottish Conservative MSPs when they were passing their legislative business through Holyrood.

I mentioned the Prime Minister’s speech. I also wish to mention the significant address that was delivered by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in Edinburgh the week before the Prime Minister’s visit. Both addressed the matter of the strength of the Union in the 20th anniversary year of devolution, and both concluded, on the basis of their assessment, that the Union must be strengthened, and they are both right. The Union has been too much neglected.

Talking about the Union is good. I recommend it to colleagues from all parts of the House, because there is an understanding gap in certain quarters of the parties on both sides of this House about what the Union is and its importance. However, talking about it is simply not good enough; we must now do something about it.

I say to my friends on the Conservative Benches that what concerns me the most is that we have this important debate about devolution brought to this Chamber by these two Select Committees, but there are no Members of Parliament representing English constituencies here to make a contribution to this important constitutional issue, other than the Minister whom I welcome to his place.

The Conservative and Unionist party must continuously rediscover its Unionist soul. We should affirm now, more than ever before, that we have the word “Unionist” in our party’s name, because strengthening the Union is core to what we stand for. We need to put strengthening the Union at the very heart of our Government. Setting up a unit of one sort or another for the Union in No.10 or putting titles on the end of other job titles is lip service only; we need the very structure of Government to be changed to put the Union at its heart. I have said this in the past, and I want to say it again here and now: there are missing pieces of the devolution settlement, and those missing pieces are at this end of the country.

I will make a very short list of the things that I believe we need to attend to, or at least consider and debate, because I very much welcome the Select Committee report of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) and the recommendations contained therein. My first suggestion is to look very carefully at the case for a powerful Department of the United Kingdom, led by a First Secretary of State for the Union, the primary purpose of which would be to test every action of the UK Government based on its impact on the Union. The Department would be further tasked to ensure greater cohesion and communication across Government on issues affecting the devolved Administrations to ensure that better understanding and knowledge of devolution and the Union.

Secondly, we need to put in place those missing pieces of the constitutional machinery that will establish stronger intergovernmental and inter-parliamentary working relationships to move from confrontation to close collaboration on crossover areas of public policy. These changes must be done on a cross-party basis, and they are essential for the post-Brexit operation of the Union.

Thirdly, the Departments of the UK Government with a Union-wide remit must engage with stakeholders and other bodies on the ground in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as they already do in England. It is simply not good enough that that does not happen today.

David Duguid: My hon. Friend is making a typically impassioned speech. Does he recognise that the Oil and Gas Authority in Aberdeen is a perfect example of what he is talking about?

Stephen Kerr: Yes, I do.

The Government should bring forward primary legislation to enable direct UK Government spending in devolved areas on a partnering basis with the devolved Administrations. The Scottish Government already spend money from the block grant in reserved areas.

Fifthly, the Government should bring forward detailed proposals on how the replacement fund for the EU regional funding will be administered. It should be administered at a UK level in partnership with the devolved Governments including councils.

Sixthly, and finally, there must be an urgent review of English votes for English laws, because, in my opinion, it was a badly advised and an unnecessary circumvention of the work of the United Kingdom Parliament from its very inception, and the sooner that it is gone, the better for the Union.

I celebrate 20 years of devolution; now let us invest in the Union consistent with the principle of devolution. The United Kingdom works best when we have shared endeavour, when we have co-operation and collaboration between our different nations and regions, and when we realise that our similarities and shared experiences bring us together far more than they divide us.

1.44 pm

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): This debate today feels deeply personal to me. I have campaigned all my life for devolution and was part of the cross-party campaign back in 1997 to secure that yes vote in the referendum. I remember that night in Cardiff. I had made my way up from Carmarthenshire that day, exhausted after a long, hard-fought campaign there and across Wales. It was looking bad for us, but when the last result came in from Carmarthenshire not only had it voted yes, but it had voted yes with a big enough majority to ensure that we secured devolution and the beginning of that exciting journey for the people of Wales, and that...
journey continues. For 20 years, the Welsh Assembly has grown, and it has grown also in the hearts and minds of the people of Wales.

Today’s Senedd is a very different Parliament from the one that was established in 1999, and as its powers grow, so too does the case for increasing its capacity to create an institution that is worthy of representing the people of Wales. It is worth reminding ourselves of the journey so far; how that institution, that legislature, has affirmed itself—asserted itself—in the hearts and minds of the people of Wales, far beyond its geographic boundaries. I am immensely proud to have played a part in that journey, too.

In 2008, I was lucky enough to be brought in to work with Welsh Ministers and with the father of Welsh devolution, Rhodri Morgan. His approach to devolution was far-reaching and forward-thinking. After a close-run referendum, he saw it as his responsibility to reach out to those who did not vote in favour of devolution and to persuade them that this institution in Cardiff belonged to them. Beyond anything else, he wanted to give confidence that that institution would matter to them. And he did that. It was the winning of the second referendum a decade after the Assembly was formed, when full law-making powers were transferred, that showed his ability to build that trust and confidence in an institution that brought those powers closer to the people.

Wales has trodden its own course and continues to tread its own course, challenging anti-trade union laws, tackling zero-hours contracts, increasing and improving the rights of tenants, introducing sprinklers to new build and public buildings, protecting people from the worst of austerity and genuinely leading the world in legislation on the environment, with the second best recycling rates in the world.

I am proud to have helped to bring forward the internationally progressive Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which has enshrined a framework for public decision making, linking wellbeing factors, including equality, community, climate change and culture to the laws and decisions that are being made for the people of Wales by the people of Wales. This legislation shows what the best of Wales has become: a confident, modern democracy that innovates and is good for its citizens, confident and proud.

The future promises more powers to Wales, with powers taken closer to the communities on which they have an impact. I am really proud that, yesterday, Members in the Assembly voted to change the name to Senedd—to Parliament—and that they will lower the voting age for the next election to 16 and 17.

Ahead of us lie some very, very dangerous times. With the risk of Brexit on the horizon and the challenge that that poses to us as a devolved nation within the Union, we must tread very carefully. For me, what is paramount is to have a Government in Wales who are fit for purpose and to have a Senedd—a Welsh Parliament—that delivers effectively for the people of Wales, ensuring that the framework of our democracy is fit for purpose and that it is rooted not just in its legislature but in the hearts and minds of the people of Wales.

We need the political courage to take that argument out to the people. We must increase the size of the legislature, to ensure that it is fit for purpose, and to ensure that it works effectively—and to ensure that, it needs more Members. Three major independent inquiries have all reached the same conclusion, and as it stands, without counting Ministers or other office holders, there are only 44 Members in the Welsh Parliament who are able to hold the Government to account. That compares with 113 in the Scottish Parliament and 522 here, in the English Parliament. [HON. MEMBERS: “It is not an English Parliament.”] To finish, let me say this—[Interruption] Let me say this. Labour delivered on the process of devolution, and it continues to be a fiercely devolutionist party. I am proud to have played my part, and I hope that it will continue on that path.

1.50 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin), and I want to add my thanks to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) for securing today’s really important debate, in which we can celebrate 20 years of devolution. In 2016, I was elected to the Scottish Parliament. It was a privilege to serve in Holyrood, and it is also a huge privilege to serve here in Westminster and to take an active part in the devolution story of this country.

Devolution takes decision making closer to people, offering a greater voice for and more accountability to communities across these islands, while ensuring that those communities enjoy the huge benefits of being part of our wider United Kingdom. Devolution has marked the next chapter in our Union’s successful story—that of an increasingly vibrant and diverse country, in which devolution not only lets the unique nature of our four nations shine but celebrates the shared values that bring us together.

Devolution means that we can have distinctive Scottish policies taken forward to address distinctive Scottish problems. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire listed some of those achievements. However, I feel that the full potential for that has not been realised, sometimes due to a lack of ambition on the part of successive Administrations but also to a real paralysis that has been caused by such an obsession with the constitution. Although there are substantial powers to make positive change, it is disappointing that on important areas such as health and education, time is squeezed out by the constant prioritisation of the constitution. Even the First Minister says that independence “transcends” all these important bread and butter issues.

I believe that devolution and a strong Scottish Parliament is good for Scotland. Sadly, however, there are Members on the SNP Benches in this Chamber who do not believe in devolution. They have no vision for the good that it can do, or trust in the strength that it brings to all four nations in our United Kingdom, because they want to ensure that devolution does not succeed. They want to see the devolution settlement ripped up, the constitution upended and our Union torn apart. But devolution is the evidence of an inherent strength to our Union that allows debate to prosper with a diversity of views from all corners of the country. Devolution also allows resources to be directed to those who most need them, often in areas that are hard to reach.

Stephen Kerr: My hon. Friend is making a very good point about the opportunity that devolution provides to fit public policies to policy objectives that are particular...
to Scotland, or parts of Scotland. Are there not, though, many similarities between the different parts of the United Kingdom with regard to some of the difficulties that we face, so would it not be a good idea if we shared more of what we are doing, so that there was a strengthening together?

Ross Thomson: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and there is not much more that I can say, because I wholeheartedly agree with him that there is far more scope for us to work together, to collaborate and share—for example, by sharing best practice and sharing policy that has been a success. Just because it has happened elsewhere in the United Kingdom does not mean that we should not do the same thing in Scotland.

When we leave the EU, the Scottish Parliament will gain new powers in a vast array of areas—forestry and carbon capture, crucial in tackling climate change; ports and harbours, which will be vital in supporting our fishing industry and offshore industries; and voting and employment rights, which will be key to securing a sound civil society. So I am proud that a Conservative Government are ensuring, once again, that the Scottish Government have the tools to deliver for the people of Scotland. However, it is up to the SNP Scottish Government to make sure that they live up to their duty to deliver.

Devolution unambiguously shows the strength of our United Kingdom. It has given us the security we need to share the risks and the rewards as a family of nations. It is important to remember that the devolution settlement continues to have the support of the people. We saw that in 2014, when the people of Scotland voted, clearly and decisively, to stay in the United Kingdom. We have seen that in Wales, where the people have backed devolution in successive polls to afford their elected representatives more powers. What we have seen over the past few years—indeed, over the past few weeks—is that devolution can work only when those elected to represent people across these four nations do so in good faith and live up to their commitments to uphold devolution.

Intergovernmental relations have come under strain at the political level—that is reflected in the Scottish Affairs Committee report, which I commend to colleagues—but it is not surprising that there is friction when different political Administrations hold unreconcilable positions. We need to look at what more we can do to ease that friction and to ensure that, where there is dispute, we can get resolution.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making an important point. Would he accept my party’s position that perhaps what we need to resolve the issues is an independent dispute resolution mechanism, so that when the two Governments of Scotland are in different positions, there is an independent process for finding a way forward?

Ross Thomson: I thank the hon. Lady. There is a lot of merit in what she has suggested; it would be a constructive way to resolve disputes.

As has been said, devolution is not the end of the road; it is a process, not just an event. I wish to say as part of my contribution today that we often, even in this place, view devolved issues in a very binary way—either a matter is entirely reserved, so it is just to do with Whitehall, or we see it as devolved, so it is only to do with Edinburgh. But some policy areas fall into reserved competence that do have an impact on devolved matters, so perhaps we should start to look at things slightly differently. Perhaps we should take a more shared, joined-up approach. An example would be to have representatives from the devolved Administrations on UK-wide regulatory bodies, such as the Trade Remedies Authority. That would be helpful and constructive.

I echo the points raised by my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), that we need to see some more Union in Scotland, too. I do not think there is anyone from the Treasury in the Chamber, but I would like to see the Treasury supporting more projects in Scotland directly. Just because an issue is devolved does not mean that we cannot spend money on it—not at all—and if there is a great project that merits it, which will provide benefits, then absolutely the Treasury should support it.

I believe that devolution can strengthen the bonds between our communities right across the United Kingdom. I look forward with optimism to the future of devolution and to the enduring strength of our Union. With a passionate belief in devolution and in our Union at the heart of this Government, I am sure that the best days of devolution are ahead of us and, if I may say so in closing, more so when Scotland has its first Scottish Conservative Government in 2021.
to tackle fuel poverty; to create a new social security system with dignity and respect at its heart; to reform our justice system, raising the age of criminal responsibility and extending the presumption against short sentences; to extend social care to under-65s who need it, through Frank’s law; and to enshrine safe NHS staffing in law. All this has happened while Westminster has ground to a halt and the SNP Government at Holyrood have been getting on with the day job.

Now that the United Kingdom is, against Scotland’s wishes, leaving the European Union, the UK will have to change its constitutional arrangements. As the UK Government have made clear, “the current devolution settlements were created in the context of the UK’s membership of the EU”. This is what has prompted the power grab. While the UK Government continue to distrust the devolved Parliaments, a constructive relationship is extremely difficult to maintain. The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee’s report, “Devolution and Exiting the EU: reconciling differences and building strong relationships”, states that “the shifting of Wales from a conferred to a reserved powers model indicates that the reserved powers model is now the constitutionally preferred model for devolution within the UK. Powers are not conferred by the UK Parliament onto the devolved legislatures, rather particular matters are reserved to the UK Parliament and all other areas devolved.”

It is time for the UK Government to recognise that.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) mentioned, Winnie Ewing celebrated her 90th birthday yesterday. She said at the opening of the Scottish Parliament:


If you are Scottish and a democrat, that should make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up, because those are far more than just words. They are words dripping with purposeful intentions, because devolution is not just about a building or the Government within it: it is a spirit, a belief, a self-belief. It is about power. It is about who has the power to define the present and the future of a nation. What we are really asking is, who gets to decide what is best for Scotland, and why should the people of Scotland settle for a supporting role in that when we are big enough, rich enough and smart enough to play the lead? The intention of devolution may have been to satisfy the hunger, but instead it has fed the beast—and across Scotland, that glorious beast is roaring once again.

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance on how I might correct something that may have been said during the speech by the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) that factually does not hold up. He said—

Mr Speaker: Order. [Interruption.] Order. The hon. Gentleman should resume his seat. I am not responsible for adjudicating between one Member and another on the veracity of what is said in the Chamber. Every Member is responsible for what he or she says in the Chamber. I say in a very gentle and understated fashion to the hon. Gentleman, who detained the House with considerable eloquence for a significant period earlier, that others have not yet spoken, and I know that he would not be so selfish as to interrupt the debate for any length of time, because that would be wrong and he would not do it—I know him too well to think anything of the sort.

2.3 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to be able to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) for securing it. I would like to return to a point made by the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), who said that the Scottish Parliament had not been paralysed by Brexit in the way that this one had. That may be the case, but it was certainly paralysed by the independence debate. There was an entire year of the 20 that we celebrate today in which the Scottish Parliament had no legislation before it—not a single law was passed. That, for many of us, perhaps goes down as one of the most disappointing aspects of devolution—that for a whole year our Parliament was paralysed by an argument over independence, which the majority of people of Scotland then rejected.

Those 20 years have indeed been an achievement. The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) recently commented from a sedentary position, “How long did devolution take?” Well, Liberal Democrats know that it took a century because it is a century since we first proposed home rule. It is great to see that, 120 years later, each of the parties in this Parliament is backing devolution, supporting the principle that was originally put forward by the Liberals. We worked on that with the Labour party in the constitutional convention, before eventually being joined by the Scottish nationalists and then, after the fact, by the Conservatives. It is perhaps the biggest single achievement of devolution that it has won over both the Scottish National party and the Conservatives to the position that we had all held before.

Jamie Stone: I was myself one of the original members of the Scottish constitutional convention and I have to point out for the record that, during the time we worked together, the Scottish National party was not in the room.

Christine Jardine: I thank my hon. Friend for that reminder that the SNP did not, in fact, take part at all.

During those 20 years, it has been important to differentiate between devolution and the work of the Scottish Parliament and of the various Scottish Governments. Yes, there have been achievements—they have been mentioned already—including free personal care, the Borders railway, and the growth in our economic, perhaps, independence. There have been huge achievements, but there have also been significant failures. Our education system is suffering. Our NHS, despite what we regularly hear, is suffering. Independence is constantly put forward as the answer to everything, with Westminster always being at fault. However, perhaps those who advocate independence would do better to spend more time on the day job, working for the people of Scotland to improve the areas that are falling down—most significantly,
as the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) said, in the sucking in of power to Holyrood at the expense of many different areas of life in Scotland. As my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) mentioned, the highlands and the north-east of Scotland have suffered greatly from this centralisation and the whittling away of the powers of local government in order to aggrandise the Scottish Government at their expense.

For those of us who worked hard for independence—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hooray!""] I mean devolution. [Interruption. I] can honestly say that will never happen. Those of us who worked hard for devolution for more than 20 years, who campaigned between 1979 and 1997, and for whom devolution is the most significant achievement of Scottish politics of the last 300 years, will defend it, will work to improve it, and will always support those who put their effort into the good governance of Scotland.

2.13 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) and, indeed, the many contributions in this debate. I compliment the Chairs of both Committees for securing it.

Devolution, in its modern context, started with the Tony Blair Government’s confirmation of their first act in bringing together the referendum and the creation in 1999 of the Scottish Parliament. It is worth remembering that, in that first period, between 1999 and 2007, under Donald Dewar, Henry McLeish, and, of course, Jack McConnell, we saw the introduction of the smoking ban and of proportional representation in local elections. Schools were built, teachers were recruited, and there were smaller class sizes. Nursery places were secured for every three and four-year-old. Free personal care was brought in. Radical land reforms were introduced, which ensured that we conserved and enhanced our national parks and wild camping.

Crucially, devolution has ensured that lawmaking reflects the traditions of Scotland’s distinct and separate legal system. We required a Parliament because the cultural norms within both our legal and education system differ from those in England and Wales. Pre-devolution, most laws—bar a handful each year that were Scotland-orientated—were created here in Westminster and applicable to Scotland but fashioned in the framework and legal spirit of England and Wales.

I am extremely fortunate that one of my predecessors was John P. Mackintosh, the former MP for Berwick and East Lothian. With the greatest respect to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), I feel that J.P. Mackintosh is the true father of devolution in Scotland. From the outset, he recognised the imperative to form institutions that met Scotland’s demands. Mackintosh was one of the finest politicians never to hold public office, but his writings and ideas were arguably far more transformative than those of many of his peers who served in Government.

Mackintosh’s central argument was that devolution is about empowerment, not the glorification of a nation state. In the 1970s, he spoke of a settlement that was remarkably similar to the one forged through the convention in 1999 and that was receptive to citizens’ concerns and empowered Scottish communities. When making the case for a devolved Parliament, Mackintosh spoke of holding a “dual identity”—that of being Scottish and British. I stand here today proud to represent the seat of East Lothian in a UK Parliament, as a member of the European Union, embodying that tradition. I can argue without contradiction that I believe in a union of nations working together and staying together, whether that be the UK or the European Union. Neither the Conservatives nor the nationalists who sit in this place can make that commitment.

Recognising multifaceted identities has never been more important. We live in divisive times, with the unhealthy prospect of nationalist and nativist movements strangling UK and global politics. In that context, devolution is still crucial to the UK’s political landscape. We face international policy challenges such as climate change, surging global inequality and a changing face of work that will undoubtedly impact on jobs. Never before have we required more the forces of interdependence, collective action and solidarity among the nations of the UK.

The devolution settlement keeps the constitutional bond intact. As Gordon Brown said in 2016: “If we are to meet and master the global challenges ahead, we need to get the balance right between the autonomy people desire and the co-operation we need… we should help the nations and regions realise it and give them the power to do so. The alternative is a Britain that looks in on itself without the means to bridge its divisions and to bring people together.”

Devolution was the greatest achievement of the last Labour Government. It is forged on confirming the identity of individuals, not as a step to independence, but so that a child born in my constituency can see themselves as being Lothian, Scottish, British and European. Long may that continue.

2.13 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to speak in this debate on 20 years of devolution. We now have an entire generation in Scotland who have never known a Scotland without its own Parliament, and that is something of which we can be proud. The Scottish Parliament was born out of disappointment and frustration with the monolithic and remote set-up of Westminster, and that created a thirst, a desire and a burning need for Scotland to have its own democratic Parliament.

What a 20 years it has been! Many of the policies delivered by the Scottish Parliament have been creative, innovative, progressive and worked hard to create a more socially just Scotland. There has been legislation on areas such as land reform and the ban on smoking in public places—championed by Kenneth Gibson MSP, who was the very first politician in the entire United Kingdom to promote that innovative idea. We have had the most ambitious climate change legislation and minimum unit pricing. I could go on, but those examples show that Scotland’s Parliament sets a legislative agenda that others need to follow.

The more the Scottish Parliament does, the more we find it can do—and that is just as well. As Westminster lies paralysed by Brexit chaos and the Government eat themselves alive, with 30 Ministers resigning in the last year alone, the Scottish Parliament under the SNP has got on with the day job. Nine Bills have been passed in two months alone. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), those Bills
focused on issues such as tackling fuel poverty, enshrining safe NHS staffing in law, extending social care to under-65-year-olds who need it through Frank’s law—which the Tories voted against, by the way—and a whole range of other measures to improve the lives of the people of Scotland. Of course, recently the Scottish Government have been forced to concentrate their mind on doing all they can to halt or prevent Scotland from the most damaging aspects of Brexit. All of this is in the context of a £2.5 billion cut to the Scottish Parliament’s budget over the last 10 years under successive UK Governments.

**Jamie Stone:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Patricia Gibson:** I will not.

In Scotland, we think about politics differently. We do not consider this Parliament sovereign. We do not consider the Scottish Parliament sovereign. In Scotland, the people are sovereign. It is the duty of the Scottish Parliament and all who seek to serve Scotland in the political sphere to continue to work to improve the lives of the people of Scotland, and the voice of Scotland’s people must be heard.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) lamented the lack of English MPs in the debate, but I put it to him that that might well be down to the fact that UK Governments of all colours have come to regard devolution as an inconvenient irritation. We know that not every political party in Scotland shares the SNP Government’s view of Scottish independence, but the Scottish Government stand ready to work across the political spectrum to continue to deliver improvements to the lives of the people of Scotland, despite the fact that some Tories have never really reconciled themselves to the existence of the Scottish Parliament. All we have to do is remember the words of former Tory Prime Minister John Major, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) and, of course, the former Tory leader and Member for Richmond (Yorks). I will not even talk about the behaviour of the elusive current leader of the Tories in Scotland. The Scottish Tories in this place love devolution so much that some of them could not wait to get out of the Scottish Parliament to come and sit in this Parliament.

The first 20 years of the Scottish Parliament has had a materially positive influence on the lives of the people of Scotland, and I am sure we will continue to see such improvements in the next 20 years. We were told by the once high-profile Labour MP Baron Robertson that devolution would kill nationalism stone dead. As he sits in the other place wrapped in ermine, he must surely at times reflect on his underestimating and misunderstanding of his fellow Scots. The fact is that Scotland is making more and more decisions for herself, and she likes it. There is no going back.

The process of devolution will one day, I am sure, lead Scots to demand their full independence, when we can complete our journey to a more prosperous, more just and more equal society. To complete that journey, and to continue to improve the lives of the people of Scotland, we need all the levers of taxation and spending powers, and that day will come. The first 20 years have brought so much improvement, and as we embark on a new constitutional journey over the next 20 years, things can be—and, I believe, will be—even better. I pray that I am alive to bear witness to that, and that I will live to be part of a flourishing, just, equal, independent Scotland.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP) **rose**—

**Hugh Gaffney** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab) **rose**—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The two remaining Back-Bench speeches must be completed by 2.30 pm, whereupon I shall call the SNP spokesperson, who has not yet orated but will do so. This debate must conclude no later than 3 pm.

2.19 pm

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a genuine pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who, in her inimitable style, delivered a passionate speech. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) for opening the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran spoke about a whole generation of young people in Scotland who have never known anything other than devolution. I was just seven years old when the people of Scotland voted for a devolved Parliament, so it is on that basis that I want to make some reflections about where we are and where we are going. Quite deliberately, I have not written a speech today. I want to try to avoid some of the party point scoring. I do not intend my speech to be that this House has confidence in the Scottish Government, tempted though I am after some of the various remarks, but I think it is worth reflecting on the record not from 2007 until now, but all the way back to 1999.

When I came to this place I did so as a nationalist MP, and we have an understanding—I sometimes think that it is missing in other parts of the House—that our primary job is to come here to scrutinise reserved matters. There are Members of this House who may have served in the Scottish Parliament, but they seem to speak more about devolved issues in this Parliament than they do about reserved issues, and I think that they are doing an enormous disservice to their constituents. [Interruption.] If the Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), who is chuntering away, wants to stand up and intervene, I am happy to give way, but he appears not to be taking that opportunity.

The point I want to make is that one of the first things I put up on my office wall when I came here was the metrics of the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. It is no secret that there are a number of challenges in the constituency I represent. The metrics we have in the Scottish index of multiple deprivation cover employment, income, health, crime, housing, education and access, some of which are devolved. The argument I want to develop over the next four minutes is about how much progress we have made in the last 20 years, but how the reality is that our hands are tied behind our back, particularly on the first two—employment and income.

The reality is that legislation relating to the national minimum wage and all these things is still held at Westminster, and limited taxation powers have come to Scotland. The Conservative party would say, “Well, you’ve
got your taxation powers—use them”, but when we use our taxation powers to try to lift people out of poverty, we get accused of the nat tax and all these other things. That seems a bit of a joke when we reconsider the council tax comparison between Scotland and England.

As I go around my constituency, I reflect on what devolution has actually meant. Particularly over the past few months, I have found that pretty much every single week there is a sod-cutting in my constituency where we are going to open a housing development. That is because of the record investment that the Government in Scotland are putting into housing.

I want to turn to some comparisons between devolution and the Union. The first one I will look at is the right to buy. The Scottish Government have decided that we are abolishing the right to buy because we want to invest in social housing; yet, down south, there is a major problem with housing, so I think that there is an opportunity for the UK Government to look at.

There are other areas as well. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) has been campaigning very hard on the issue of drug consumption rooms. There is a recognition and a realisation that, on a public health issue, we have a problem there. Many politicians in Glasgow understand that drug-related diseases and all those things are a major challenge for us. We have a Scottish Government and local authority in Glasgow who realise this is a challenge—that it is a public health issue we want to try to sort out—but we have the Home Office standing in the way. That highlights some of the challenges we have as a result of still being tied to the United Kingdom.

My hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) has been campaigning for a very long time for recognition that immigration is not a problem in Scotland, but emigration is. He has been consistently asking the UK Government to look at a regional approach to immigration policy. Any Member who comes to this House and represents Scotland but does not recognise that we have a challenge when it comes to migration, and that the one-size-fits-all policy pursued by this Government is not helping, is doing a disservice to their constituents.

On defence policy, the vast majority of people in civic Scotland do not want to have nuclear weapons on the River Clyde—whether it is the Catholic Church, the Church of Scotland or the trade unions. Public polling consistently shows that in Scotland and it is the view of the majority of MSPs, yet the Government just say, “That’s fine—you’re just leaving it there”. That does not strike me as much of a respect agenda.

Jamie Stone: May I briefly add one to the hon. Gentleman’s list that is often forgotten—the Scottish Government’s decision to amendulate the bedroom tax? I was very grateful for that when I was a councillor, as I was then. That actually made a very great difference to my constituents, and I give credit where it is due.

David Linden: I always think the hon. Gentleman is a very thoughtful Member of the House; when he has the opportunity, he fairly calls out when the Scottish Government have done something right. Again, that highlights the reality. What is the purpose of devolution? Is devolution just to be a sticking plaster for bad decisions that come out of Westminster? In that case, the reality is that we have had to use money that would have been used for other areas of devolved policy to deal with the bedroom tax, so he is right to highlight it.

The final area I want to touch on is the European Union. Whenever we talk about the Union—or what has now become the precious Union—Members in this House say, “Well, you know in 2014 Scotland voted to remain a part of the Union”. They are right: Scotland did. But in 2016, there was a referendum on our position in the European Union, and people in Scotland voted by 62% to remain in it. That decision has been ignored.

Patrick Grady: I congratulate my hon. Friend on making a very powerful speech. In fact, is the situation not even more profound than that? As the First Minister of Scotland has said, the Union that people voted for in 2014 no longer exists. That is the fundamental constitutional change that has taken place. / Interruption. / That is the fundamental reality.

David Linden: My hon. Friend makes the point. In 2014, people were told, “Oh, you’ll have the triple A credit rating, and you’ll be a member of the European Union”, but the reality is that that has changed. When the facts change, we need to look again at the options. We are not saying that we will unilaterally declare independence from the United Kingdom, but the reality is that the facts have changed and that the Union people voted for in 2014 no longer exists.

If Conservative Members are so confident that people in Scotland would give a ringing endorsement of the Union, the first thing the Cabinet Office will do is to release the polling information that they are hiding. If they are still confident that people in Scotland wish to be a part of the United Kingdom, ask them. Put the question to the people.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me in this important debate.

We recently held a moving debate in this House to mark the 25th anniversary of John Smith’s death. Members who participated reflected on John’s unwavering support for Scottish devolution. In 1994, John referred to the creation of a Scottish Parliament as “the settled will of the Scottish people”. In 1997, the referendum proved him right, with 74% of voters supporting the creation of a Scottish Parliament. I would like to pay tribute to all those involved in the campaign for Scottish devolution, from Keir Hardie onwards and right throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Groups such as the Scottish Constitutional Convention brought together civil society, political parties, trade unions and others in support of devolution. Its tireless campaigning was in no small part responsible for ensuring that we now have a Scottish Parliament.

I also want to commend those individuals in the Labour party, such as John Smith and Donald Dewar, who championed the cause of Scottish devolution, and others such as Tom Clarke, who served this place for 33 years as the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill. Their efforts led Labour to adopt a firm commitment in favour of devolution to Scotland. I will always be proud of the fact that it was a Labour
Government who created the Scottish Parliament and delivered devolution to Scotland. Let us never forget that the Tories opposed the creation of the Scottish Parliament, and their reckless pursuit of a no-deal Brexit poses a real risk to such devolution today.

The Scottish Parliament has achieved significant changes, which have had a positive impact on the lives of all people across Scotland. We have heard about many of them. They include free personal care, land reform, the smoking ban, free bus travel, votes for 16 and 17-year-olds in Scottish Parliament and local government elections, and the passing of the equal marriage Act for same-sex couples. All these changes highlight the real potential of a Scottish Parliament to deliver positive change for Scotland.

However, the potential of a Scottish Parliament to deliver real change is not being met. We have entered a period of constitutional politics in Scotland that has seen the powers of the Scottish Parliament go unused in the pursuit of social justice. The SNP and the Scottish Government in Edinburgh are focused solely on pursuing independence, and their Tory opposition in the Scottish Parliament has just one policy: to oppose a second independence referendum. The people of Scotland are being badly let down by both the SNP and the Scottish Tories, who have chosen to put the constitution before the interests of their communities.

Nearly 500,000 workers in Scotland do not earn the living wage. [Interruption.] I will repeat that in case the House missed it: 500,000 workers in Scotland do not earn the real living wage.

**David Linden:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Hugh Gaffney:** I will not; the hon. Gentleman cost me two minutes earlier on.

Over 70,000 Scottish workers find themselves with exploitative zero-hours contracts. There is a housing crisis, and those in the private rented sector find themselves facing rip-off rents. Nearly a quarter of all children in Scotland are living in poverty, and one in 10 Scots is living in food poverty. That is the Scotland that we live in today.

It could not be clearer that we need to use the powers of the Scottish Parliament to deliver real change for the people of Scotland. We could be using the new tax powers to introduce a 50p top rate of tax to raise revenue for our public services. We could be using new welfare powers to end the two-child limit and top up child benefit by £5 a week. We could be using the Parliament’s existing powers to end free bus travel to those under 25, cap rents and end exploitative zero-hours contracts. That is what Scottish Labour would seek to do, because we recognise the potential of devolution to deliver for the many, not the few.

**John Smith** was right to say that the creation of a Scottish Parliament was “the settled will of the Scottish people”.

Most Scots do not want independence; nor do they support a Tory Government attacking devolution. They want to see a powerful Scottish Parliament, but crucially they want a Scottish Government who are prepared to use those powers to tackle poverty, invest in public services and deliver a fairer society. Twenty years on, it is clear that Labour is the only party to settle the will of the Scottish people.

**Mr Speaker:** The Minister must be re-seated by 2.58 pm, so I am looking for speeches of no more than eight or nine minutes from the Front-Bench spokespersons. People must not be precious about it—I am sure they will not be—but we have to deal with the realities of the situation.

**2.31 pm**

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It is a pleasure, as ever, to follow the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney).

I want to look forward in this debate, but to do that I first have to look backwards. The Act of Union of 1707 gave protection to many aspects of Scottish life. In our churches, classrooms and courts, things were preserved. That aside, that Act of Union led to the creation of a single unitary state with a centralised government apparatus. It was not a federation or a partnership or even, in the proper sense, a union at all, but the creation of a single polity into which Scotland was subsumed. That represents a central weakness and fragility of the United Kingdom, which has been exposed in the time since. Everything that has transpired in this debate about devolution and decentralisation should be seen in the context of the United Kingdom’s imperfections and the ability to compensate for them to enable the state to represent the aspirations and needs of the people in Scotland.

That did not matter so much in the early days, but government expanded rapidly throughout the 19th century, so that by the end of the century there was a demand for decentralisation. In 1885 we saw the creation of the Scottish Office and the position of Secretary of State for Scotland, but not until the 20th century did the demand arise for political decentralisation, devolution and constitutional change. The home rule movement at the beginning of the 20th century was widely reflected in Scotland, leading in 1913, more than 100 years ago, to the passing through this House of the Government of Scotland Bill, in which some elements of home rule for Scotland were embodied.

That legislation was not enacted because of the advent of the first world war, and economic disruption and a further world war meant that the debate was not re-joined until the 1950s. Then we were in a completely new world. The old order had changed utterly. Empires were disintegrating and almost every couple of months a new nation state was formed somewhere on the globe, such that the demands of Scottish nationalism—the demands for Scottish self-government—were not cast in terms of the past or romantic notions of pre-Union days, but were a contemporary proposition very much in touch with the modern world. That was typified in the 1967 Hamilton by-election, when Winnie Ewing said:

“Stop the world, Scotland wants to get on”.

The 50 years since have seen a series of reports, from Kilbrandon and Smith, and a series of Bills, which have all tried to dissipate and placate the demands for self-government from the people of Scotland. The central paradox is that despite all that has happened, that placation does not seem to have worked. I can understand why Unionists must be frustrated. The old dictum of Enoch Powell—that power devolved is power retained—
does not appear to hold. Unionists must be tearing their hair out, thinking, “What more do we have to do for these rebellious Scots to be satisfied?” The Scottish social attitudes survey shows that about 8% to 10% of people think that there should be no Scottish Parliament at all, yet once we discount that small minority, a clear majority of the remainder believe that the Scottish Parliament should be independent rather than part of the constitutional arrangements of the United Kingdom.

Why has that happened? I think it has happened for two reasons. The first is that devolution has been a resounding success. It has led to perceptible benefits for the people of Scotland and changes in how lives are lived that people really appreciate. Other Members from across the Chamber have talked about the achievements of the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government, so I will not repeat them. However, I want to make it clear that I do not regard those achievements as the preserve of any one political party. I am proud of the last 12 years of the SNP Scottish Government, but I acknowledge fully the progress made by the Labour and Liberal Democrat coalition in the first two terms of the Scottish Parliament. However, many people are now open to the idea that if some devolution can make positive changes to their lives, why not just devolve everything and take all the powers that we need to run our affairs in Scotland?

The second reason why the demand for self-government has not been dissipated is that the exercise of power throws into sharp relief the powers that we do not have. This is now a raging argument in Scotland. People say that there are things that could be made better, but we do not have the competence and capacity to do it. To give a few brief examples, we want to reduce carbon emissions in Scotland. The Scottish Government are now committed to having an all-electric road system, with charging points throughout the entire country, but are powerless to shift the transition to electric vehicles because they have no control over vehicle excise duty. We might want to give incentives to small businesses in Scotland and start-ups in key sectors of the economy, but we have no power at all over corporate taxation. From drugs to broadcasting, food standards to employment law, there are many aspects of life that could be improved, but we do not have the powers to improve them.

Now, that adumbration is not by itself a compelling argument for independence, because we could respond to that lack of competence with further devolution. However, it is a mystery to me why many proponents of devolution, who in many ways brought us to this point, now seem to think that it is time to pull up the drawbridge—to say that devolution is complete, that the process is over and that nothing can possibly be done. However, it has enabled me to commemorate a memorable anniversary in this way.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), the Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee, on securing the debate. He mentioned Donald Dewar, Scotland’s first First Minister, in his opening remarks. I was struck by a quote from Donald:

“Cynicism, together with unrealistic expectation, are the two great bugbears of politics.”

That is certainly a quote that has stood the test of time, particularly when considering the pretenders to the office of Prime Minister at the moment.

It is certainly a privilege to close today’s debate on behalf of the Labour Front Bench. I admit to being a child of devolution. It feels surreal to be standing here not just two years since I made my maiden speech, but after 20 years of devolution. I remember that year very well indeed, because I was very unwell in Yorkhill Hospital. I watched the opening ceremony of the Scottish Parliament in Holyrood from a hospital bed. Watching it as a young child, I was struck very deeply in particular by Sheena Wellington’s fantastic singing of “A Man’s a Man for a’ That” by Robert Burns and the great words of Donald Dewar.

In my view and in the round, devolution has been a bit of a mixed bag, as has probably been reflected in the speeches today. When I reflect on the positive changes that have been made during the devolution era, there have certainly been some successes that show exactly why we need a Scottish Parliament and, indeed, a Welsh
Assembly. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) mentioned, that was hard fought for for many years. My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) mentioned Keir Hardie. Labour has been fighting for home rule for well over a century. It has been at the heart of Labour and progressive politics throughout the party’s existence.

The first great success of the Scottish Parliament that comes to mind is the smoking ban, through the Smoking, Health and Social Care (Scotland) Act 2005, which was introduced by the Scottish Labour Government in 2005. From what I can remember, I think it is fair to say that that was the first time that the Scottish Parliament truly led the way with reform that was then adopted by the UK Government and rolled out across the UK—a really progressive step. In the light of the decision by this place on Tuesday to legislate for same-sex marriage to be legalised in Northern Ireland, it is absolutely right to put on record the success of the Marriage and Civil Partnerships (Scotland) Act 2014, which was introduced by the SNP Government. It was the first legislation of its kind in the UK and a perfect example, mentioned by the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), of the Scottish Government leading the way in an area of social policy.

The Scottish Parliament has had other great successes, such as free concessionary bus travel, free tuition for university students and free prescriptions. Those are policies that have changed the social landscape in Scotland for the better. I congratulate every politician of every party who played a part in ensuring that those policies were enacted. Indeed, a litany of achievements have been elucidated in speeches throughout the Chamber today. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) mentioned that 280 Acts have been passed in the 20 years of devolution.

We have seen innovation in the form of the post-study work visa in Scotland, which was championed by the then First Minister, now Lord, McConnell. He regards that as his greatest achievement in his time as First Minister and it led to the reversal of Scotland’s historical population decline. There have been other transformative policies. The writing off, by Wendy Alexander, of Glasgow’s £1 billion social housing debt transformed social housing for Glaswegians and enabled the mass reconstruction of the city’s municipal housing stock, as the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) mentioned in his speech.

Sadly, I am not convinced that devolution has been the unequivocal success that many hoped it would be. It is probably fair to say that progress in many areas of domestic policy has stagnated. Education reforms have been a failure. The health and social care sectors have been mismanaged by health boards and Scottish Ministers. We have yet to see a Scottish Government implement what I believe are fundamentally sound policies, such as public ownership of our railways.

On that point, I like to highlight the case of the Cally rail works in Springburn. That is a particular case where devolution has not been a success. I understand the reason is that the Tories are opposed to public ownership. Their long-standing principle of laissez-faire capitalism and free market thinking means that that is not surprising. What is surprising is the fact that the Scottish Government have been completely unwilling to countenance the prospect of public ownership of the Cally. For me, that is exactly the kind of policy that the Scottish Parliament should be focusing on. Indeed, it is in stark contrast to the robust interventionist policies of previous Secretaries of State for Scotland, such as Willie Ross and Tom Johnston. Indeed, one of the first acts of the Scottish Government and the Scottish Executive in 1999 was to ensure the safety and the continued operation of the Govan shipyard.

We have a dangerous level of pollution in Scotland, especially in cities. We have dangerous disparities in income and wealth, which are reflected in child poverty, homelessness, health inequalities and huge disparities in life expectancy between rich and poor, predominantly determined by the postcode in which they live. That has not significantly changed throughout the life of the Scottish Parliament. I remember Jimmy Reid in the early 1990s saying that, depending on which district in Glasgow people lived in, the difference in life expectancy could be a life sentence. That is a terrible indictment of the failure of social policy.

Growth and productivity have been in decline since 2000 and are still 20% below Government targets. That is simply unacceptable. The Governments in both the UK and Scotland need to address that issue robustly. We have Scottish workers in insecure work earning poverty pay and lacking even the most basic protection against unscrupulous employers. Those who are on benefits have been subjected to vicious Tory austerity, but with little protection from the Scottish Government, typified by the timidity on using the social security powers and enacted in the Scottish Act 2016.

SNP Members do not like to hear that the Scottish Government have done next to nothing to protect people in Scotland from Tory austerity, but I draw attention to the fact that the Scottish Parliament’s independent research body points out that the Scottish Government have cut the budget of local authorities by four times the amount that the Tories have cut the Scottish block grant. That is the independent parliamentary research body at the Scottish Parliament saying that, not just me. That is typified by the fact that the Scottish Government have cut addiction services by a quarter in Glasgow, despite record, epidemic levels of drug-related deaths in that city.

Rural towns and villages are losing shops and services, and even simple things such as access to cash. Manufacturing and service industries are increasingly owned outwith Scotland, and land ownership remains concentrated in the hands of a few ultra-rich individuals. The Scottish Government have the powers to ameliorate the worst of those impacts, but, sadly, they have failed to do so in the vast majority of cases. That is why my assessment, and that of the Labour Party, is that the existing powers of the Scottish Parliament must be used more effectively. New powers may well be needed to make a real difference in tackling the problems I have listed above, but not simply to supply more fuel to what Gordon Brown calls the constitutional Punch and Judy show, which we have seen enacted in this debate today and which typifies the attempts to distract from the records of both the Scottish and UK Governments.

I am a firm believer that we must be able to invest in our manufacturing base. To do that realistically, we need more borrowing powers for the Scottish Parliament. That investment must ensure that the Scottish people
have a stake in any future development and that we are not simply giving handouts to foreign investors who can up sticks and leave whenever they wish to do so, as typified by the Cally. That is why Scottish Labour leader, Richard Leonard, has outlined his desire to have employment rights devolved to the Scottish Parliament. I do not trust the Tories to legislate for a proper living wage, or to legislate to ensure that public contracts cannot be awarded to blacklisted companies. I am not sure that I trust the SNP Government to do that either.

I am a firm believer in the fact that, within reason, power should be as close to the people as possible, and that the principles of subsidiarity should reign, rather than those of separation, as J.P. Mackintosh rightly said, as was referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield). It is on that point that I want to acknowledge that although devolution has been a mixed bag, with regard to its success, I do not think that the current system of governance in the UK is working terribly well either. I agree that the Brexit process has highlighted the flaws in the devolution settlement, and I do not believe that the settlement currently works for people in Scotland. However, I am not entirely convinced that the SNP’s answer of separation is a way forward either, and the main reason for that is the undeniable fact that the SNP Government are guilty of centralising power in Holyrood and undermining the ability of local government.

As has been mentioned, devolution is a process, not an event, and I believe that its destination lies in further constitutional reform and federation, rather than separation. As Donald Dewar said at the opening of the Scottish Parliament 20 years ago,

“This is about who we are, how we carry ourselves… today there is a new voice in the land, the voice of a democratic Parliament. A voice to shape Scotland, a voice for the future.”

That has been a mixed legacy. We have to remember, however, as we stand on the 20th anniversary of that opening day, that it is not an end but a means to a greater end. I wish the Parliament every success in its deliberations over the next 20 years.

2.49 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): May I begin by congratulating the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), on a very effective first appearance at the Dispatch Box? I did not agree with everything he said, as he will not be surprised to hear, but he certainly made a very good point and I am sure that we will hear many more such speeches in future. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) and my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) on securing the debate. It has generally had a reflective tone, despite some obvious differences in where we believe the devolution journey should take us.

Devolution has allowed space for the four nations of the UK to pursue their own domestic policies, reflecting the distinct circumstances of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Equally importantly, it combines all those benefits within the wider strengths and advantages of the Union. Devolution means that the nations and regions of the UK can work together, with their voices and interests amplified by being part of something bigger. It means drawing from and contributing to the strength of the

Union and combining our resources to be the world’s fifth-largest economy and a leading player on the international stage. Around the world, the voices of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are amplified by being part of this United Kingdom as we participate in diplomacy, sport and international aid. When we come together as one people, we benefit from the security and stability that comes from being part of one of the largest economies in the world, pooling risks and sharing benefits. But devolution is not about the UK Government just forgetting an area.

In Wales, we are working with the Welsh Government, businesses and local councillors to support the Cardiff capital region deal, which will provide investment funds for the region and support electrification of the Valley Lines railways, and the Swansea Bay city region deal will deliver over £1 billion of investment to the region and support investment in digital infrastructure and next-generation technology. We have also committed £120 million towards the agreement of a north Wales growth deal and continue to support a mid-Wales growth deal—all three levels of government working together in the interests of those we represent.

The UK Government have also committed over £1.35 billion to support economic development in Scotland through city and growth deals. When it comes to research and development programmes and funding, the UK benefits from the talent and expertise in the devolved nations, and the devolved nations punch above their weight as part of this United Kingdom. Scotland benefits significantly from the UK life sciences industry, and the life sciences industrial strategy is a UK-wide strategy.

We continue to work towards the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland, and I am sure that all Members of the House look forward to the day when Stormont—

Ian Murray: Before the Minister moves on from Scotland, will he give way?

Kevin Foster: I will take one brief intervention.

Ian Murray: Some 63% of Conservative party members have said that they think leaving the EU is much more important than keeping the Union together. What does the Minister think?

Kevin Foster: I am clear that I am a Unionist and that I want to see the Union remain together, and that poll is absolute rubbish.

Employment in Northern Ireland is at near record levels, rising to a record high of 70% at the end of last year. Northern Ireland remains the most popular location for foreign direct investment outside London and the south-east, and exports are up 11% since 2011. We will continue to build opportunities for Northern Ireland’s economy, even in the absence of the devolved tier of government. In March, we agreed the heads of terms for the Belfast city region deal, which will see the UK Government invest £350 million in the Belfast region over the next 15 years to boost investment and productivity, and we are making progress on a Derry/Londonderry and Strabane city region deal.

Devolution means that decisions can be made at the most appropriate level of government, and it should mean that. People and businesses expect those different levels to work together to deliver for them.
Stephen Kerr: The commitment of the people of Scotland to the Union is evidenced by the fact that in every election to the Westminster Parliament there is a greater turnout than there is for elections to the Scottish Parliament.

Kevin Foster: It is always welcome to see how people wish to participate in elections to this Union Parliament, and the fact that it has the higher turnout shows the importance that people attach to it.

Devolution allows for different approaches alongside one another, each the democratic choice of electors who hold their own politicians to account, yet we should not limit this to thinking about the UK Government and the devolved Governments. The Smith commission recognised that when it called for powers to be devolved, not taken away from, local communities in Scotland. We have championed this approach in England, devolving powers to new Mayors in Manchester, the west midlands, Liverpool city region, the west of England, Cambridge and Peterborough, Sheffield, North of Tyne and Tees valley. This enables decisions on services to be made closer to the people that are affected by them and gives a powerful voice to the communities the Mayors serve. This approach to local decision making could also benefit the great cities in other parts of the UK, but of course I respect that that would be a decision for the devolved Assemblies.

For devolution to continue to succeed, it must evolve with changing circumstances and respond to new challenges. The UK Government have adapted to meet this changing constitutional landscape, while maintaining our primary responsibility of being a Government serving the whole United Kingdom.

As the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, and given the changes to the devolution settlements in recent years, it is timely for us to consider whether the institutional structures we have used over the past 20 years remain fit for purpose in terms of intergovernmental relations. At the Joint Ministerial Committee plenary in March 2018, Ministers from the UK Government and devolved Administrations agreed to review the existing intergovernmental structures. On 3 July, the UK Government published the agreement on joint working comprising a set of principles developed jointly by a working group of representatives of all four Administrations. Their publication demonstrates that the UK Government and devolved Administrations are committed to working together to develop intergovernmental structures that will remain fit for purpose after the UK’s exit from the EU. I was pleased to hear some reflection on that today.

The Government have been clear that EU exit will mean an increase in decision-making powers in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. As we prepare for the UK’s departure from the EU, the UK Government are working with our counterparts in the devolved Administrations to establish common frameworks that uphold our UK internal market. On 3 July, the UK Government published a set of further updates on common frameworks. These detail how we are working together to put frameworks in place across the UK Government, the Welsh and Scottish Governments and the Northern Ireland civil service, we plan to share this work with stakeholders, legislative and interested parties.

It is also right that, while marking 20 years of devolution, the UK Government also consider whether we are working in the most effective way possible to realise fully all the benefits of devolution within a United Kingdom. The Prime Minister has established an independent review of how the UK Government works with the devolved level of government, which will report to the new Prime Minister in the autumn. It will consider and make recommendations on whether UK government structures are configured in such a way as to strengthen the working of the Union. Let me be clear that this is not a review of the devolution settlements.

As a Government, we are committed to ensuring that devolution continues to serve this Union well. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster recently gave a speech to the Law Society of Scotland on the importance of devolution, emphasising that the UK Government’s vision for the UK is one of strong devolved Parliaments within a strong United Kingdom. Just a few days ago, the Prime Minister restated the paramount importance and value of the Union in Stirling. Devolution is not an alternative to the Union. It is not either/or. It is an integral part of a modern Union that will last for generations and serve all parts of our United Kingdom well.

Pete Wishart: I thank everybody for contributing to the debate. We know it will be a good debate when it is contrived between the Scottish Affairs Committee and the Welsh Affairs Committee. It was good to see so many members of both Committees taking part.

I have just a couple of reflections on what I have heard today. First, it is really encouraging that no one now talks about abolishing or doing away with the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly. They are such a feature in our democratic tapestry that no one even suggests that anymore. Secondly—I think that the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) mentioned this—not one contribution was made by an English Member that found that members of the Conservative party are probably more interested in Brexit than the Union.

We all look forward to what will come in terms of devolution, but can I say ever so gently to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney)—I also congratulate him on his first outing at the Dispatch Box—that we have spent £500 million mitigating Tory austerity in the Scottish Parliament? We cannot be a mitigation Parliament; the money has to come from other budgets, so let us look positively at how we go forward. I am glad that we have now agreed and that this is now a firm feature in our democracy, but let us look forward to the next 20 years, too.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered 20 years of devolution.
Leasehold Reform

2.59 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House takes note of the Twelfth Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, HC 1468, on Leasehold Reform and the Government’s response, CP 99; welcomes the Competition and Markets Authority investigation into the extent of any mis-selling and onerous leasehold terms; believes there is no reason why the majority of multi-occupancy residential buildings could not be held in commonhold; calls on the Government to remove the incentives for developers to build new leasehold properties; and further calls on the Government to bring forward legislative proposals to amend onerous permission fees and ground rents in existing leases.

In March, the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee published its 12th report following a six-month inquiry into leasehold reform. We received more than 700 submissions in initial evidence, and during our evidence sessions many leaseholders got in touch with us saying “Me too! I am in exactly the position that is being explained to you by the witnesses.” We have now received the Government’s response. While we are pleased by their support for some of our recommendations, we feel that more could be done for existing leaseholders, and I shall say more about that in due course.

Might I intrude on the previous debate, Mr Speaker, and refer to the issue of devolution? Yes, in England we are interested in it. Indeed, the Select Committee announced today its intention of holding an inquiry into devolution in England, which I think is a positive development.

The Committee uncovered a scandalous situation—or, rather, scandalous situations, because they varied in many respects. Developers often sell their properties, funded by the Help to Buy scheme, and give purchasers inducements to use a solicitor of the developer’s choice who does not explain to the purchaser the full impact of the purchase, does not give the full information about ground rents or permission fees, and sometimes does not even make clear the difference between leasehold and freehold. Purchasers are promised that “it will be all right, because you can buy your freehold following a given period and for a given sum”, only to find when they try to do it that the freehold has been sold on to a third party. We heard about some other really bad examples: for instance, people in flats were being faced with unexplainable and unjustifiable service charges, and, of course, excessive commission fees as well. In the worst cases, people have been left trapped in unsellable and unmortgageable homes.

The Committee concluded that “too often leaseholders…have been treated by developers, freeholders and managing agents, not as homeowners or customers, but as a source of steady profit.” That is simply unacceptable. We also concluded that there was no link at all between the ground rents that were paid and the service that was delivered to the leaseholders. We were completely unconvinced that, in most circumstances, “professional freeholders provide a significantly higher level of service than that which could be provided by leaseholders themselves”.

Ours is a comprehensive report with a great many recommendations. I shall list some but not all of them, because there are so many. I pay tribute to the work of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform, many of whose members are present today and who did an awful lot of work, to all my colleagues on the Committee—this is a unanimous report, although it contains controversial and far-reaching recommendations—and to the Leaseltod Knowledge Partnership and the National Leasehold Campaign, which have done a great deal of work to put this issue into the public domain.

In their response, the Government are generally positive about new properties, but probably less committed to certain recommendations for existing leaseholders. They have agreed to a ban on leasehold on new houses, which is certainly needed. In the case of future leaseholds, there should be a peppercorn rent; the Government’s original proposal was a £10 charge. We have asked for clear standardisation for leaseholders when they buy their properties. The Government have accepted the recommendation in respect of new purchases, but not for resales. We may need to return to that issue, because it is important.

We have not made as much progress on commonhold. We were positive about its future, suggesting that it should become the primary form of tenure; the Government called for it to be a “viable alternative”. We know that there is work to be done on the legal position relating to commonhold and the availability of mortgages, but the Government ought to be a bit more enthusiastic than perhaps they have been so far. We also called for a ban on inducements for purchasers to use particular solicitors. The Government have not gone that far; they have talked about better redress, greater transparency and asking the regulators to be more proactive. We do not think that goes far enough.

We also called for any permission fees that are in the original lease to be no higher than the administrative costs of those fees. The Government have said that that is a matter for Lord Best’s review of the regulation of property agents. We hoped that the Government would say that they were looking forward to implementing recommendations from the review, but they have not gone that far either.

On existing leaseholders, we still have more progress to make. We recognise the complications of this. Nevertheless, we also recognise the suffering of leaseholders at present that does need to be addressed. On the positive side, we called for the Competition and Markets Authority to conduct an inquiry into mis-selling. I met Lord Andrew Tyrie. He is committed to the inquiry that he has announced. He wants to do something. He recognises the problem and we look forward to that. I hoped the Government would have said, “Yes, we want the inquiry and we want to implement what it finds.” Instead we are in a, “We look forward to the inquiry, but are not quite sure what we are going to do with it when we get it” situation.

We have also called—these are important issues—for onerous ground rents and onerous permission charges to be dealt with retrospectively. They both need addressing. We could do it in the human rights legislation. We took detailed advice and evidence on this. Again, the Government’s response seems to be, “Well, voluntary deals are being done with various developers about this.”
Frankly, we are concerned about the level of trust the Government are placing in the same industry that created the onerous leases in the first place. The Government do not go far enough. Often the links to the retail prices index can lead to high figures. Often deals do not apply to the resale of property and of course they do not cover permission charges or any of the arrangements that have been arrived at. So we certainly want to go a lot further than that.

On permission fees and retrospective action, the Government said, “Look for the CMA report.” We understand that that report will be about not just mis-selling, but whether the conditions so far imposed are unfair in consumer law. We will want to have a look at that when it comes out. We hope the Government will act quickly on that report and the report being done in parallel by Lord Best, the review of property agents, which will look at permission fees as well.

Some of those fees are scandalous: £3,500 to put a conservatory in, before starting with the cost of the conservatory; £68 for a doorbell; £100 to answer an inquiry. These are outrageous fees. They are not justifiable. They are unfair and scandalous, and action needs to be taken on them.

We have clearer statements from the Government on some areas and we should recognise that. The Government want to see standardised forms for service charges. We received lots of evidence that service charges just came out of the blue; it was not possible to explain what they were or justify the amounts—in some cases it was not even possible to find the service being charged for. So that needs to be addressed. Lord Best’s review is looking at that and we hope that the Government act quickly when it is published.

We said that, where a freehold was bought, some of the freehold agreements themselves kept service charges and permission fees embedded in them. We could see no justification for that and the Government agreed with our position. We called for greater clarity on communal areas on freehold estates in terms of who was responsible when the council and the developer did the initial planning agreement, and the Government supported action there.

Enfranchisement is a big issue. We know that the Government agree with our recommendation for a clearer and simpler system. Again, the Government are waiting for the Law Commission, but we hope that their commitment in principle will soon produce action. We also recognise the Government’s commitment to change the current system: there is only first refusal for flat owners in terms of the sale of freehold; in future that will apply to houses as well, which is a step in the right direction.

We also recognise the Government’s commitment in most cases to ban the freeholder collecting from leaseholders the costs of going to a tribunal when the freeholder loses. That is an important step. It is frankly outrageous that someone can win a case in a tribunal and then find that they are paying the price of winning through extra lease and service charges.

The Government are being a bit mealy mouthed on forfeiture, even though it is completely wrong and unjustifiable. It might not happen very often, but the threat of forfeiture forces many leaseholders not to challenge and to back off, so we need action there as well. An important issue that is often forgotten about is sinking funds. They can be very large and they are currently unregulated. The Government have suggested that Lord Best’s review should look at the issue. We look forward to that review because there are a lot of things it will have to look at.

There are many other issues. I cannot go into them all in detail, but there is a very long list of recommendations and responses from the Government. The Government are positively trying to look at the issues around redress, but I ask them please to get on with the housing court. Having a housing court would mean that people who had problems with their housing, whether as tenants, leaseholders or in other circumstances, knew where to go for a simple and effective form of redress. We welcome the Government’s commitment to this in principle, but that principle has been sitting there for a long time and we need some action on it.

In the end, the Government are right to say that this is a very complicated area of law. There are lots of Acts of Parliament and lots of regulations, so what we in the Committee have suggested is very simple. Let us recognise the changes that need to happen, but let us also recognise that there will be enormous long-term benefit for everyone if we have a wider review of all the legislation on leaseholds. We should give the Law Commission the funds to do that, but again the Government have really backed off the proposal. I ask the Minister at least to agree to that today, because it is a very simple suggestion that could have enormous long-term benefits.
or two of those. As the hon. Gentleman said, the two areas in which these leasehold scams arise are ground rents and service charges. The ground rents in older leases tended to be a fairly small proportion of the total cost, but in recent years modern developers have hiked the ground rents, often doubling them every 10 years. The so-called proposals to modify this with reference to the retail prices index could lead to an even greater scam, because if inflation started to rise, ground rents could double not every 10 years but every five years. We need to look very carefully at that proposal. There are other proposals to make ground rents more moderate.

The other area, which is perhaps a bigger concern, is that of service charges. They can often be completely unknown, and they can include elements that are not immediately apparent to the person buying a leasehold. Those elements include administration fees, accountancy fees, commissions, insurance—the list goes on forever. The problem with all that is that a purchaser’s solicitors often assume that their client has a greater knowledge than they really have and are not explicit about what the obligations amount to.

I will move on quickly, because time is running out. I have constituents in the Gallery who have had equal and similar problems with scams relating to freeholds. Freeholders buy their properties with a covenant—many covenants in some cases—that contain unquantified and unspecified obligations relating particularly to the common parts of their estate. When pressed, the smart salespeople in the smart furnished flat or house on the estate often say, “Well, it’s only a small amount. It will amount to a few hundred pounds.” However, when the buyer gets their first bill, they suddenly realise what they are locked into. In some cases, the charges are so high, as can be with leaseholds, that the properties are effectively made unsaleable.

We need to look carefully at the purchasing system in this country, and the Government need to work with the Law Society to ensure that all solicitors make it explicitly clear to their prospective purchasing clients what they are letting themselves in for. In my experience—I do not wish to knock either my own profession or the legal profession—they tend to be fairly bliss about inquiring into what the arrangements are for managing these common parts, which can be very expensive. The Government need to examine the arrangements to make it much easier for groups of people representing their estate to take over its management. What actually happens is that the management tends to be vested in a company that is owned by the estate’s original developer, and then people who cannot get out of dealing with that company are locked into whatever said company chooses to charge them.

I pay great tribute to Amanda Davies from Burton Chase and Mike South in Victory Fields for bringing some of these anomalies to me. Like the hon. Member for Sheffield South East, I have written to the Competition and Markets Authority with a draft of how my constituents think the current system is being mis-sold. I hope that the CMA will take close notice of that.

3.16 pm

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) for presenting the report on leasehold for debate. Before I make my observations, I must declare my interest as I am one of the many thousands to have been caught in the leasehold trap. It appears that we have 18th-century practices operating at 21st-century prices and, more fundamentally, that a person’s home is not really their own, with the freedom to do within it as they please. In West Lancashire, nearly a quarter of homes sold in 2016-17 were leasehold, and the figure was still over 15% in 2018. The issue seems to be that leasehold has strayed into being an extortionate money-making racket at the expense of house owners.

Owners are forced to pay extortionate ground rents and locked into rip-off service charges, with nearly 60% of them lacking an understanding of their contractual obligations. My hon. Friend talked about inducements to use the preferred solicitor of the developer and the lack of information that follows. I can tell the House for a fact that Redrow in the north-west simply passes all its clients’ details to Bannister Preston Solicitors LLP, and it is assumed that that firm will act for them. It is time for the Solicitors Regulation Authority to wake up and act.

Perhaps leasehold would not be talked about so negatively if leaseholders did not find themselves obliged to Dick Turpin-like companies that require them to stand and deliver—in this case, it is “your money and your home” that they are after. The Government also need to look at councils that, in concert with developers, contractually agree to sell the freehold to the developer, but only when all the houses are completed. That allows salespeople to say, “We don’t own the freehold,” knowing full well that they will. They then get a huge ransom from selling the freehold on before anyone knows, and they can say that that has nothing to do with them. In Liverpool, for example, the council sold the freehold of one site to Redrow for £1, which then sold it on for £175,000, saying that that was the best price for Liverpool’s taxpayers. Where was the district auditor? My colleagues tell me that this practice is not unusual and is happening all over the country. Liverpool has banned Countryside Properties, and the Mayor has rightly said:

“We will not be making any deals...with any developers that put people at risk.”

Is it now time to ban Redrow? We need to find a way to ensure that thousands who are already caught are given an exit option on fair terms.

Everyone knows that people are being charged to receive emails. It takes four weeks for someone to come. There are no phone numbers. People pay extortionate prices to carry out work on their own property. People are being misled, being told they can buy the freehold in a couple of years’ time for a few thousand pounds, only to find the freehold has been sold on, with no first refusal being given to the leaseholder. Some do not even offer direct debit, so those who forget to pay their twice yearly charge are slapped with further charges for late payment. People are sent threatening and heavy-handed letters.

But it does not end there, because those who do engage and who manage to buy can find that they are buying not the freehold but a virtual freehold, whereby they have simply bought out the ground rent. Many of the conditions remain, with owners still being charged for work to be done, except now they have fewer legal rights to contest any excessive amounts because they entered into the freehold contract willingly and the amounts were unspecified.
[Rosie Cooper]

Sadly, owners are being led to the slaughter, let down by conveyancing solicitors who, despite their best efforts, cannot deal with these sharks. I firmly believe that, unless strong and immediate action is taken, people will have great difficulty when they come to sell their virtual freehold homes, with the covenants and conditions still remaining, in a few years' time. I forecast to the Government that the freehold scandal will erupt again.

We need leasehold reform now. It is in the Government's power to do it now, and households right across the country demand that they do it now.

3.21 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper).

When the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee started looking at this area, one thing the user groups that came before us wanted was the outright abolition of leasehold. In fact, they regard it as “fleecehold.” I am concerned about the Government’s responses to our detailed report, which makes excellent recommendations—I would say that, because I was party to the report and agree with every one of its recommendations. The Government have just said that they note what the Select Committee has said. There has been no commitment to action, and my request this afternoon is for the Government to take action to implement our report.

I draw an immediate distinction between the sale of houses and the sale of flats. There is clearly no justification whatsoever for a house to be sold on a leasehold basis, but there is a justification for flats. There needs to be more promotion of commonhold to encourage people to participate and use it, but we must always remember that some elderly and vulnerable people do not want to exercise more control and may be happy to have a leasehold property, with someone else managing it for them. We have to be cautious on that subject.

The Government are leaning on the fact that the Law Commission and the CMA are doing reports but, in their response to our report, they have made no commitment to implement whatever recommendations they make, and I hope we will get to that position.

The Select Committee’s report draws attention to the role of lenders and the fact that relatively few will lend on commonhold properties. That was true, but more lenders will now lend on commonhold properties. On mis-selling, most people who buy a leasehold property are first-time buyers. They are often naive and do not understand all the detail, and they learn by their mistakes.

The introduction of transparency is therefore vital, as it is not good enough for developers to mislead potential purchasers. It is vital that we legislate for mandatory information, rather than relying on a voluntary code.

On the imposition of freehold purchases, a leaseholder should have the absolute right to purchase the freehold from the developer, either at the point of sale or at some future stage. During our inquiry, we had the scandal of the chief executive of Bellway Homes telling our Committee that after six months it sells all the freeholds to a finance company and washes its hands of them. I said at the time that that is a scandal and I retain that view, and Bellway Homes should stop that practice right now. Given that it does not want to do so, we should legislate.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Not only do we think it is a scandal, but the buyers—the finance company—must have known it was a scandal. If the Government, Law Commission or Parliament come forward and say that those houses can be enfranchised on the basis of a formula that means that those buyers do not get their expected bounce of bonus or excessive profits, it will be their fault because they knew.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that. He is absolutely right, and I compliment him on the measures he has taken on behalf of leaseholders over many years.

The issue of legal advice for individuals who are purchasing, particularly for the first time, is crucial. We found when we took evidence that developers give incentives, discounts and all sorts of other encouragement to first-time buyers to use the same solicitors as they are using. Of course, these solicitors are then acting on behalf of both sides and are not acting independently. That must be bad and this must be made clear in legislation.

On our recommendations on ground rents and onerous terms, the Government have said they have taken note but they have taken no action. The key here is that the Government seem to be driving the view that voluntary action is sufficient. After looking through all the evidence and hearing everyone who has come before us, my view is that voluntary action is not acceptable: we have to legislate and force developers to do the right thing, otherwise they will not.

I also think we have to draw a distinction. We need to legislate to protect people going forward and then consider retrospective legislation to right the wrongs that have been done to leaseholders over many, many years. I also believe that we should legislate to intervene on existing ground rents that are onerous—not only should we do this for future cases, but we should intervene to correct the position on existing leases, because we now have a position where first-time buyers have entered into a lease and cannot sell their property. It is outrageous that we have allowed them to get into that position.

The Chair of the Select Committee has mentioned the position on permission fees. It is outrageous that someone can put a conservatory on a property that they have bought and suddenly the developer is saying, “I want thousands of pounds because you put something on the back of your property.” That should be outlawed.

On service charges, sinking funds, estate management, enfranchisement and forfeiture, it is not good enough for the Government just to lean back and say, “We note what you’ve said and we will consider what needs to be done.” We need legal action. I suggest that when the Law Commission and the CMA report, we come forward with a substantial piece of primary legislation to correct this market, as that is what will be needed. Unless we commit to doing that right now, these developers will carry on fleecing their customers.

3.28 pm

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Given that it is Wimbledon week, it is nice to see you in the umpire’s chair, Mr Speaker. It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who made a good case that I fully support. I should also compliment my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield
South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Select Committee, who, as ever, displayed a detailed and thorough knowledge of the subject.

According to the House of Commons Library, 27% of all new house sales in the north-west in 2018 were on a leasehold basis. In my constituency, about 1,320 have been sold on that basis in the recent past—261 in the past year alone. As we have heard, the current arrangements allow landowners to retain a level of ongoing management and the ability to secure income. For leaseholders, there is a range of problems, most of which we have already heard about, including with transparency on what they are charged for, disproportionate service charges and freeholds being sold on to a third-party.

Let me give a couple of examples from my constituency to show how the current situation has affected real people. Helen Spree is the owner of a Redrow property in my constituency for which she pays a ground rent. She is limited by a restrictive contract that dictates what she can and cannot do with her home. She is concerned that the freehold will be moved to a third party which, as we have already heard, happens frequently, without any notice or consultation. To purchase the freehold, it will cost her 26 times the current annual leasehold payment. That amounts to around £7,000. In addition, she would be required to pay Redrow’s legal fees, as well as hers, if she wanted to purchase it. By any standard, that is outrageous.

Another constituent of mine, from Earle Avenue, does not want to be named. He bought his property as the second owner—he was not the first person to buy it—in 2014, and planned, not unreasonably, to install a conservatory. He was told by a neighbour that Bellway would charge £350 for the privilege. When he approached the freeholder’s representative, he was informed that that £350 had gone up to £2,600. All he wants to do is build a conservatory, and he has to pay the freeholder £2,600 to do so. In addition to that, he would have to pay administration charges. Four months after he moved in, Bellway sold the freehold on his house to an investor; he found out only when he received a letter telling him so. He is restricted in respect of retaining his mortgage with his existing mortgage company, because under the terms of his lease he is required to inform the freeholder if he wants to change providers, and pay an additional £108 charge to the freeholder for doing so.

I have one further example that I will not go into at any length. A constituent of mine called Mr Eric Barry lives in a flat in Briton Court in my constituency. He is currently being charged £1,692 a year in service charges. There is a long list of things that the company, Moreland Estate Management, is supposed to do for that money, but Mr Barry contests whether it bothers to do it, or does it with the required frequency. It is an outrage. The worst thing about it is that he took the matter up with his existing mortgage company, Moreland Estate Management, but I have still to receive a reply from them to a letter that I wrote on behalf of a constituent.

We have heard in great detail what a scandal all this is; it is about time it was sorted out.

3.33 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): More than two years ago, I asked Ministers what they were going to do to help existing leaseholders in my constituency who are trapped in their homes. I am still waiting for a satisfactory answer. I support the comments from colleagues: the only way we can see these people satisfactorily helped is if the Government bring forward legislation to deal with issues such as the doubling of ground rents, high permission fees and exorbitant charges to pay for the freehold.

The Government have talked about supporting those who buy in future, but we need help now for our constituents who have already bought and who are trapped. In fact, as one of them said to me, the fact that buyers are now being offered much better terms by developers, often on the same developments, has exacerbated their problems and left them in difficulties. They simply will not be able to sell their homes.

I have been given permission by Alison and David Rowlands of Sandbach to cite their experience. It is just one of many examples in my constituency, where there is a high level of house building. They say that their situation has been truly damaging to health, family life and finances. They bought their home from Taylor Wimpey in July 2011. In December 2013, they received a letter from Taylor Wimpey informing them that the freehold had been transferred. Never at the point of purchase were they told that this was something that would happen. The house is on a leasehold agreement. The terms state that the ground rent doubles every 10 years, starting at £289. That was explained to them by their solicitor, but as they expected to buy the freehold within the first couple of years or so of their ownership, they were not too concerned. However, the solicitor presumably did not know, and certainly failed to inform them, that the freehold would be sold on to a third-party investment company, which would then completely alter the estimated purchase price of the freehold that they were told about when they bought in 2011. When they bought in 2011, they were advised that it would be in the region of £5,000. After purchase by the third-party private investment company, they were told that it would be in excess of £30,000.

The alternative for the couple—they have calculated this—is to continue paying ground rent charges throughout their lifetime. We must remember that they are in a property in which they are now trapped; they cannot move out because the terms on which other similar properties nearby are being sold are so much more preferential. They have calculated that, during their lifetime, they will pay £185,850 in ground rent charges—almost the price that they had to pay for their house. Indeed, the total sum of ground rent on the property that they bought for £229,995 on a 250-year lease will be £1,837,850—the equivalent of buying their house eight times over. They say that they feel victimised and vulnerable, and, of course, they are not alone in this situation. Government need to act as a matter of justice to help these people.

Government have acted effectively retrospectively with regard to a number of individuals in my constituency who have bought properties to rent out. They bought on the basis that the mortgage interest that they would be paying would have tax relief. The Government are effectively changing that, and, as far as they are concerned, changing it retrospectively. How much more the Government need to look to help these people who are not investors—this is their home and this is the situation in which they are now trapped. As I have said, I have
met Mr and Mrs Rowlands on a number of occasions. They are very genuine people—a young family seeking to settle their situation in life and become secure—and yet there they are living in their home and, as they say, feeling victimised and vulnerable. As far as Mrs Rowlands is concerned, this has had a very serious detrimental effect on her health.

3.37 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and his Committee on the excellent work that they have done on this issue.

Homeowners who have bought newly built houses in my constituency—and there are many hundreds of them—thought that they were buying their own homes. Technically and legally, they were buying a lease, a type of tenancy, often a long one of up to 999 years, which has left them with a landlord, the freeholder. Many property development companies and finance companies are treating the freehold reversionary interest on houses on these estates as a financial asset to be exploited to the full, with no regard whatever for the leaseholders and the families they are exploiting mercilessly. They see families in my constituency as nothing more or less than a long-term financial asset to be squeezed to the maximum for cash.

There is no reason at all to sell a leasehold house. There is only any point in selling a house as leasehold to make it into a financial asset to squeeze into the far future. Yet in the north-west, 69% of newly built houses in 2016 were sold as leasehold properties. There are already more than 1 million leasehold houses in England and Wales, so what is happening now to my constituents and other home buyers in the north-west is happening elsewhere—perhaps at a lower level, but it is happening.

There are four main areas of concern. People were mis-sold these properties—were not given the full information about what they were getting into. I have heard of many examples of conveyancers having potential conflicts of interest. I have constituents who paid deposits to secure plots in developments before they were even informed that they were in fact purchasing a lease. I have numerous examples of constituents using the conveyancers suggested by developers to guarantee the speed required to access Help to Buy, who were not even advised of how onerous some of the terms of their lease would be.

Escalating ground rents are a real problem for affordability, security of the lease and resale value. There is no reason for ground rent to go up in the way that it does—after all, the freeholder does not provide anything for these payments; it goes up because it can. It is feudalism of the worst kind. Purchasing the freehold is made very expensive and the price often seems arbitrarily high. I have had constituents whose freehold has been sold on without being offered to them. I have people on the same estate being quoted anything between £5,000 and £17,000 to purchase the freehold on identical properties. Leaseholders are being quoted 26 times the ground rent, plus freeholders’ extortionate legal costs, when the formula in enfranchising legislation uses 10 years’ ground rent as the norm.

Some of the restrictive covenants may be unfair contract terms in a legal sense, but no one has thousands of pounds to take the matter to the courts to check. I have heard examples of extortionate fees—£1,600 being demanded for granting permission to have a driveway installed. No wonder people call these properties “fleecheholds”. It is a sorry tale.

There is an additional common problem for leaseholders; they cannot sell their properties. I have been asking myself why escalating ground rent leads to mortgage companies not wanting to lend. I have constituents whose sales have fallen through, but why? Perhaps the answer lies in the landlord-tenant relationship that is the essence of the freeholder-leaseholder relationship. I saw a piece on the website of a legal firm, Mishcon de Reya, that addressed that issue. It said that long leases can sometimes count as assured shorthold tenancies. According to the piece, that cannot be the case where the ground rent is a peppercorn, but where the ground rent is over £250, or £1,000 in London, the lease is covered by the Housing Act 1988 and counts as an assured shorthold tenancy.

I find this shocking: where ground rents escalate, the leases are likely in time to come to fall into that category of assured shorthold tenancy, and such tenancies are designed to be the least well protected. Assured shorthold tenancies can be relatively easily terminated, and therefore the lease forfeit by the landlord or freeholder. In most leases there are provisions, which are quite draconian, for that to happen. Because assured shorthold tenancies allow relatively easy termination, the 1988 Act gave courts the right to grant relief, cancelling the forfeiture if the rent was paid. However, the power to grant relief does not apply to assured shorthold tenancies if at least three months’ rent is more than three months overdue. In such circumstances, forfeiture must be ordered by the court. That raises a terrible prospect of homeowners losing their homes simply because they did not realise this had happened.

The Government must do something about this, and they must do it now.

3.42 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government estimates that there are 4 million leasehold homes in England, of which 70% are flats. Because almost all flats are leasehold, leasehold transactions are more common in London. In my constituency, in the Colindale ward, there are almost 10,000 new properties—predominantly flats—on 10 hectares of land. That figure does not include the additional developments in Millbrook Park in Mill Hill, Stonegrove in Edgware and the additional properties proposed by the Mayor of London.

When I owned a flat in the Hendon area, there would always be a problem with the service charge. I had a neighbour, Les Miller, who would always challenge the service charge and speak to the managing agents, and he would always resolve the problems. Not everyone is fortunate enough to have someone like Les, but he was the perfect candidate because he was retired and could devote his time to that. However, some residents’ groups have appeared in places like Colindale. At the Colindale Village residents association at the Pulse in Colindale, Joey Sky acts on behalf of many people who have problems—especially parking problems—on the estate. That situation has arisen because there are three different managing agents for the same development, and there are just 48 parking spaces for 1,000 tenants of the
properties. With the introduction of a controlled parking zone in Colindale, residents are going through hell as they simply cannot park on or off the street.

Up the road, at the development in Beaufort Park, residents are paying around £800 to park their cars. For that, they do not receive a designated parking space but are simply allowed to park in a vacant space in a parking zone. The Beaufort Park residents association is not recognised by the developers, who say that they will recognise any such group only if a percentage of the owner-occupiers come together and form it. Unfortunately, because there are so many overseas investors in the development, the residents’ concerns are ignored. That is a great mistake, as these are very sensible people who are seeking solutions to the problems that many experience.

Other parts of my constituency are having problems with leaseholds. The residents of the Edgware Green development in Edgware have been trying to buy the freehold of their properties from Barrett Evolution. The issue is complicated by the discovery that some freeholds have already been sold on to another company. Many residents were not aware of this and were not given the opportunity to purchase. The new freeholder has increased the annual ground rent by almost 32%, and the residents have had to engage a solicitor collectively to assist with their purchase, as the matter is really not very straightforward.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): There is a similar situation in Cheltenham where a freehold has been passed on. The freeholder then completely goes to ground, so when my constituents try to make contact with the company, they cannot get hold of it and are unable to sell their properties. It is an appalling situation. Does my hon. Friend not agree?

Dr Offord: I certainly do agree. It is such a frustrating scenario when it is not even possible to find out who is responsible. I think that the managing agents in that scenario will be particularly keen on sending their bills to my hon. Friend’s constituents and will not be very slow in forwarding those invoices.

Three years ago, residents at Kennyland Court in Hendon were asked by their managing agents to pay for roof repairs despite a 20-year guarantee being in place since 2003. The managing agents said in their defence that the guarantee was for 15 years and was on a reduced basis, but even my maths shows me that 2016, when the bills were issued, was still two years before the end of the guarantee. However, residents were just given two repair options and no real response to the matter of the guarantee. They felt that they were being bullied by the managing agents into accepting the repair bill without any answers to their legitimate questions.

A constituent at the Brinsdale Park development in Hendon is having difficulty with a managing agent over vague bills and a lack of invoices. She says that the managing agent has consistently sent coercive demands for what she believes to be incorrect service charges. She has now invoked sections 21 and 22 of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985. Section 21 relates to service charge information and section 22 relates to a request to inspect supporting accounts. This all seems very reasonable: someone receives an invoice involving sections 21 and 22, and sees the information. However, the managing agent has responded by sending emails accusing my constituent of harassing him in seeking such information.

It appears, judging from this debate, that there is widespread dissatisfaction about the way that many of our constituents are being treated. Indeed, that dissatisfaction has been expressed by leaseholders themselves regarding service charges. Of 1,244 leaseholders surveyed by the Leasehold Advisory Service in 2016, 40% strongly disagreed that service charges represented value for money and 62% agreed that the services provided had not improved in the past two years.

The problems are quite simple. There is difficulty buying freeholds. There is a lack of transparency around the additional medium-term and long-term cost of a leasehold compared with buying a freehold. There are significant legal and surveying costs when leaseholders want to purchase part of the freehold, or, indeed, part of the land itself. There is an excessive increase in ground rents, a lack of transparency around service charges and freeholds not being offered to leaseholders before being sold off to a third party. This situation really is intolerable for so many people, particularly in my own constituency. I understand that the Government have sought a consultation. I hope that they act on it, because the way that residents are being treated is not only unfair but, in many ways, morally corrupt, and we must act sooner rather than later.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) for giving us another chance to debate this issue. I have spoken before on this issue many times, and I intend to keep doing so until we have some action, because I cannot stress enough just how big a problem it is in my area.

The hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) rightly pointed out the impact on London because of the high proportion of flats sold here, but the figures helpfully provided by the Library show that in 2018, 16 of the top 20 constituencies for leasehold house sales were in the north-west, and staggeringly, 14 of those were in Greater Manchester. I know how bad this is in my constituency, that my constituency is not even on that list—what must that mean for those other places? The argument that there is some sort of price differential between freehold and leasehold, when the market is so concentrated in certain parts of the country, has nothing going for it whatsoever.

In a previous debate on this issue in Westminster Hall, I said:

“l am genuinely shocked by the stories I hear in my constituency and that we have heard in this debate. I am not a man prone to hyperbole, but I would go so far as to say that the only fair description of some of the practices we have heard about in this debate is legalised extortion. There is simply no relationship between the services being rendered and the costs charged for them.”—[Official Report, 21 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 471WH.]

I stand by every word of that statement.

The problem in my constituency is with ground rents and service charges, and we need serious action on both. For example, residents of a block of flats in the Hattersley area of my constituency were quoted £32,000 just to paint the hallways—not to paint the flats, but just the communal hallways. Frankly, they could be painted with gold, and it should not come to £32,000. Another constituent was charged £180 just to ask what it would cost to buy the freehold—just for the inquiry.
and the quote that came back. Frequently, worse than that, people simply do not get a response or the information when they make an inquiry about buying the freehold. Often service charge bills are received with no information and no breakdown, sometimes even charging for works that predate a managing agent taking over. Those are just a fraction of the stories I could tell. I could use more than my five-minute allocation simply reading out examples.

Like colleagues who are present, I have made many of these points before. These are always good debates. There is a great deal of expertise, good will and consensus, but frankly, I have seen everyone in this Chamber today in previous debates. This is a group of people who really know the problems, but we need some action, because we are sick of making these points.

Sir Peter Bottomley: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the best thing to do in England or England and Wales, with, I hope, the Law Commission’s support, is to pass a simple statutory instrument that provides for a table of information, so that instead of people having to ask and argue with surveyors, they can look at the table and see the number of years, the ground rent and so on?

Jonathan Reynolds: I have huge respect for the work that the hon. Gentleman has done on this issue, and I could not agree more.

There are five things that I would like to see happen. First, the sale of leasehold houses should be ended—that is obvious, and I think there is no disagreement about it. Ground rents should be capped at a percentage of the property value or an overall financial sum. The sum of £250 a year has been raised, and I would be more than happy with that. As the hon. Gentleman said, there should be a simple right-to-buy formula that is not bureaucratic, with additional administration or legal costs, but that can be used in every case to let people purchase their freehold. There should definitely be a crackdown on unfair terms and opaque service charges. Ultimately, we need to make it as simple as possible to let residents take over if they are in that flat situation. Some people will not want that, and there are some reputable people in the marketplace providing services in that situation, but the power should be with the residents to make those decisions.

I will conclude, because I know how many Members want to speak. I cannot stress enough how much people want to know when they will have a simple and straightforward way out of this. I want to make a point that was touched on earlier about the impact on investors. It is true to say that there is another side to this. W e have heard about the bad deal that our constituents get, and those on the investor side who have bought the leasehold and freehold rights are clearly getting a very good deal out of it. I want to make two points on that. Colleagues will be aware that when I am not speaking from the Back Benches, I speak from the Dispatch Box for the Labour party’s shadow Treasury team as the shadow City Minister.

First, institutional investors—particularly those based in this country—have some of the best research and analytical functions of any businesses going. They assess all kinds of risk, including political risk, and I cannot understand how anyone would invest substantially in this area without knowing the political risk that has been raised frequently about the will of Parliament and our desire to see change in this area. Secondly, there are many precedents of this House legislating to limit unfair contract terms and conditions because the power balance and the relationship between both parties is not right. I simply cannot emphasise enough how much that applies in this case.

This is symptomatic of how our housing market does not work anywhere near how it should. I do not think that our land allocation system works. I do not think that the design of new homes works particularly well. I do not think that the power of developers is right in our system. I do not think that the affordability of homes is anywhere near correct, and I do not think that this leasehold system is fit for purpose at all. We can influence some of those things at a local level, and in my constituency we are trying to do that, but some things require parliamentary legislative action. This is one of them, as I think we all agree, so let us get on and do it.

3.54 pm

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): Buying a home is the biggest single commitment that anybody will take on. In this country, 85% of people want to own their own home. We encourage people to own their own home and to make it an investment. We encourage them so that, in later life, people have security and are not reliant on the state. If we are to encourage that, we need to make sure that we are giving those people every confidence in their investment and every protection we can.

I welcome the Select Committee report. I will not go into the detail of the whole report, which would be very difficult to do in the time we have this afternoon, but I want to touch on a couple of things. Commonhold features heavily in the report. This has been available since 2002 and the take-up of it has been very small. There are lots of legal practicalities and challenges for mortgage lenders and so on. But the basic fact is that developers, particularly those developing blocks of flats, want to retain some sort of value after they have completed the development and they want to be able to profit from the value they have retained. I can understand that in certain situations, such as retirement accommodation and so on, but if we are to encourage people to go to commonhold, we will have to legislate to take away from the developer the option to retain that financial interest in the property.

I would rather go for a simpler mechanism that would basically prevent developers from continuing to hold that interest in the property so that, as soon as all the flats are developed, the freehold interest reverts to the leaseholders who buy the long lease at the outset, and that can then be managed by the leaseholders. Those would be far better arrangements and, for me, that is where most people who own leasehold property fare best.

I also want to mention the conveyancing process. I say this as somebody who acted for thousands of people buying and selling residential property over a long period. Clearly, it is the job of the conveyancer—a registered conveyancer, a registered conveyancer or a solicitor—to protect their client and they have a duty of care to their client. In the arrangements for new developments, new developers generally have two or three solicitors on a
panel of solicitors that they will recommend and, by hook or by crook, they put virtually every single person who is buying to those people. The reality is that there is a lot of pressure on those firms of solicitors to exchange contracts, to complete and to expedite matters and, within that, they are therefore not necessarily providing the best impartial service for their clients. The link between these referrals and the solicitors in the advice given to clients needs to be broken. We cannot continue with the status quo in that regard.

We need to do far more about assignment fees, notice of mortgage fees and dealing with covenants. Things must be based far more on what it costs for a freeholder or managing agent to undertake a particular process, rather than adding exorbitant fees. It is absolutely disgraceful when exorbitant fees are charged, and they always come into play right at the end of a conveyancing transaction when the managing agent has the person who is selling absolutely over a barrel.

I will quickly mention dispute resolution. I welcome the announcements that have been made about the fees on leasehold tribunals, but there needs to be a far simpler process before people get to the tribunal for leaseholders. Onerous terms of leases are also a massive problem. I am aware of several constituency cases where that has caused families a major problem.

We also need to make sure that we do not have leasehold houses; there is no necessity for leasehold houses. I know there is a cost involved, but we should move to a system where very little is provided by a managing agent and a tenant. People should get value for the council tax and we should go back to more of an estate being adopted and paid for by the local authority. People can then hold their local council to account if they are not getting what they are looking for.

Mr Speaker: Order.

4 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I congratulate the Select Committee on its report. The fact that in 2019 so many British people owe their homes to a feudal property relationship is absolutely astounding. I am proud that the Labour party has announced that it will end this ancient and anachronistic practice and ensure justice for leaseholders.

I want to use the brief time that I have to highlight the ongoing misery of constituents whose case I raised in my Adjournment debate of 1 November 2017; one is watching here today. As you know, Mr Speaker, the St Thomas area of Newcastle is one of the most beautiful parts of what is a very beautiful city. It has a large number of fine houses that anyone would be proud to call home, but for some they have become a prison—the families with children uncertain whether they can afford to pay mortgages that they cannot change; a refugee whose family have outgrown their home but who cannot sell it; a pensioner who wants to move to be near her grandchildren but cannot do so; and a couple in their 70s faced with six flights of stairs and rising maintenance costs. The charity that owns the freehold, the St Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust, refuses to extend their leases for tens of thousands of pounds more. I hope the Minister will condemn that behaviour by the trust.

I also hope that the Minister will condemn the Charity Commission, which, in some disgraceful correspondence with me, said that it would be wrong for the trust to forgo the income that it could receive—presumably when the leases expire and my constituents are dead or on the streets. This is an organisation whose chair, Baroness Stowell, recently said: “Charitable aims cannot justify uncharitable means”, and:

“All charities, not just the big ones, have to recognise that they have to demonstrate charitable behaviour and charitable attitude.”

Does the Minister view what I have described as charitable behaviour? Will she ensure that the trust follows the example of the National Trust and offers to buy back leases at market value? Will she press the charity to allow the option of enfranchisement, as committed to the Minister previously? Or will she leave the residents with no option but to await a Labour Government and justice for leaseholders?

4.4 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): First, I should declare an interest as I, too, am currently the owner of a leasehold property. As 66% of property transactions in Leigh now come with a leasehold, anyone would be hard-pushed to find someone in Leigh who is not affected.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) for securing this important debate. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) for her work on this issue. I know that she has constituents here in the Public Gallery. I thank the all-party group on leasehold and commonhold reform and the campaigners of the National Leasehold Campaign, in particular Katie Kendrick, for their work in highlighting the scandal and for providing support to constituents all over the country. Their work has brought together the real injustices facing people who own their own home.

I represent a constituency in the north-west and the leasehold scandal is hitting our residents in particular. In 2017, 31% of house transactions in the north-west were leasehold properties, compared with a national average of 3%. In Leigh alone, more than half of all property transactions came with a leasehold. To understand the anger and sense of injustice that the residents of our towns feel, we must look at the history of how we have got to this situation today.

Section 172 of the Housing Act 1985 restricts the 1967 legislation to exempt charities from selling or extending the lease of houses on their land. The National Trust is in a similar position and, in response to the Committee’s consultation, offered to buy back properties whose freehold it did not want to sell. In the past, the Mary Magdalene Trust has offered to sell the freehold, but more recently it has changed its position, apparently to maximise its land assets. In so doing, it is causing misery.

The Minister is familiar with the situation and in the past has reassured me that a solution was in the works. My constituents had their hopes raised when it was reported that the trust was willing to sell the freehold, but in fact it was willing to charge residents thousands of pounds just to consider the option of perhaps allowing them to extend their leases for tens of thousands of pounds more. I hope the Minister will condemn that behaviour by the trust.

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In our proud post-industrial towns, such as the ones that I represent, properties were often utilised by the once-dominant landowners and manufacturing industries as accommodation for workers with peppercorn rents. As our industries declined and our factories closed, those leaseholds were bought up by companies that now dominate the local property market—a feudal system of old transferred into a feudal system of the modern age. As we have heard, those freeholders set into contracts new clauses that double ground rents every few years. A peppercorn payment has turned into a sizeable rent that is hitting families across our constituencies.

This real and growing crisis has led to desperate families getting in touch with me to say that they are struggling to afford those payments, on top of their mortgage and bills. This is the important aspect of this situation: there is a real human cost. A recent survey carried out by the NLC and SOS Silence of Suicide found that spiralling bills and charges are taking their toll on people’s health and wellbeing. And why? It is all down to the fact that a loophole has been exploited and innocent families have been caught up in it based purely on where they have been brought up or where they choose to live. The scandal is also having an understandable impact on our property prices and restricting the prosperity of our towns.

Earlier this week, the shadow Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), pointed out that the Government have made 60 leasehold announcements since they came to power nine years ago, but have taken no action to clamp down on this injustice. I am glad that the Government recognise the crisis we in the north-west in particular are facing, but their proposals simply do not go far enough. Their proposals offer nothing to help the hundreds of families in Leigh who are already stuck in these contracts, they do nothing to help with their spiralling ground rents and they do nothing to enable homeowners to escape their leasehold trap.

That is why I fully welcome and support Labour’s announcement this week that we will not only ban new leaseholds, but cap existing ground rents at £140 per year in Leigh and enable homeowners to buy their freehold at no more than 1% of their house cost. Those are the type of bold interventions that we need if we are ever going to be serious about fixing our broken housing market. From my weekly surgeries, I know how urgently we need leasehold reform. We need a radical shake-up to get our housing market working again.

4.8 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak briefly in yet another leasehold debate and I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) in this very well-informed discussion. I thank the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee for its excellent report. I thank the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, Martin Boyd and Sebastian O’Kelly for their analysis of the Government’s response, their ongoing expertise and their unstinting support for the all-party group on leasehold and commonhold reform. It is due to their efforts, and those of the National Leasehold Campaign and others, that this issue has risen up the political agenda steadily in recent years.

The plight of leaseholders is not new. Governments of both colours have tried in recent decades to improve the position of leaseholders and to offer them more regulatory protection. That vulnerability has increased because of the explosion of tenure as the demand for new housing has grown and the profits to be made have been understood. Some of those profits have been entirely unearned and border on profiteering and ongoing criminal exploitation.

Poplar and Limehouse has the second-highest proportion of leasehold properties of any constituency. The tragedy at Grenfell only highlighted some of the problems that leaseholders have faced from some freeholders, developers and property management companies. That is only one example of the lack of protection that the law affords leaseholders, which led this Government to set aside £400 million for the public sector and £200 million for private sector blocks for fire safety work and repairs.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh has just mentioned, there has been a lot of noise from the Government on other aspects: the 2017 housing White Paper; the 2017 consultation on ground rents; the 2018 consultation on leasehold sector reform; the report on the regulation of management agents and permission fees; the Government’s engagement with the Law Commission on commonhold; their commitment to consult on enfranchisement to help leaseholders buy freehold; and the Competition and Markets Authority’s announcement of an inquiry, having been written to by the Secretary of State.

The Chair of the Select Committee did an excellent job of introducing the debate. I want to make only a few points. First, the Government have repeatedly used the defence “as soon as Parliamentary time allows.” That appears in paragraphs 11, 36, 89 and 96 of their response to the Committee’s report, to mention just a few, and it has been used regularly at the Dispatch Box in recent years. If not now, in this Parliament, then when?

Secondly, I would be grateful if the Minister could reassure us that Lord Best’s inquiry into the regulation of property agents, permission fees and so on is still on track for the end of this month. Thirdly, the Government have announced for a third time that leasehold house sales, with exceptions, will be banned. Can the Minister confirm that Help to Buy has shut this down in the meantime? Fourthly, lease forfeiture is a source of major abuse, as we have heard, and many well documented cases have been supplied, yet the Government still seem hesitant. Perhaps the Minister could explain why.

On a separate matter, the Minister will know that the APPG’s officers, the LKP and others have been critical of the Leasehold Advisory Service—LEASE—especially following a recent meeting. Can the Minister advise when the APPG’s officers might receive a response to our request for an apology to our secretariat?

The Labour party has published its policy platform on leasehold. Its five strong pledges are very welcome. I commend our shadow housing team for their excellent work—I look forward to hearing my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) respond to the debate.

In conclusion, the Government have an impressive list of promises—I have mentioned some, but there are also ground rents on new leases at zero, and a new housing ombudsman. I commend the hard work of the
many civil servants in the Department who have worked on the programme. However, most of the Government’s programme, if not all of it, is subject to that great “Get out of jail free” card: “as soon as Parliamentary time allows.”

Leaseholders have been waiting long enough. Surely it is now time to deliver.

4.13 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): We owe progress to a number of people. I want to mention Lynn Boyd first, as she is the one who encourages Martin Boyd, who, along with Sebastian O’Kelly, has created the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership. They have also got better retirement solutions to deal with exploitation in the retirement market. Without them, I do not think that those MPs who have been trying to organise would have got even halfway as far as we did.

I also pay tribute to the National Leasehold Campaign, and to Jo, Katie and Cath, who provided that spark and allowed the north-west MPs to understand the strength of the issue. Together they and the north-west MPs have got both practical progress and media interest, which matters. If anyone at the BBC is listening to this debate, could they please nominate one or two housing experts with whom we could interact? Often when things come up in this part of the housing field, we do not know who to talk to. We do in health, finance and politics, but we also need it in housing.

I should also mention Gavin Barwell, who, both as Housing Minister and as chief of staff to the Prime Minister, got the Departments to start moving and told LEASE at its conference that it was to be unequivocally on the side of leaseholders. Martin Boyd has given a direct list of the number of times when LEASE, through its conferences and in its publications, allowed—and, I would say, encouraged—expertise in how to exploit residential leaseholders.

I declare an interest, as I constantly do: if I ever forget, please correct me. I own a lease—actually, I have paid for a lease in my constituency. As it happens, the other five leaseholders and I have bought the freehold. We had a good freeholder and a good managing agent, and we are happy. I have contracted to buy a leasehold flat that is being built and may be completed in three years’ time. If there is a restriction on ground rents, I might benefit from that as well. That is not the reason why I support the Labour party’s policy in this area. In a different debate, I could have a knockabout with Labour on some of their failures on housing, but on leasehold I think the interaction between the Government, the Opposition and Back-Bench MPs will lead to significant progress, unmatched since George Thomas, LordTony pandy—one of your predecessors, Mr Speaker—campaigned on leasehold abuse in his first 20 or 30 years in Parliament.

There is not time in this debate to deal with all the issues, but I hope that the Chair of the Select Committee will accept praise from the whole House for the way that they, with their witnesses and advisers, have produced a report that exceeded expectations and pretty well met the needs of the situation. I encourage everyone to read that report, including the reasons for its recommendations, and say, “Let’s get on with it.”

I want to add to the list of the goodies Bob Bessell of Retirement Security. He has developed well over 1,000 homes for people in retirement with security and without ground rents. I give notice to my hon. Friend the Minister on the Front Bench that perhaps in another parliamentary Session we should return to the issue of ground rents, which the Government seem to have been persuaded are necessary by Churchill and other retirement developers. If Bob Bessell can do it for well over 1,500 homes, so can Churchill, McCarthy & Stone and the others.

I do not know how much money the firms have spent on lobbying, and I know that one of them may indirectly have given what appears to be a rather large donation to LKP—we will come to that on another occasion—but they have spent an absolute fortune trying to tri up the people who are the goodies in this campaign. I am glad to speak after my friend the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and to say that he is one of the goodies, together with the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), a candidate for the Liberal Democrat leadership who was a Minister under the coalition Government. They have helped as well.

We have to realise that until we can get LKP to be respected by the present chair of LEASE we will only get half as far as we can, because while that sore is still there the Government cannot expect to get the full benefit that LEASE should give and that LKP is trying to give. I make this suggestion, which is not for the Minister to answer today, but—and if she will not do it, instruct—the chair of LEASE to invite the chair of the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership to come to the LEASE office, and meet the LEASE staff. If there are problems, they can then be resolved quietly, and we will know that we can go on co-operating. That seems the simplest way of dealing with that problem.

4.18 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this important debate and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) for his excellent speech and for all the work done by the Select Committee.

I took part in a similar debate in December 2017, just after the Government had announced for the first time an end to leaseholds for new-build houses, but there is still a huge amount of work to be done to help those caught in the leasehold trap, like many of my constituents. I first became aware of the issue in 2016, when I was contacted by a constituent, Linda Barnes. She told me that her house, which she had bought from Taylor Wimpey in 2011 for £147,000, had a ground rent that doubled every 10 years and that had been sold on by Wimpey in 2011 for £147,000, had a ground rent that doubled every 10 years and that had been sold on by Taylor Wimpey to E&J Estates. Linda had been quoted a price of £35,000 to buy the lease before it doubled—that is a quarter of the value of her house.

I heard from another constituent, Jonathan, who bought a house from Countryside Properties using the Government’s Help to Buy scheme. Jonathan said that he had been made aware that the development was to be leasehold and that an annual ground rent of £200 was payable to Countryside Properties. Six months after he moved in, Jonathan received a letter informing him that the freehold had been sold on to a company called Tuscola Ltd, based in the British Virgin Islands. He was quoted a price of more than £6,000 for the freehold. He also discovered a doubling clause in his lease which
meant that by 2055, the ground rent would be £1,600 a year. That is naturally causing him a great deal of concern, because by the time he reaches retirement age, his ground rent will be unaffordable and will make his home unsellable. As Jonathan said,

“Considering the significant cost of new homes one would have thought that the last thing one should worry about is the land the house sits on and that it can seemingly be sold on from underneath you.”

I have been contacted by many of Linda’s and Jonathan’s neighbours, and they all tell the same story: that they were encouraged to use the developer’s choice of solicitor when they bought their homes, that they were not informed of the doubling clause, and that the prices that they are being quoted for the purchase of the freehold are simply unaffordable.

Many residents are rightly angry that the developer sold off the freehold to a property investment company without first consulting the homeowners and offering them the first chance of purchase. Many pointed out that the leases on their homes are for 250 years; if the ground rent doubles every 15 years, it will be £13 million by the end of the lease. If the Government do just one thing, they must ban this exponential growth in ground rents. I heard from Lee, who told me:

“We are unable to sell our house…as the true nature of this mis-selling has now been revealed. We have a 10 year doubling ground rent on our house that is now known to be toxic. The only option currently offered by Taylor Wimpey is to convert us to an RPI lease and somehow this is supposed to remedy their wrongs.”

William, who contacted me, has also been offered an RPI ground rent. He took advice from a barrister who said that although it was not a good deal, it was better than a doubling ground rent. He advised William to accept the RPI deal and take out a professional negligence claim against the solicitors, who had been recommended by Taylor Wimpey. So my constituent is now embroiled in a professional negligence claim and an unsatisfactory ground rent deal, when all he wanted and aspired to was a home of his own. He points out that he is paying, in a professional negligence claim and an unsatisfactory ground rent deal, when all he wanted and aspired to was a home of his own. He points out that he is paying, in addition to his mortgage, estate management fees, service charges and ground rent in what was supposed to be an affordable home—but it is not all about money, William said:

“This is causing so much mental stress and is affecting the quality of my life with worry.”

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: One of the worst scandals of all has not yet come out in this debate. When people buy their houses, part of the contract states that they must obtain a compliance certificate before they will be allowed to sell them. If they are in arrears with any of the charges that the landlord has imposed on them, if they are in dispute or if they have not paid the interest, they will not be able to obtain the certificate, and they will not be able to sell their houses.

Liz McInnes: The hon. Gentleman speaks from a position of knowledge, and I am grateful to him for introducing an issue that does not feature in my speech.

I have been contacted by many other constituents with very similar stories. Sarah said:

“The Leasehold itself makes me feel like the property isn’t ours, having to pay fees for the most simple changes to your house, like painting the door and changing its colour…The leasehold is simply a joke and should never be allowed in law to happen to New Homeowners…or anyone.”

The north-west has one of the highest percentages of leasehold new-build homes, so sadly it comes as no surprise that so many of my constituents are struggling. We in the Labour party have said that we will abolish ground rents for new leases, will cap ground rents for existing leases at 0.1% of the property value up to a maximum of £250, and will introduce a simple formula for leaseholders to buy their freehold or commonhold, capped at 1% of the property value. We will crack down on unfair fees and contract terms, and will introduce new rights for residents to take over the management of their homes themselves.

Will the current Government do the same, and end the misery of the leasehold trap? Will they also launch an inquiry into how this was allowed to happen, similar to their inquiry into the mis-selling of payment protection insurance?

4.24 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am delighted to take part in today’s debate on an issue close to my heart, having first been contacted by constituents back in March 2016 and having campaigned with the APPG of which I am proud to be the vice-chair under the wise stewardship of the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). With the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership and the National Leasehold Campaign we have shone a light on these issues over the last three years. It has been a long journey. We have had some successes, but the further we have travelled the more deceptions, scams and greed we have uncovered, and the more it has become crystal clear that this has been nothing short of a national scandal.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) mentioned, first there is the serious impact on mental health. A survey carried out by the National Leasehold Campaign found that 90% of leaseholders thought about their leasehold problems every single day and about a fifth thought of self-harm. We must never forget the human cost of all this.

It saddens me to say that while the Select Committee inquiry brought a sense of vindication and indeed hope among all those who campaigned on this issue, the Government response feels tepid in comparison. An example of that is the response to the Committee’s conclusion that leaseholders were treated as a source of steady profit, because it is not good enough just to say that the Government have noted the conclusions of the Committee. One campaigner said to me, “How do they think that makes us feel?” Having waited four months for a response, I agree.

We have had voluntary codes, which are doing some good, but that is not enough, and an example that has come to light recently in a new Redrow development just down the road from where I live shows why we need to do more to enforce these changes. The first phase of the development was sold on a leasehold basis—goodness knows why—but following some pressure locally, Redrow agreed that subsequent phases would be freehold and all those who had purchased leasehold properties would be able to purchase the freehold at 26 times the ground rent after two years; that was still too high, but at least Redrow was prepared to sell it back rather than send it to an offshore investor.
Several constituents have now contacted me because after the offer was made they inquired of Redrow whether they would still need to pay the ground rent during that two-year period and were told they would not need to, but now Redrow is sending out bills and denying ever having said that. That is rubbing salt into the wounds, because it has also asked for a legal contribution to its costs, and is refusing to disclose any information about other covenants that might go with the land should it purchase. That, along with the fact that Taylor Wimpey has got rid of doubling ground rents but has still left itself in control of advantageous leases, shows me why we need legislation. We cannot have confidence that the developers, who, after all, are the authors of this racket, can put right the wrongs they have created.

I look forward to hearing the outcome of the Competition and Markets Authority investigation. There is plenty of evidence out there for it to conclude that this was a deliberately constructed income-stream effort. I have seen many documents talking about leases being optimised. It does seem to me that there was a deliberate strategy.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the difficulties now is that though the CMA intervention is very welcome, it is going to take time, and its consultations and engagement just put everything back? It kicks the can down the road in a Parliament where we are not doing an awful lot of legislating.

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I do not see that we need to wait for the Competition and Markets Authority investigation to conclude before we come up with tangible legislation to help leaseholders now. It is important that that investigation is carried out, however, because I think it will shine a light on wholesale practices. I have seen evidence such as the CBRE market review of 2013 saying that “leases had been optimised” in terms of rent review clauses, notice fees and other provisions to maximise freehold sale receipts for developers. It talked about soft income being generated from insurance premiums, commission, service charges and enfranchisement premiums. There is clearly an industrial-scale racket going on, and it is important for the future of the industry that we get to the bottom of it and find out who is responsible and make sure that they never get the chance to do it again.

Perhaps what is most concerning in this respect is that evidence has emerged of what are described as forward purchase agreements. These are contracts between an investor and a house builder to acquire a scheme before the individual units have been sold off on long leases. These agreements can often be in place as construction is ongoing, or even before commencement. It would be interesting to know which developers had forward purchase agreements in place before completion of their developments, because if they did they surely had a responsibility to inform the prospective leaseholder prior to their making their purchase that such an agreement was in place.

Instead, what we have heard from constituents is that they were told the exact opposite: they were told freeholds would be available to purchase after two years. Was this a deliberate deception? What did the sales staff know? Just how deep does this scandal run? For those reasons and more, we need a fully independent inquiry into the whole scandal so that those responsible are held to account for their actions and we get a house building sector that works for everyone, not just itself.

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution thus far. One aspect that has not come out during this debate, however, is the excuse used by developers about the use of common areas that need to be built on or utilised for the common purposes of all the houses in the development. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that scandal needs to be exposed as well?

Justin Madders: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that that is used as an excuse. When I was growing up, the common areas were usually run by a body called the local council, and rates or council tax would be paid to cover the costs. We need to look at the way that has been developed in recent years. Now, it is all about maximising profit.

I appreciate that we are pressed for time, so I will conclude by making a direct plea to the Minister. If the Government are serious about ending the abuses in the leasehold sector, they should adopt my party’s proposals to allow leaseholders individually or collectively to buy their freeholds under a fixed formula paid to the landlord. This is similar but not identical to my 2017 private Member’s Bill. The Government could also cap existing ground rents at £250 a year or 0.1% of capital value, whichever is lower, and cap the cost of buying the freehold at 1% of the capital value. Alternatively, they could just do a multiple of the ground rent. I am not precious about my private Member’s Bill; I just want to see something done—anything that gets us to a place where existing leaseholders can find a way out of this.

There are many things that can be done—there are many things that need to be done—and there is no reason why we cannot get on with them now. Parliament has been stuck in a rut for months because the Government have lost control of the Chamber, but if they came forward with a proposal along the lines we have been talking about today, there is no doubt that they would find more than enough support on both sides of the House for getting real tangible laws on the statute book as soon as possible to offer help and hope to the many thousands of people still stuck with toxic leases. I say to those on the Government Front Bench: work with us now; let us end this scandal once and for all.

4.31 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): The issues that colleagues have been raising across the Chamber today are very familiar to my inbox. My constituents have been affected by exactly the same issues, and I want to tell a couple of stories to illustrate them.

Mary told me that she was really lucky to be able to buy and move into her flat in 2013. Since then, her joy has been marred by the failings of the freeholder year after year. Service charges have increased by 33% in five years, with no change in the frankly dire service that is provided. Mary and other residents pay £4,500 a year but must deal with broken lifts that are not fixed for months at a time. Disabled residents have had to move out of the block. The doors to common areas have been left broken, allowing access to anyone and leaving residents vulnerable to antisocial behaviour in common areas and in stairwells. Rough sleepers understandably see
this as an opportunity for shelter. We all know just how much rough sleeping has escalated over the past nine years due to austerity, but people sleeping in stairwells is an obvious fire risk, with sleeping people and belongings blocking the stairs.

Mary and her neighbours have no effective way of communicating with the management. She has not been allowed to ask about items on bills that double or triple in cost for no apparent reason. She has not been allowed to hold service providers to account—companies to which the residents pay thousands of pounds a year simply do not do their job. There is a pattern. Mary sees maintenance problems deliberately being left unfixed, because that means that residents pay a second and third time for call-out fees. As leaseholders, she and her neighbours have little power to stop people ripping them off. Three others from Mary’s block have written to me with exactly the same concerns, and one has been dealing with them for 15 years.

Another local leasehold block has cracked and faulty pipework for water and heating. Some flats completely lose water pressure, leaving residents unable to wash clean or even fill a kettle. Others are roasting in hot weather because the heating is constantly left on in the walls—an appalling waste of energy and residents’ money, and a health risk. The average temperature in one corridor is 30°, and residents can ventilate it only by keeping a fire door open. We all know how dangerous that is. The block goes uncleaned for weeks at a time. Flawed waste disposal means that that rubbish piles up, and the block has not been decorated in years. It is dire.

The management company has a clear responsibility to provide the service, but it ain’t happening. Residents complained more than a year ago, but nothing was done and now we are back in summer when the heating and ventilation problems will again be at their worst. They come to me, but what powers do I have to make the management company behave? I do not have any, because the law is not there. The management company has a clear responsibility to provide these services. These are homes, and flawed laws should not prevent people from working together to keep their blocks clean and safe. Their only option is to write begging letters to a distant hands-off freeholder to ask them to intervene.

Rahima tells me that she feels like a prisoner in her own home because of an extortionate and, frankly, disgusting clause in her leasehold contract that doubles the ground rent. It started at £200 a year, and she was deceived into believing that it would stay that way, but actually it will keep doubling and doubling, eventually reaching £6,400 a year—completely and utterly unaffordable. It could make it impossible for her to remortgage or sell. I could go on and on because, frankly, I have got the case load. All the constituents who have contacted me have seen paltry commitments from this Government, but they are not enough to free residents from the injustice of the leasehold system.

However, I am really proud of Labour’s new proposals. When we get into government, Rahima will not be facing that doubling of ground rent, because we will cap existing ground rents at never more than £250 a year. Mary and her neighbours and many others will gain power over the management of their blocks—no more extortionate opaque service charges, but a clear right to challenge poor services, and a right to come together to buy out the freeholder and establish commonhold ownerships. My constituents need radical solutions, and if this Government will not provide them, our Labour Government will.

4.36 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and all the other members of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on such a powerful report, and I thank the 700 or 800 people who got in touch with the Committee to give their views. We have heard this afternoon how powerful the feelings are across the country. I thank the APPG, of course, the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, of course, and the National Leasehold Campaign, of course, all of which have done extraordinary work in this area. I also pay tribute to all the Members who have spoken today, but I give particular thanks to the Conservative Members on the opposite side of the House. It is not necessarily comfortable for an MP to stand up and call for action from their own Government, but they have done that well and with dignity and great conviction.

We have all heard some of the stories many times, and the time has come to act. One in four homes in this country are leasehold homes, which means that up to 6 million people have basically bought homes that they think they own when they do not. We have heard horrific cases of people trapped in homes they cannot sell, people being ripped off with extortionate service charges, and people being threatened with eviction for absolutely no good reason.

No other major economy has this feudal-style system. Every other major economy has moved away from leasehold and towards fairer, more transparent systems of ownership. Scotland has abolished leasehold, transferring all properties held on long leases to outright ownership, and action has been taken in Northern Ireland. Other countries have demonstrated that alternative models of ownership can work. There are co-op models, and the Australian system has spread to other countries—Canada, New Zealand and Singapore. This is being done everywhere else, but not in the UK.

This week, the Labour party announced a policy that will bring leasehold into line with every other major economy, and I brought a copy of the document with me today. We do not have many printed copies, but I have one here for the Minister, because she will hopefully appreciate reading it. We talked to the Law Commission. We spent a lot of time listening to the debates, reading the Select Committee’s report, and listening to the APPG and the campaigners, and we talked to property lawyers. Our policies are comprehensive and sensible, and worth being looked at by the Government. There are two parts, and the first is what we do with new leasehold properties going forward.

Of course, there is no argument at all for new leasehold houses. We should be looking to abolish new leasehold flats, too. The second part of the package, of course, is to help the up to 6 million people living in leasehold homes by giving them new rights and saving them thousands of pounds.

The Government have paid lip service to this. They know the system is broken and they have acknowledged the problem, but they have failed to act. As my hon. Friend...
the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) said, they have made over 60 announcements on leasehold since 2010, but none of their proposals is aimed at helping the 6 million people trapped in leasehold homes right now and none of their proposals has led to any legislation.

Going beyond that, as has already been mentioned, the Government are actually propping up the system. The number of leasehold homes is increasing and £1 billion of Help to Buy money has gone directly to new leasehold homes, which is nothing less than a scandal.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) said, Labour proposes to end the sale of new leasehold houses, with direct effect, and to legislate to end the sale of new leasehold flats. We want existing leaseholders to be able to buy the full freehold ownership of their home for no more than 1% of the property’s value. Where does the 1% figure come from? It was suggested by the Law Commission; it is well evidenced; and we think it could work.

Labour would end ground rents for new leasehold homes, and as has been said, we would cap them for existing leaseholders at 0.1% of the property’s value, up to a maximum of £250 a year. Again, where does that come from? It comes from the Select Committee, and the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) has tabled the Ground Rents (Leasehold Properties) Bill, too. Again, the proposal is well evidenced and sensible.

Labour would give new rights to empower leaseholders to hire and fire their managing agent, or to take over the management of their home themselves. Importantly, we would crack down on unfair fees and contract terms by publishing a reference list of reasonable charges, not dissimilar to that which the Government introduced in the Tenant Fees Act 2019. We could have a similar system. We want to see transparency, which we would introduce on service charges, and we want to give leaseholders a right to challenge rip-off fees. As we have heard, such fees are complex, difficult and expensive.

We think the formulation of acting “whenever parliamentary time allows,” after nearly 10 years of Conservative government, is unacceptable. As the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) said at the start of the debate, this feudal system has been in place for around a thousand years. After a problem has existed for a thousand years, parliamentary time should allow for us to act. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) said, Labour Members and Conservative Back Benchers would support such legislation if it were introduced by the Government.

I end with a series of questions, which I would be grateful if the Minister answered. Does she recognise that we are the only developed country in the world that has failed to move away from the feudal leasehold model? Does she accept that the number of leasehold homes has gone up, and is still going up? Does she accept that 100,000 people are trapped in unsellable homes because of the leasehold scandal?

Chi Onwurah: Some of them are my constituents.

Sarah Jones: Exactly. If the Minister does not accept that 100,000 figure, what work is her Department doing to understand what the number is? What possible reason can she give, after the 60 announcements and the body of evidence we have heard of today, for legislation not having been introduced? When will the legislation be introduced? Can she confirm that none of the Government’s proposals will help the up to 6 million people who are currently leaseholders, and what will she do about it?

England is the only place in the world that has failed to move away from this system, and it is time we caught up.

4.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): First, I wish to thank all the hon. Members for their detailed contributions on an issue that affects so much of England; nobody can fail to be moved by the stories we have heard today. Obviously, I wish to thank the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) for raising this issue and for his work as Chair of the Select Committee on the recent inquiry and the 18 contributors today.

There are more than 4 million leasehold properties in the UK, and leasehold tenure allows people to complete the journey towards ownership. As many Members will know, the Committee’s report contained a number of recommendations concerning both existing and future leaseholders. The Government have welcomed, considered and responded to the recommendations, and we will now press ahead with our programme of reform.

When we first announced our plans to reform the leasehold sector in December 2017, we said that we wanted to get the detail right. That is why we consulted last year on the implementation of our proposals, including the leasehold house ban and ground rent reduction. We received nearly 1,300 responses, many of which were from leaseholders hungry for change. The responses have also allowed us to fine-tune our proposals, which will remove many of the current injustices from the future leasehold market.

We will go ahead with our original plan to reduce ground rents on future leases to a peppercorn, as opposed to £10. Through the Committee’s inquiry and our own consultation process, it has become clear that a peppercorn is clearly understood and is best for the consumer—this is a peppercorn of zero. In practice, this will mean that leaseholders will no longer be charged a financial sum for which they receive no material benefit. It will also remove the current financial incentive for developers to build leasehold properties, as ground rent income will no longer present a lucrative profit stream.

Mrs Wheeler: I will not give way, as I have a lot to get through and I believe I have some answers for people.

On the leasehold house ban, I am pleased with the profound impact our original announcement and the work of campaigners have had on the market. When we made the announcement in 2017, 11% of new build houses in England were sold as leasehold, whereas today the figure stands at 2%—I repeat that it has reduced to that level. Despite that progress, we will still legislate to ensure that in the future—save for in the most exceptional circumstances—all new houses will be sold on a freehold basis. Developers will no longer be able to use leases on houses for their own financial gain, a practice that had become the norm in some regions of the country and, as we appreciate, particularly in the
north-west. These reforms will remove the incentives for developers and freeholders to use leasehold to make unjustified profits at the expense of leaseholders, and we will be pressing ahead as soon as parliamentary time allows.

On the matter of where ground rents are so high that it—

Sir George Howarth: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister has just said that she would want to press ahead as soon as parliamentary time allows. I wonder whether you could confirm that the one thing this Parliament is not short of is time.

Mr Speaker: If it were for the Chair to decide, I would happily allocate time to all sorts of worthy purposes, but, sadly, the powers of the Speaker do not extend that far. If the right hon. Gentleman is bidding to increase my power, far be it for me to say no.

Mrs Wheeler: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Time is rocking on, so I will rush. We have been talking today about a situation where the ground rent is so high that it becomes an assured shorthold tenancy and so people can be evicted. The Government have committed to changing legislation to close that loophole, so that a leaseholder cannot be evicted on that basis. I am glad to answer that one.

We will not stop there. As our recent publications show, these reforms are only one part of the plans we have for the leasehold sector. This is why we were able to accept, in full or in part, most of the recommendations made by the Select Committee. Let us consider the work Lord Best is doing on the regulation of property agents. His working group is looking at a number of things, including having an independent regulator with a legally enforceable code of practice, which will require all property agents to register; and nationally recognised qualifications for property agents to practise.

We have also asked Lord Best’s group to look at the transparency of service charges, as well as the use of administration and permission fees, and consider in what circumstances they are justified and whether they should be capped or banned altogether. This work will allow us to raise standards of property management and give leaseholders the confidence that they are being charged fairly—both things that were called for by the Select Committee. We look forward to receiving Lord Best’s report, which will also be published for all to see very shortly.

On charges, it is unacceptable that some residential freeholders are unable to challenge excessive fees for the maintenance of their estates. I am happy to confirm that under the new legislation, freeholders will be given the right to challenge the reasonableness of such fees. They will also be able to apply to tribunal for the appointment of a new manager. This will help to increase the transparency, accountability and reasonableness of fees, which is something else the Select Committee wanted to see.

I understand that many existing leaseholders want the Government to legislate to amend onerous ground rent terms. As I pointed out previously, the inclusion of legislation to amend existing contracts presents problematic human rights implications, as has been made clear in the information put out recently by the Law Commission. Despite that, I firmly believe that doubling ground rents are unacceptable and should be varied, which is why we are encouraging the sector voluntarily to vary leases and show that it is willing to solve the problems of its own creation. I have been encouraged by the response we have received. More than 60 leading developers, freeholders and managing agents have signed a public pledge that will free leaseholders from the shackles of doubling ground rents.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs Wheeler: I really do not have time. Unfortunately, there is other business that needs to be done tonight.

I am aware that many leaseholders believe they were mis-sold their properties. Many people write to me to say that the leasehold tenure was not properly explained and that onerous terms were not made clear to them. Others were promised that they would be able to buy the freehold for a certain price after two years, only to find that had been sold on buy an investor in that time. I am delighted that we have a commitment of action from the Competition and Markets Authority, which will look into the issue. It will use its consumer protection powers to determine whether leasehold terms, including onerous ground rents and permission fees, can be classed as unfair. If the evidence warrants it, the CMA will consider bringing forward enforcement proceedings. I look forward to hearing about the CMA’s progress and hope that its work complements the reforms we already have in train.

The issues I have just outlined show us that better information and advice is needed for potential and existing leaseholders, which is why we recently updated our “How to lease” guide, which now gives clear information on what leasehold tenure is, the costs associated with being a leaseholder and the rights and responsibilities that leaseholders have. This will give people a better understanding of what it means to be a leaseholder. If things go wrong, though, I want them to receive quality, free and independent advice, if they want it. I am pleased that many campaign groups have played an active role in this subject area, supporting leaseholders who have found themselves in difficult circumstances.

I specifically thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for their work as co-chairs of the all-party group on leasehold and commonhold reform, and I am grateful for their comments. We value the work of the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership and how it works with the Department. I am clear that LEASE is absolutely on the side of leaseholders. Its advice has helped many leaseholders to understand what is in their lease.

We have heard a lot today about the work of the Law Commission. The House should be confident that the Government are committed to improving the leasehold sector. Although leasehold as a tenure will continue to be used for flats, we have committed to reinvigorate commonhold, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). The Government support the wider use of commonhold, which allows homeowners collectively to own and manage the common parts of a residential building.
Although commonhold works well in other countries, there are currently fewer than 20 commonhold developments in Wales. That is because of deficiencies in our legislation; it is clear that reform is needed. For that reason, the Government are working with the Law Commission to make the legal changes needed to see more commonhold developments emerge. The Law Commission is currently analysing the responses to a consultation on that very subject, and I look forward to receiving its report. We continue to work with the Law Commission and to fund it, and we look forward to its conclusions.

As the House can see, we are pushing ahead with our plans to improve the system for leaseholders today and tomorrow. We will create a market that really works for consumers—one that is fair, simple and transparent. We are taking action now to ban the sale of leasehold houses through Help to Buy programmes. Homes England will negotiate contracts with all Help to Buy developers to rule out explicitly the building and selling of leasehold houses, except in the very limited circumstances when it is justified. On 2 July 2018, the Secretary of State announced that no new Government funding schemes would be used to support the unjustified use of leasehold for new houses, and that includes the new Help to Buy scheme from 2021. That announcement alone has brought down sales from 11% to 2%.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) talked about her issues with the St Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust. I am very sorry that, obviously, my letter to her had not arrived by the time that she had written her speech. I have written to her in the past three days, so I am very sorry that she has not got it. It does clarify the position.

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4.57 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I secured this debate this evening because I wanted this House to have the opportunity to pay tribute to GCHQ in this its centenary year and, most importantly, to the staff who work there. They are some of the finest public servants anywhere in our country—people who work night and day, often at considerable cost to themselves and their families, to keep this nation safe. It is worth reflecting on what is meant by that expression. It means bluntly that there are people alive today able to return to their families who would not be able to, but for the skill and professionalism of those working at GCHQ. Some are British soldiers on operations abroad. Others are ordinary citizens who may never have had the faintest idea that they were ever in harm’s way. There are others who have been protected from the devastation wrought by serious crime that shatters lives and robs innocence, and there are those who have been spared the anguish of seeing their jobs, livelihoods and futures destroyed by the actions of cyber gangsters and hostile state actors. That is what is meant by keeping our country safe.

Many of those professionals who have provided that blanket protection and security are my constituents. They work necessarily in the shadows, with discretion and professionalism. They are committed to the mission, however, whatever the credit they deserved. And I wanted us to send out the message, at this time and from this place, that they are admired and appreciated here in the democratic epicentre of the country they serve.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I agree entirely with everything that my hon. Friend has said, endorse it and give my profound thanks to those people. They do us honour all over the world; many countries depend on the work of GCHQ, for which they are grateful, and we should be eternally grateful to those people for what they do in our name.

Alex Chalk: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend, who makes an excellent point with his customary eloquence and force.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this debate forward. Will he also pay tribute to the people who did so much in the predecessor organisation GCHQ during the second world war, and lived out their lives afterwards in complete secrecy, claiming no credit for their great achievements? I can remember the year 1974—two years before he was born—when the book “The Ultra Secret” revealed what had happened, by which time it was far too late for many of the people who had done those deeds to claim the credit they deserved.

Alex Chalk: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend. Selflessness and discretion are the watchwords that so many of these dedicated public servants live by, and he has explained the point extremely well.

John Howell (Henley) (Con) rose—
By June 1944, Bletchley Park had accessed the communications between Gerd von Rundstedt, the Commander of the German Army in the west, and his superiors in Berlin. The importance of decrypted German communications—known as the “Ultra secret”—which my right hon. Friend, the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) has referred to, to the war effort is universally recognised. It gave the Allies an invaluable insight into the enemy’s capabilities and intentions.

Of course, the world has moved on a great deal since then. In 1984, Denis Healey said in this House of Commons:

“GCHQ has been by far the most valuable source of intelligence for the British Government ever since it began operating at Bletchley during the last war. British skills in interception and code-breaking are unique and highly valued by...our allies. GCHQ has been a key element in our relationship with the United States for more than forty years.”—[Official Report, 27 February 1984; Vol. 55, c. 35.]

As the director of GCHQ said at an event I attended in London only yesterday, GCHQ might be 100 years old, but its time is now.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Alex Chalk: I will in a moment.

That is because it is a matter of public record that in recent months and years GCHQ has detected and disrupted numerous threats against our country—from nuclear proliferation to cyber-attacks that could cause immense harm. It supports British troops, providing the vital nugget of information that can make the difference between life and death. It is reported to have played its part in the arrest and conviction of Matthew Falder, a prolific paedophile later described by the judge as “warped and sadistic” and sentenced to 25 years’ imprisonment. Nowadays, of course, defending our nation in cyberspace means having the ability to strike back—not just deterring the threat but sometimes disabling or even destroying it. Only recently, the director of GCHQ has stated that this has been used to suppress Daesh propaganda, hindering its ability to co-ordinate attacks and brainwash vulnerable young people overseas, no doubt including in this country.

I want to say a little about the solemn responsibilities that any intelligence agency has in this, our nation of laws—but before I do, I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown).

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: On the comment by the director of the GCHQ that its time is now, does my hon. Friend agree that the threat against this country and its citizens is becoming ever more multi-faceted and ever more universal, that therefore the task that GCHQ undertakes on our behalf is ever more needed, and that we should pay tribute, as he has done, to the people who work there? I would like to pay particular tribute to my constituents who work there.

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who puts the point well. It is an extremely complex threat landscape, but I am pleased that there are people working there—my constituents and his—who are equal to the task.

As I had begun to indicate, successive Foreign Secretaries have made clear their respect for GCHQ and their deep appreciation of its responsibilities. William Hague perhaps put it best when, referring to the surveillance and interception decisions made by GCHQ and others, he stated in this House:

“If the citizens of this country could see the time and care taken in making these decisions, the carefully targeted nature of all our interventions, and the strict controls in place to ensure that the law and our democratic values are upheld, and if they could witness, as I do, the integrity and professionalism of the men and women of our intelligence agencies, who are among our nation’s very finest public servants, I believe they would be reassured by the way we go about this essential work.”—[Official Report, 10 June 2013; Vol. 564, c. 34.]

He cited the work of the Interception of Communications Commissioner, who had said:

“it is my belief...that GCHQ staff conduct themselves with the highest levels of integrity and legal compliance.”

I believe that the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, which I and other hon. Members grappled with on entering Parliament in 2015, creates probably the strongest system of checks and balances and democratic accountability for secret intelligence anywhere in the world. In particular, the stringent judicial double-lock safeguard that I and others argued for means that the most intrusive investigatory powers require the approval of a judge—and that is exactly as it should be. That is not to say, of course, that mistakes will not be made—I am afraid that is inevitable whenever human beings are involved—but professional integrity and respect for the law are institutionally ingrained at GCHQ.

I want to say a word or two about the National Cyber Security Centre, which is superintended by GCHQ. Since the introduction of the national cyber-security strategy in 2015, the NCSC has the mission of making the UK the safest place in the world to live and work online. It supports British business, with its “Small Business Guide: Cyber Security” providing guidance on improving resilience. Its “10 Steps to Cyber Security” guidance is now used by two thirds of FTSE 350 companies—and it is having success. The UK’s global share of phishing attacks has dropped from 5.4% in 2016 to below 2% in March 2019. In 2016, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs was the 16th most phished brand globally; now, it is 146th. That suggests the UK is becoming a harder target, thanks in large part to the work of the NCSC and GCHQ.

What about the impact on Cheltenham, my constituency? After the end of world war two, GCHQ staff reduced from about 10,000 to fewer than 1,800 and left Bletchley Park. They moved to Gloucestershire in September 1949, and GCHQ has had a continuous presence in Cheltenham ever since. In 2004, the famous “Doughnut” building opened—the largest secret intelligence building outside the United States. It is that impact on Cheltenham that I want to take a few short moments to talk about.

In 2013, when I was first selected to stand for Cheltenham, I thought long and hard about how I could try to make my home town better for the people who live there. One of the issues that really troubled me was that, of the 18 wards that make up the constituency of Cheltenham, three were in the bottom decile of income per capita anywhere in our country and had been for many years. Wherever we sit in the political spectrum, every Member has to have a plan for how to address that issue. It always struck me that GCHQ could be better harnessed to galvanise the local economy and generate the invaluable opportunities that can break the cycle of deprivation and turn lives around.
[Alex Chalk]

I then read a Policy Exchange paper called “Silicon Cities”, and the penny dropped that GCHQ could support a local tech cluster to foster start-ups in the growing cyber-security industry. That was the main message of a speech I gave to Gloucestershire businesses at local IT firm Converge in 2014.

How far we have come since then. In November 2015, George Osborne, then Chancellor of the Exchequer announced at GCHQ that Cheltenham would receive a cyber-innovation centre and cyber accelerator, which he described as “an ecosystem in which our best people move in and out of institutions like this one, bringing the best minds and deepest expertise into the private sector, and the latest innovation back into government.”

That accelerator is now up and running, and 21 companies have been through it so far. Between them, they have invested £30 million and created valuable tech jobs.

As was always hoped for, this is now starting to catalyse the local cyber-economy. Hub 8—a play on Bletchley Park’s Hut 8—in the centre of Cheltenham is a new co-working space where start-ups in this £5 billion a year sector can scale up. Meanwhile, Gloucestershire College is now offering cyber-degrees accredited by GCHQ in collaboration with the University of the West of England. There are exciting plans for a cyber-park adjacent to GCHQ, with a GCHQ-awowed building close to the Doughnut, to anchor a local cyber-ecosystem. The plans continue to be supported by Government and the local borough council and are progressing at pace. The new frontier is cyber, and Cheltenham is uniquely well placed—through the presence of GCHQ and its connectivity to the midlands, the south-west and the Thames valley—to benefit from it, securing a better future for people of all backgrounds.

I now want to say a word about the extraordinary community work that GCHQ staff do. GCHQ is truly Cheltenham’s charity superpower. It has raised more than £1.5 million for charities over the last 10 years. GCHQ staff use their three days’ special volunteering leave a year regularly to volunteer at local charities. That has included supporting projects such as the hamper scamper, a Christmas scheme run by Caring for Vulnerable Families; the James Hopkins Trust Easter Egg appeal; and GCHQ’s Poppyfall installation, which was hanging in Gloucestershire cathedral last year and was incredibly and unbearably poignant. On 19 May this year, a charity bike ride from Bletchley Park to Cheltenham raised around £30,000.

To secure its future, GCHQ continues to recruit new generations of people with the right skills, aptitude and mindset. It sponsors the young entrepreneurs competition, which aims to encourage young people to think creatively and innovatively, with the final held at GCHQ. Its CyberFirst Girls competition had 40 finalists from 40,000 participants. Meanwhile, the NCSC has supported its first ever cyber schools hubs in Gloucestershire. I have seen their work, and it is incredibly uplifting and exciting to see young people engaged in such a dynamic way.

The UK may not have faced a category 1 attack yet—one that causes sustained disruption to the UK’s essential services or affects our national security—but the director said on BBC Radio 4 earlier this year that he thought it was a question of when, not if. Those seeking to act against our country in that way or perpetrate organised crime know that this is a nation with the capability, partnerships and resolve to protect its citizens in accordance with our laws and values.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is making a powerful speech and I am privileged to be here. A dear friend of mine is a senior official in the NCSC, and I know the important work done there. The hon. Gentleman is talking about protecting the institution in the future. We have been talking about the ever more complex and universal threat against citizens. Does he agree with me and many other Members who have spoken in recent days that it is incumbent on all of us as Members of Parliament to back up our excellent civil servants, fight the politicisation, in any form, of the civil service and give them all the support they need?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point extremely well. The strength of our civil servants is their scrupulous independence and preparedness to serve political masters of whatever hue. We see that across our civil service and we see it very clearly at GCHQ. That is its strength and that is what we must safeguard.

The point I really want to emphasise is that this is a nation that can defend itself because it has the capability, partnerships and resolve to do so in accordance with the law and with our values, and it is able to do so because of the skill and integrity of those working at GCHQ.

GCHQ’s centenary just so happens to coincide with the 175th anniversary of the first use of Morse code to send a message between cities. It is, therefore, perhaps fitting that I should conclude by playing a message to GCHQ in the form of Morse code, which will last for 13 seconds:

Happy birthday to GCHQ.

Mr Speaker: I think the whole House is grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate and for the way in which he has conducted it. We look forward to the Minister’s reply.

5.16 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I am truly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) for securing this debate, and indeed for concluding it in such a unique historical way. He has the added advantage of being one of the few Members of this House who can actually reach the microphone above him.

Somewhat inevitably, given the nature of its work, GCHQ—Government Communications Headquarters, to give it its full name—has clocked up many extraordinary achievements, but some of them of course have to go unrecognised. Its brilliant, dedicated and creative staff do not receive the public recognition they truly deserve. In this, its 100th year, I am grateful for the opportunity, on behalf of Her Majesty’s Government, to rectify that as far as I can.

Parts of the agency’s illustrious past are now known. The codebreakers of Bletchley Park were pivotal to the success of D-day and directly responsible for saving so many allied lives. Throughout the cold war, GCHQ...
adapted quickly to changes in technology, and helped to build the extraordinary security partnership that the UK enjoys today with the United States. For a century, GCHQ’s dedicated service and expertise have protected us from many serious threats. However, as my hon. Friend has said, the future brings with it new challenges—from terror attacks and conflicts to hostile state activity on UK soil—and GCHQ intelligence continues to play a vital role in maintaining our national security and protecting our people.

In the past two years alone, GCHQ has helped to foil 19 sophisticated terror attacks. When Daesh exploited the internet to export extreme ideologies, GCHQ used a whole range of capabilities and degraded its ability to radicalise and recruit. The agency continues to identify, analyse and disrupt terror threats on a daily basis. In addition to combating terrorism, GCHQ takes a leading role in countering new hybrid threats to UK interests, such as the WannaCry ransomware attack launched by North Korean actors in 2017, and the Novichok nerve agent attack in Salisbury. As these threats to national, regional and global security evolve, so GCHQ continually learns and adapts, just as it has always done since its early days following world war one.

One thing that many people will perhaps be unaware of is the contribution made by GCHQ officers deployed in support of British troops. Indeed, the insights given by GCHQ intelligence officers to our military personnel have made a positive impact in every overseas conflict of the past 100 years and continue to do so today—I am pleased to see my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence in her place. That contribution is the reason why more than 300 civilian staff have been quietly awarded campaign medals for their support of military operations.

GCHQ also combats serious and organised crime—something responsible for more deaths than all other national security threats combined. GCHQ collaborates with law enforcement agencies such as the National Crime Agency and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. Their co-operation has recently resulted in the identification of criminal activity and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs with law enforcement agencies such as the National Security Agency. GCHQ’s dedicated service and expertise have protected us from many serious threats. However, as my hon. Friend has said, the future brings with it new challenges—from terror attacks and conflicts to hostile state activity on UK soil—and GCHQ intelligence continues to play a vital role in maintaining our national security and protecting our people.

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GCHQ remains at the forefront of technological development as we enter the fourth industrial revolution. Agency director Jeremy Fleming said at Mansion House last month that “this technology revolution is providing extraordinary opportunity, innovation and progress—but it’s also exposing us to increasing complexity, uncertainty and risk.”

To defend us against those risks, GCHQ established the National Cyber Security Centre in 2016, as a single authoritative body, to provide cyber-security advice to citizens, businesses and Government. In October last year, thanks to diligent NCSC staff, the Foreign Secretary was able to attribute a range of reckless cyber-attacks to Russian military intelligence. Those attacks disrupted targets as diverse as a small UK television station and parts of Ukraine’s transport system. The NCSC’s ability to attribute such attacks diminishes the Russian military intelligence service’s sense of impunity and undermines its domestic credibility.

Cyber-security is about protecting Government and commercial interests, but also individuals’ personal data. The Government firmly believe in the right to privacy, and the NCSC’s advice and guidance help with this protection. End-to-end encryption provides billions worldwide with privacy and protection online, but it is abused by a minority to conceal criminal, terrorist and paedophile activity. That impedes the ability of tech companies to tackle harmful content and limits our agencies’ access to the information needed to keep our country safe. Last November, we published a set of principles that set out how the Government will approach encryption. This is part of our desire to have an informed and open public debate about these technical challenges.

As with all our security and intelligence agencies, GCHQ is subject to democratic accountability and rigorous oversight. The Investigatory Powers Act 2016, which my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham mentioned, strengthened GCHQ’s legal framework, so that oversight by both the Foreign Secretary and an independent judicial panel provides one of the strongest legal assurances in intelligence. GCHQ is a powerful and skilled organisation. We can be confident that it uses those powers lawfully, in line with our values and for the national good.

Sir Nicholas Soames: My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that the diligence, thoroughness and level of detail with which GCHQ and the other agencies do this work greatly adds to the credibility and authority of what they produce?

Sir Alan Duncan: As always, my right hon. Friend absolutely nails it. He is absolutely right, and I agree with his judgment about the way in which GCHQ goes about its business.

Perhaps most importantly, I would like to return to the people of GCHQ. They are not only brilliant and dedicated, but increasingly diverse and representative of the nation for whom they work. GCHQ is known to champion diversity of thought, which is vital for innovation and problem solving, and it is creating an inclusive culture where everyone can thrive. Since the days of Bletchley Park, it has been a good employer for women and it is actively working to recruit more. It is also, very proudly, a Stonewall Top 100 Employer. Two years ago, the agency attained the highest level in the Government’s Disability Confident scheme.

The Government hugely value the diligence and dedication of all those who work for GCHQ. They keep us safe from terrorism, they fight serious crime and they protect our troops. They have consistently stayed one step ahead of technological advances. They conscientiously protect our security and our democratic values. I thank my hon. Friend for initiating this centenary tribute debate. He is known in this House as the hon. Member for Cheltenham. Member for GCHQ as much as he is the hon. Member for Cheltenham.

On behalf of the Government, I thank GCHQ, and everybody who works or has worked there, for 100 years’ dedicated service. I am confident that they will continue to play a vital role in tackling the challenges of the future, to the great credit of the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

5.26 pm

House adjourned.
The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The Disclosure and Barring Service is a vital part of the safeguarding regime. The DBS issued more than 5 million certificates last year, which was more than the previous year. The Home Office, as the sponsoring Department, continues to oversee the DBS’s performance.

John Spellar: Does the Home Secretary not understand—I think he does, along with the Justice Secretary—that it is widely accepted across the House that the service is not fit for purpose, because it makes it far too difficult for those with a record to get back into work, which is bad not only for them but for their families and society? Can we have some urgent action to get back to trying to rehabilitate offenders by putting tight limits on disclosure, especially for cautions and minor offences in early years, and so let many of our citizens turn their lives around? Why does he not cut through the bureaucratic inertia in the Home Office and get a move on?

Sajid Javid: The House will be aware that there have problems with the service in recent years. As a result, a number of changes are being made and performance is up. In fact, a new chief executive is starting this week, I believe, so there is new management. On the actual policies it implements, the right hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Changes can be made and active discussions are taking place right now between me and the Justice Secretary.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Already this phenomenal summer of sport will have inspired many children to play football, tennis and cricket, with netball, golf and rugby still to come, but there are still failings in our safeguarding processes, including the DBS checks. I worked extremely hard with the excellent Minister on this policy. The main issue remains broadening the remit of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 to include sports coaches, but will the Home Secretary update the House on progress towards strengthening DBS checks for those involved in coaching, including assistant coaches, to ensure the next generation of possible sporting heroes and heroines are safe from abuse?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for the work she has been doing for several years to encourage more people, particularly young people, to take part in sport. She is right about the current position: sports coach is not included as position of trust. Enhanced criminal checks are available, but I agree that we need to do more work, which is why we are reviewing the effectiveness of the law on those who take advantage of young children with sexual relationships and are looking at what more we can do to include them as positions of trust.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The scope of the DBS is far too narrow. Private tutors are exempt, as are host families of international students. As we head into the summer, it is a reminder that we need to safeguard all young people. What steps is the Home Secretary taking to ensure it is far more comprehensive in who it covers?

Sajid Javid: I understand that the hon. Lady has had a meeting recently with the victims Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), on this very issue, and I am glad that she has raised it. She may be aware that there are changes we have to, and want to, make because of a recent Supreme Court judgment, and because of that I want to bring forward other changes that we are looking at and planning and that, when they happen, she will welcome.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Some of these DBS checks take far too long and prevent people from getting into employment. Is it the fault of the DBS, local police forces, or both?

Sajid Javid: Sometimes, when there are delays, they will probably be very case-specific, so it is hard to attribute fault, but my hon. Friend is right to raise the need for speedy checks. There have been significant improvements. He may be interested to know that there is a 14-day maximum on the basic checks we apply, and in 98% of cases that has been met.

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): Last week, the Government published a new economic crime plan in partnership with the private sector to create a whole-system approach to economic crime. Her Majesty’s Government are investing at least £48 million this year to bolster capabilities to tackle economic crime, including with the establishment of the National Economic Crime Centre, to increase the number of financial investigators and to recover more assets.
Mr Wallace: The new economic crime plan brings together all the different actors on the stage the Government have invested in and identifies all those areas that need to be solved. It is a better analysis of economic crime. We have set up the NECC to bring together all the assets of government—everything from UK Visas and Immigration and the Home Office to the intelligence services—to focus on some of the biggest money launderers and to implement the new powers in the Criminal Finances Act 2017, to deal with criminals and money launderers and to take the money back from them.

Mr Wallace: Absolutely. Building “failure to prevent” offences such as bribery and tax evasion into statute makes a real difference. It is important for us to give our law enforcement agencies powers to deal with, for instance, corporations that engage in conspiracies, because in the past that has been very hard to prove.

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. While large sectors are regulated under the FCA, we have seen fraudsters exploiting marketing as a guise to escape that regulation. When we identify them, there are criminal investigations, but I should be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman and hear more about his views.

3. Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of the EU settlement scheme application process.

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): EU citizens are our friends, our neighbours and our colleagues, and we want them to stay. The settlement scheme is performing well. The latest published statistics show that more than 800,000 applications have been received and the majority of people are finding it easy to apply. Additional support is available to those who are vulnerable, or who do not have the appropriate access, skills or confidence to apply online.

Ronnie Cowan: Instead of implementing a scheme that makes EU citizens—many of whom have lived here for a great many years—unlawfully resident if they fail to apply by December 2020, will the Minister introduce a declaratory system whereby people apply for proof of settled status rather than the right to stay?

Caroline Nokes: A declaratory system that did not require EU citizens to obtain status and provide evidence of it would risk causing confusion, especially among the most vulnerable, and people might struggle to prove their status in years to come. There would also be a risk of confusion among employers and service providers, and the system might impede EU citizens’ access to benefits and services to which they are entitled.
Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The vast majority of people I hear from say that the settled status scheme is working very well and is easy to use. Many receive responses within a few hours of submitting their applications. However, it is a bit frustrating that the service is still not available on Apple devices such as phones; can the Minister update us on when it might be?

Caroline Nokes: It is not just anecdotal information that tells us that people are finding it easy and quick to apply; we know that most applications are settled within one to four working days. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has been tireless in pursuing the issue raised by my hon. Friend, and we are very hopeful that the app will be available on Apple devices in the autumn.

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Lady will be aware that the Home Office has provided up to £9 million of grant funding to 57 voluntary and community-based organisations specifically to help the vulnerable people to whom she refers. I was pleased to visit the East European Resource Centre and to have the opportunity to speak to a group of long-standing UK residents about the support available. She references the grey economy; we do not wish to see anybody working in the grey economy, but we recognise that there will be those who do. The Home Office is absolutely prepared to accept a wide range of evidence of people’s stay in the UK, including tenancy agreements or letters from health providers with whom they have been in contact. This is absolutely about working with individuals. The EU Settlement Resolution Centre is up and running, and is incredibly well staffed. I was pleased to visit it, to see the help that it can give to individuals.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): There is a seeming desire among some Opposition Members for the EU settlement scheme to be a complete failure, but will my right hon. Friend again confirm that this is a successful scheme and that take-up has been positive? If Opposition Members continue to tell their EU citizen constituents that they will not be able to apply, they are not being helpful.

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The scheme has been a success, and it is shocking when hon. Members talk the scheme down. It is working well. We are determined to put in place support for those who are vulnerable, as I said. Later this week, we will see the latest statistics surrounding the scheme, which will show a considerable uplift from the figure of 800,000 reported from the end of May.

Refugee Settlement Programme

4. Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): When he plans to announce details of the integrated programme to resettle an additional 5,000 refugees from 2020-21.

[911920]

23. Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): When he plans to announce details of the integrated programme to resettle an additional 5,000 refugees from 2020-21.

[911939]

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): We continue to engage with international and domestic delivery partners and stakeholders, as we work through the detailed policy and operational considerations for the new global resettlement scheme. In the meantime, we continue towards our commitment of resettling 20,000 of the most vulnerable refugees affected by the conflict in Syria.

Thangam Debbonaire: The Minister knows that I would like the ambition to be as high as possible. What plans has she got to consult refugees and refugee organisations about the lessons that can be learned from current resettlement schemes?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady will know—this is an ambition that I have often voiced to her—that we have sought to bring together the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, the vulnerable children’s resettlement scheme and the gateway protection scheme, to consolidate our refugee programmes. We continue to work closely with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and indeed with those delivering the schemes, local authorities included. As part of the ambition—this is why we have given a figure in the region of 5,000—it is important that we learn from VPRS, work through local authorities to establish the number of people they can best assist through the schemes and make sure that we do not downgrade the good commitments we have previously given on resettlement.

Helen Hayes: Young adult asylum seekers often face unique and complex challenges to their mental health and wellbeing, with many having survived unimaginable experiences in their country of origin and during their long and treacherous journey to reach this country. In setting out details of the integrated programme to resettle an additional 5,000 refugees from 2020 to 2021, will the Minister commit to there being a youth welfare officer in every asylum accommodation and dispersed accommodation location, so that vulnerable, traumatised 18 to 25-year-olds receive the support that they need to recover from their experiences and can live as well as possible in the UK?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to point out the distinction between the formal resettlement schemes referred to in the question and those young people who have made, in many instances, terrible and perilous journeys of many thousands of miles and who have travelled across the whole of Europe to get to these shores. It really is important that we work to support young asylum seekers; I am conscious that the largest numbers will be found in a small number of local authorities, particularly Croydon, Kent and Hillingdon, which work incredibly hard to support not only unaccompanied minors but...
those leaving the care system and those for whom we have a responsibility up to the age of 24 under the Children and Families Act 2014. It is crucial that we get this right; that is why I was so pleased to see the uplift in funding to local authorities for unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Scotland has played a leading role in the current vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, resettling nearly 3,000 people across all Scotland’s local authorities. Recent opinion polls show strong support in Scotland for maintaining that commitment and, indeed, for improving on it. Will the Minister join me in welcoming Scotland’s success story, and will she commit, through the comprehensive spending review, to funding integration support for refugees under the new scheme at the same levels that are currently provided under the VPRS?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. and learned Lady is absolutely right to point out the significant role that Scotland has played. In Jordan last summer, I was pleased to meet a family who were being resettled to East Ayrshire within a few days of my visit. It is important that we provide not only support for resettling people but the necessary integration, not least through the provision of English language teaching, which is a crucial component. She will know from previous comments I have made in this House that one of my big passions is ensuring that we assist those with refugee status into work and ensure that good schemes exist across the entire country to help them to do that.

Mr Speaker: I can tell that there is a second question coming from the hon. and learned Lady.

Joanna Cherry: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As well as Scottish local authorities, Scottish community groups are also planning to sponsor refugee families. I met representatives of Refugee Sponsorship Edinburgh in my constituency recently. This is the first group of people to do this in Scotland. They will be delighted that the UK Government have finally agreed that any refugees supported under the community sponsorship scheme will be additional to those resettled under the UK Government scheme. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that the new scheme will make it easier for named individuals to be resettled and for family members dispersed across the world to join refugees who have already been settled here? I am sure I am not alone in being approached regularly in my constituency surgery by refugees with those concerns.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. and learned Lady is absolutely right to highlight the brilliant role played by community sponsorship schemes. They are absolutely the gold standard of resettlement. However, it is important that we continue to work with the UNHCR to ensure that it is the most vulnerable people who are resettled here, whether through community schemes or through the sponsorship of local authorities. It would be very wrong for us to use resettlement schemes to resettle people from safe third countries when many people across the middle east and north Africa region and across the world are in parlous situations and in real danger. They must always be our first priority.

Mrs Speaker: In noting that the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) was chuntering from a sedentary position in evident disapproval of the length of an inquiry, I simply say to him in the gentlest possible spirit that I feel sure that, in his own mind, his own questions are never too long but merely fully developed.

Modern Slavery Act: Business Compliance

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to monitor business compliance with the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Around 16,400 UK businesses are within scope of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. The Home Office has commenced the first stage of a compliance audit, following which non-compliant businesses will risk being publicly named. We are developing a Government-run registry to track compliance and make it easier for consumers and others to scrutinise business action. We are also consulting on strengthening modern slavery reporting requirements, including improving compliance and the quality of business statements.

Ellie Reeves: I thank the Minister for her answer, but the number of potential victims of modern slavery identified in the UK each year has more than doubled since 2015 and now stands at just under 7,000. The Modern Slavery Act was a step in the right direction, but it has been left to go stale due to lack of enforcement, with a staggering 40% of companies not complying with it at all. Will the Minister take urgent action to commit to an enforcement body to enforce sanctions against non-compliant companies?

Victoria Atkins: I think that, when we have the opportunity to do so, we should talk up our country and what we are doing to lead the world in tackling modern slavery. We really are leading the world; the Prime Minister hosted a dinner last week with the McCain Institute, at which people from across the world acknowledged the world-leading work we are doing in this country. Of course there is more to do, which is precisely why we asked the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), my right hon. Friend for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and Baroness Butler-Sloss to conduct an independent review of the Act to ensure that it is up to date and working. We know that modern slavery criminals change their mode of working. From that, last week we announced £10 million over five years to establish cutting-edge policy and evidence centres on modern slavery and human rights. We also responded to the independent review of the Modern Slavery Act and accepted the majority of its recommendations. I really believe that this work on transparency in supply chains will be groundbreaking.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I entirely endorse what the Minister said about how this country leads the fight against modern-day slavery, which is a great credit to the Prime Minister, but should she not encourage all businesses to report possible victims as they come across them in their daily business? Police would prefer to have an investigation that leads to nothing than leave victims in modern-day slavery.
Victoria Atkins: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, who has done much work in this field. We have only to look at the terrible case that was finalised last week to see the breadth and range of ways in which people who indulge in modern slavery torture and enslave their captives; some of the details of that case were truly shocking. It absolutely underlines the fact that every single business that meets the criteria in the Act is obliged by law to report and ensure that its supply chains are free from slavery. That has a trickle-down effect for smaller businesses that are contracted to those larger businesses, because they have to make sure that they are doing the right thing too.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): Will that requirement be carried out in the public sector? Given the size of the procurement budget, will the Minister tell the House what plans the Government have to ensure that Government spending is within the scope of the Act?

Victoria Atkins: May I thank the right hon. Gentleman. As I said, for the work that he and his colleagues did on the review? It was an extraordinary piece of work and very thorough, and I know that he was pleased that we were able to accept the majority of its recommendations. We absolutely accept the point about the public sector, and he will know that the Prime Minister recently made an important announcement to confirm that Departments will make modern slavery statements to ensure that their supply chains are free from slavery. As for the further details, I will write to the right hon. Gentleman in due course.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): We on the Labour Benches appreciate the progress that has been made on modern slavery thus far, but the House will be aware that there was recently a shocking case of agricultural slavery. A fresh produce supplier to major US supermarkets was using slave labour in its supply chain. Does the Minister accept that consumers who are conscious of issues such as organic production and sustainable food production will not appreciate unwittingly purchasing fresh food with slave labour in its production? Will the Government act more swiftly? We need faster action than she is suggesting to get proper business compliance with their modern slavery legislation.

Victoria Atkins: I am delighted that this is one of those issues that enjoy the support of Members from all parts of the House. The right hon. Lady will know from the announcements last week on our response to the independent review that we are very much seeking to toughen the regulations and requirements for the largest businesses. For what it is worth, some 75% of businesses that are in scope have set down a modern slavery statement, but we want to make it easier for civil society and others to judge how effectively businesses are doing, which is why we are looking into setting up a central Government registry to help that happen. We are conscious, too, of the role that non-governmental organisations can play in this space. Only last week, Oxfam released its new behind the barcode supermarket scorecard, which shows how the sector as a whole needs to step up activity to identify and rectify labour exploitation risks. I am delighted that many UK supermarkets have signed up to that.

Immigration Policies

6. Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that his Department’s immigration policies do not unfairly discriminate on the basis of (a) race and (b) nationality.

10. Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that his Department’s immigration policies do not unfairly discriminate on the basis of (a) race and (b) nationality.

14. Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that his Department’s immigration policies do not unfairly discriminate on the basis of (a) race and (b) nationality.

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Home Office is bound by the public sector equality duty to eliminate unlawful discrimination and promote good race relations. The Equality Act 2010 provides that discrimination is not unlawful if it is required by legislation or authorised by Ministers. For example, a visa regime that applies to a particular nationality constitutes discrimination, but is lawful under the Equality Act.

Kate Hollern: An Iranian refugee in my constituency applied for a Home Office travel document and has been refused. He was told that he must get a passport from his own country, which, as he fled that country, is almost impossible. Even to apply for a passport, he would have to agree to sign up for national service. Surely that is discrimination.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that specific issue. Although I cannot comment on individual cases, we do not wish to see anybody disadvantaged because of the individual requirements of travel documents from their country of origin. I would be very happy to work with her to see whether we can find a solution.

Matthew Pennycook: The Department’s own statistics make it clear that last year’s average refusal rate for entry visas from Nigeria was 37%, and almost 44% for entry visas from Ghana, compared with an average refusal rate of only 12% across all countries. Can the Minister explain to my west African-born constituents, whose family members, friends and ministers of religion are being refused visitor visas in ever rising numbers, why the system is discriminating in that way?

Caroline Nokes: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the system is not discriminating in that way and that the Home Office is obliged to consider all visa applications in light of the evidence presented by the applicant. He might be reassured to learn that, in the year ending June 2018, we saw a 2% increase in the number of visas issued to sub-Saharan African nationals compared with the same period of the previous year.

Janet Daby: The Home Office has offered warm words and reassurances to migrant communities about a movement away from the hostile environment, yet the Government are appealing against the High Court ruling that the right-to-rent scheme, which requires private landlords to check the immigration status of tenants, is discriminatory and breaches human rights law. Does the Minister believe that discrimination is a necessary price to pay for enforcing the hostile environment?
**Violent Crime: Young People**

7. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What steps he is taking to divert young people away from violent crime.

**Sajid Javid**: My hon. Friend join me in congratulating N-Act, in my constituency, which has toured the schools producing plays that have a profound effect on young people, meaning that they do not get involved in gangs, and Gorgui Thiam, a Senegalese sports coach whose work has been very effective in breaking up violent gangs through the power of sport.

**Mr Speaker**: Of course we all join in the celebration of the power of sport as a positive force, be it, for example, tennis, cricket or indeed football. [*Interruption.*] And lots of other sports to boot—netball, hockey, rounders and athletics. We also celebrate those who teach sport, and those who broadcast it and write about it, one of whom I spy not very far from me at this very moment—the great Richard Evans. [*Interruption.*] That will do for now.

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**The Secretary of State for the Home Department**

*Sajid Javid*: Diverting young people away from crime is at the heart of our approach to tackling serious violence. Factors such as domestic abuse, truancy and substance abuse can make a young person more vulnerable to becoming a victim or perpetrator of serious violence. That is why, for example, we are investing £220 million in early intervention schemes—a record amount.

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**Sajid Javid**: My hon. Friend has led an excellent local campaign and I commend him for it. As he will know, Essex police has received £1.7 million from the £100 million extra funding to tackle serious violence that was recently announced. In addition, his local police and crime commissioner has been provisionally allocated a further £1.16 million for a violence reduction unit. He may also welcome the £660,000 allocated to Essex from the early intervention youth fund.

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21. **Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Reducing school exclusions is key to tackling this problem. Will the Home Secretary join the Housing, Communities and Local Government Secretary to co-fund high-quality intervention for young men who are falling
out of school and being excluded from school between the ages of 13 to 15, which appear to be the key ages when they are at risk of going from pupil referral units to prison?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady raises an important point and it shows precisely why we are planning to introduce the public health duty—to get more Departments and public agencies to work together in providing early intervention through many different types of programme. She is right to highlight alternative provision and some of the issues associated with it, especially how some of those children, sadly, become the target of gangs, and we are doing more work across government.

22. [911938] Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What is the Home Secretary doing with other Departments in the spending review to fund youth centres properly? That would go some way to tackling youth crime.

Sajid Javid: When it comes to early intervention, youth activities, youth clubs and the kind of thing we have just heard about in Southend are the sort of important work that we want to support more. I have talked about the £220 million of early intervention funding, which is a record amount, and it will go towards doing that, supporting some 200 different projects.

Mr Speaker: Ah yes, you’re a very fine sportsman—I call Mr Tom Pursglove.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): You are far too kind, Mr Speaker.

What difference does the Home Secretary believe putting 20,000 more police officers out on the beat, catching criminals and deterring crime, will make in practical terms?

Sajid Javid: I have long said that we need to tackle crime, especially serious violence, on many fronts, and that means making sure that the police are properly resourced so that we have enough police on the streets. That is why this year we had a record settlement of resourced so that we have enough police on the streets and we are discussing that internally in Government to see what more can be done. I hope the right hon. Lady recognises, though, that it is about more than just police; it is about early intervention and understanding some of the underlying causes of crime. I have always recognised the need for more resources and more police.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Home Secretary referred to the new public health duty. The Opposition agree that it is a good idea in principle, but does the Home Secretary agree with the Children’s Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, who has said that the change is not enough on its own and who is calling for the next Prime Minister, and perhaps his Chancellor, to ensure that preventive services such as youth services have the right resources? Will the Home Secretary tell us how often the Prime Minister’s knife crime taskforce has actually met?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Lady has mentioned an important partner in tackling serious violence, and the Children’s Commissioner is part of the serious violence taskforce and we listen to her important views regularly. Of course, the Children’s Commissioner is right that this issue requires action on many fronts. There is no one single answer—we have talked about resources, new powers, early intervention and, of course, the public health approach—which is why we are working across Government. We have institutionalised that in Government in many ways, including with the taskforce that the Prime Minister set up, which has already met once and is meeting again today.

Extremist Views

8. Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): What steps is he taking to support community organisations to counter extremist views.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Our £63 million “Building a Stronger Britain Together” programme provides funding to local community groups that seek to challenge extremist views. Since 2016, we have supported more than 230 civil society groups, which have access to training opportunities and a network of 40 expert counter-extremism community co-ordinators who are embedded in local authorities.

Dr Lewis: What more can the Government do to publicise those important examples of where communities and community organisations have succeeded in the supply of information that has prevented terrorist plots, saved innocent lives and helped to take people who were at risk of radicalisation away from extremist doctrines?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. We have often talked at the Dispatch Box about, for example, the importance of the Prevent programme, which is fundamentally about safeguarding and supporting vulnerable individuals to stop them becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. My right hon. Friend may be interested to know that in just one year, 2017–18, our Channel safeguarding programme supported some 394 individuals, and 181 different community projects that have reached 88,000 different people.
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Home Secretary really should be ashamed of himself. If he comes to a place such as Huddersfield and other towns in West Yorkshire, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) has just mentioned, he will find that it is about not only diverting young people from violence, gangs and crime, but tackling extremist views early on. If the Government dismantle local government youth services, they cannot just pass the responsibility across to community associations and think that is okay.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman should know that we have done a great deal since 2000 to support community projects, including youth community projects. I mentioned earlier the £63 million that we put into the “Building a Stronger Britain Together” programme. That is through the Home Office alone, but much more is going on through the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Education and local government. He mentions Huddersfield. Just last week, I had the pleasure of meeting a young man called Jamal, who was the victim of racism, a form of extremism, in the hon. Gentleman’s own constituency. I had the opportunity to welcome him to our great country and to tell him that what happened to him in Huddersfield in no way represents the people of our great nation.

Mr Speaker: I call Sir Roger Gale.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): Topical Question 1, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: No, no, no; the right hon. Gentleman is ahead of himself. He is working on the basis that we always stick to time, which is not an unreasonable assumption except that it suffers from the disadvantage in factual terms of being wrong.

Hostile State Activity

11. Sir Roger Gale: What steps he is taking to counter hostile state activity in the UK. [911927]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Across Government, we are taking a broad range of legislative, diplomatic and operational action to prevent, disrupt and deter hostile state activity.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) will have Topical Question 1 as well, so he will get two bites at the cherry and he will have nothing about which to complain.

Sir Roger Gale: A wonderful opportunity! Scarcely cricket, but a wonderful opportunity.

Following the attempted poisonings in Salisbury, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister took robust action to secure the dismissal from the United Kingdom and other European countries of Russian spies posing as diplomats. There is some reason to suppose that that network is now being rebuilt. Without asking my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to give details of the work of MI5, may I ask him to give us a reassurance that it is very firmly on the case?

Sajid Javid: As my right hon. Friend says, I will not comment on any sensitive intelligence matter, but he is right to be concerned about the rise in hostile state activity. There is ongoing activity across Government to ensure that our democracy is protected. We have taken many steps and co-ordinated them across Government and the relevant authorities. He will also be pleased to know that, now that the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019 is on the statute book, it gives us many more powers to counter hostile state activity.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Home Secretary will know that police numbers remain key to hostile state activity prevention. I have still not heard an answer to the question that my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) posed—how many extra police officers are going to be recruited, and when, to tackle this important issue?

Sajid Javid: When it comes to hostile state activity, it is not that police numbers are unimportant, but actually, the key is intelligence and support for our intelligence services, especially for MI5 and the excellent work that it does.

Mr Speaker: I am enormously tickled to see the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), the Father of the House, beetle into the Chamber by walking across the Government Front Bench. I suppose that he was so long an habitué of the Treasury Bench that it may seem a perfectly normal means by which to enter the Chamber, but, in any case, we are delighted to see him.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I do apologise to the House. It was once the only way that I entered this Chamber.

Mr Speaker: As I say, we are very pleased to see the right hon. and learned Gentleman, and we look forward to hearing from him ere long.

Community and Neighbourhood Policing

12. Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with police and crime commissioners on (a) the merits of and (b) investment in community and neighbourhood policing. [911928]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): As funding for the police increases, we have made it clear that we want to see more consistent, proactive neighbourhood policing, which is the cornerstone of the British policing model.

Ruth Smeeth: I thank the Minister for his reply, but my police and crime commissioner has cut the number of warranted officers by more than 500 since 2010, and, despite the efforts of my brilliant local police, only two are now allocated to Kidsgrove. We have seen a spike in threatening antisocial behaviour in the past month, with some people now refusing to go to the local park. I will not have no-go areas in my constituency, so what will the Minister do?

Mr Hurd: I am a bit puzzled by what the hon. Lady says, because I have spoken to her police and crime commissioner, the excellent Matthew Ellis, and he is extremely animated about how he is going to use the additional money from the funding settlement to move
Mr Hurd: They do not need a degree to go into policing; that is what the apprentice route is for. I know plenty of people with degrees who would make very poor police officers. What we are keen to do is upskill the force and, critically, ensure that the very considerable skills that people coming out of policing have developed are accredited.

18. [911934] Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Northumbria police has lost a quarter of its funding and 1,000 police officers due to Government cuts. Labour’s candidate in the police and crime commissioner elections on Thursday is so concerned that she has raised a petition to reverse the cuts. Will the Minister send the next Prime Minister a message that she cares about community policing and sign Kim’s petition?

Mr Hurd: Northumbria police has had its funding increased by £18 million in a process that the hon. Lady opposed. The excellent Conservative candidate in those elections—Robbie Moore, whom I have met—is absolutely committed to neighbourhood policing, as are this Government. We are making police funding a priority.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Investment in neighbourhood policing looks set to become even more difficult following last month’s Supreme Court ruling that the Government’s post-2015 pension changes were unlawful. This ruling affects tens of thousands of public servants, including police officers, who have no negotiating rights and have had these discriminatory changes imposed on them. Will there be an industrial resolution to this mess for officers who have been left in limbo, and will funding for policing be protected when the Treasury finally brings forward measures to remedy this illegal discrimination?

Mr Hurd: The Government have made very clear the priority that we attach to police funding. We are increasing funding, through council tax and other measures, by up to £1 billion this year. The Home Secretary and I have made it quite clear that police funding is our priority, as have the candidates for the roles of leader of our party and the next Prime Minister. In relation to the very important judgment—it is extremely significant—against which the Government cannot appeal, it is for my colleagues in the Treasury to make a considered response.

Mr Speaker: We are running late, but I want to take the questions from the hon. Members for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) and for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on domestic abuse.

Mr Hurd: [Interruption.]

Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Ending domestic abuse remains an absolute priority, which is why I am delighted to announce that tomorrow we will be launching the landmark Domestic Abuse Bill, which will contain a groundbreaking series of measures to promote awareness, support victims and children, tackle perpetrators and improve services.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the Minister for answering my supplementary question before I had asked it—I am delighted that the Bill will be introduced tomorrow. Can she confirm that it will support my constituents in Daventry who have experienced or been victims of domestic abuse, and protect others from experiencing it in the future?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so. I thank my hon. Friend for the work that he has done to raise with me the issues in his constituency. We are delighted that the Bill will be introduced tomorrow. There is also a package of non-legislative measures that will be critical in ensuring that we are supporting victims, preventing further opportunities for abuse and, also importantly, helping children who live in abusive households.

Trudy Harrison: Will my hon. Friend join me in commending the new and excellent Women Out West centre in Whitehaven, which is having a huge impact on women and their families in my constituency in partnership with the Copeland hub, which she recently visited?

Victoria Atkins: I would be delighted to commend the centre. It was a pleasure to visit the Copeland hub—a great example of multi-agency working, which, as everyone in the House knows, is essential if we are to tackle this pernicious crime of domestic abuse effectively across our country.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): It is great news that the Bill is going to be published tomorrow—real credit to the Minister personally for sticking with this. Can she confirm that she has listened to the survivors of abuse, particularly of emotional and economic abuse, through the draft process and strengthened the final Bill as a result?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so, and may I thank the hon. Gentleman, too, for all his work and his lobbying of me to support and protect victims of domestic abuse? I must also record my thanks to the Joint Committee—a brilliant Committee of parliamentarians from both Houses who scrutinised the draft Bill in great detail, heard lots of evidence from incredibly important stakeholders and produced a report, to which we will publish a response tomorrow alongside the Bill.
Topical Questions

T1. [911942] Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): We continue to fight serious violence and support our world-class police. Yesterday I announced a new legal duty on public bodies to prevent and tackle serious violence, which will compel all relevant public agencies to work together to understand and address this epidemic. Over the last year, we have engaged with police officers and staff on our frontline review, which was published last week and will lead to even more support.

Sir Roger Gale: Given the ongoing police inquiry into the leaking of confidential Foreign and Commonwealth Office documents, together with the need to protect the freedom of the press, my right hon. Friend has a difficult circle to square. Can he tell the House how he intends to both protect the freedom of the press and ensure that the person responsible for this crime is brought to book?

Sajid Javid: I am not going to comment on an ongoing police investigation—I hope my right hon. Friend understands that—but the person who leaked the document should, of course, face the consequences. When I was Culture Secretary, I was very passionate about the freedom of the press. That view has not changed in any way whatsoever. I will always defend the hard-won liberties and the operation of the free press.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): The latest Government fire and rescue service inspections found that nine years of austerity have created a postcode lottery of response times and crewing levels. We now have rising response times, with fewer firefighters attending incidents. The Government’s reckless lack of oversight and investment is risking the safety of many communities across the country. Will the Minister consider implementing national minimum standards, to confront the geographical inequalities that his Government have deepened?

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): We have introduced independent inspections of fire and rescue services, which in fact show that most people across the country get an excellent service in the response to emergencies, but there are variations. That is why we have introduced a national standards board, which is looking at the opportunity to develop greater consistency in standards across the system in the light of the inspection findings.

T2. [911943] Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Responsibility for enforcing the Vagrancy Act 1824 falls between the Home Office and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is time we revoked the Act and had homeless people who are here only to work. She is right to raise the issue, but those in English universities who might be studying a solution so that not just students at Scottish universities but those in English universities who might be studying a longer course such as medicine, veterinary science or architecture are not disadvantaged. We are determined to find a solution that works for all students.

Sajid Javid: I commend my hon. Friend for the huge amount of work he has done on tackling homelessness and rough sleeping: I saw that as Communities Secretary as well. The Government believe that no one should be criminalised for simply having nowhere to live and sleeping rough. The Government’s 2018 rough sleeping strategy committed us to reviewing the homelessness and rough sleeping legislation, including the Vagrancy Act 1824. That is what we are doing, and I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that further.

T3. [911944] Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): The Government have been severely complacent in preparing fire services for an emergency on the scale of Grenfell Tower. There are still hundreds of dangerous high-rise buildings, and by continuing to degrade our fire service, the Government are failing to recognise the severity of the risk. Since Grenfell, Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service’s funding has been slashed by £3.8 million. Response times have continued to rise. Can the right hon. Gentleman guarantee that all fire and rescue services will be properly prepared for high-rise emergency incidents?

Mr Hurd: The Government continue to give the fire service the resources it needs against a background of falling fire numbers. We continue to monitor that in the run-in to the comprehensive spending review, working closely with the fire service. On the remediation of buildings and the urgent review of a fire safety system that had clearly failed, we continue to work closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in our consultation on that.

T4. [911945] Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): In 2018, the Home Secretary agreed to review the policy that bans asylum seekers from working within their first 12 months and severely restricts what professions they can enter thereafter. Can he tell the House when he expects the results of the review to be published and what proposed changes will be recommended?

Sajid Javid: As my right hon. Friend knows, asylum seekers can work in jobs on the shortage occupation list if their claim has been outstanding for 12 months. I know that she will agree that we need to distinguish between those with the need for protection and those who are here only to work. She is right to raise the issue, and it is time for reform. The work in the Home Office is ongoing, and we hope to bring something to the House as soon as possible.

T5. [911946] Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): A blanket three-year temporary leave to remain visa after a no-deal Brexit will not cut it, especially for students wanting to study courses that last longer than that. When will that be fixed so students have certainty that they can complete their courses?

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question on an issue that has been raised several times in the House. The Home Office is working hard to make sure that we have a solution so that not just students at Scottish universities but those in English universities who might be studying a longer course such as medicine, veterinary science or architecture are not disadvantaged. We are determined to find a solution that works for all students.

T6. [911947] Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Neighbourhood watch schemes and social media apps are widely used in my local community to share local information and to keep the community safe by working together. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me to
discuss this and the possibility of funding a pilot scheme to enable the police, neighbourhood watch and local people to engage in a wider network to better co-ordinate those digital platforms?

Mr Hurd: Those of us who have active neighbourhood watch networks in our constituencies know the value of that network of active citizens working closely with the police: it is the heart of our police model. We are big fans of neighbourhood watch and we have supported it for many years. I would be delighted to sit down with my hon. Friend to discuss how that funding could help in her constituency.

T7. [911948] Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): On Friday, Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, told the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse: “I am convinced we need to move to mandatory reporting for regulated activities.” Does the Home Secretary agree with the archbishop, and will he now introduce mandatory reporting legislation to protect children from harm?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): We are of course grateful to the archbishop for his thoughts, and to the independent inquiry, which is doing an incredibly important job in looking at tackling institutional child sexual abuse. We have looked at mandatory reporting really carefully, and the balance of evidence came down against, but it is something that we very much keep under review, and I am happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss it with her.

T8. [911949] Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the best way to get the message to those across the world who gain wealth from grotesque crimes involving hideous human rights abuses and fraud that they are not welcome here is to have more unexplained wealth orders and a robust UK sanctions regime up and running?

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): My right hon. Friend has led a long campaign against such people. He will be glad to know that in the last few years, with our new impetus on economic crime, we have found that a number have already had their collars felt, some have had to explain their wealth—the latest case being £100 million of London property—£112 million of assets have been frozen, and some have found it very hard to visit the country altogether.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): In his excellent op-ed in the Financial Times on 7 June, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said it made no sense at all to send back home straight after their studies some of the brightest and most enterprising people in the world, and he also backed a cross-party move to liberalise the student migration system. That said, I have agreed with him and many other hon. Members that we need to look again at the action that was taken and see what more can be done. I am planning to come to the House with a statement to say much more before the summer recess.

Mr Hurd: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman’s interest in this issue and the work that he is doing through the all-party parliamentary group that he chairs and helped to set up. We have discussed the broader issue several times. He will know that in 2012 the National Audit Office highlighted widespread abuse of the student migration system. That said, I have agreed with him and many other hon. Members that we need to look again at the action that was taken and see what more can be done. I am planning to come to the House with a statement to say much more before the summer recess.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Disability hate crime has increased more than fourfold since 2011, and that is not even the real level of hate crime and abuse that disabled people have faced. Disabled people have been particularly hit by this Government’s cuts, so what will the Home Secretary do to ensure joined-up working between the police and other agencies to squash this blatant disregard for the laws of the land once and for all?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The latest official data indicates an increase in police recorded disability hate crime. We believe that is due in part to general police recording improvements, but more clearly needs to be done. That is why we are instigating a review by the Law Commission to ensure that the framework, generally, tackles such hatred. We have had a nationwide public awareness campaign, including specific examples of disability hate crime. We are also funding community projects across the country, including a number that directly tackle disability hate crime, such as Changing Faces and Barnardo’s.

Sajid Javid: I commend my right hon. Friend for the work he has done in this space, especially on tackling unauthorised encampments. He will know that the Home Office has identified a set of measures that will extend the powers available to the police. We are also conducting a review of the act of trespassing to see whether it can be automatically criminalised.

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the current Cabinet, but, as he knows, there will be a change in the Cabinet very soon. We do not know who will lead that change, but it might well be someone he is quite close to, so he might want to lobby them too. However, I am very sympathetic, and I will happily work with my hon. Friend.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): TransPennine Express recently locked a gate that is a major access point to the Hull Paragon station, and prominent disability campaigners have been protesting about that. It has locked the gate because it believes that that is the best way to deal with the rising problem of antisocial behaviour. Does the Minister agree that the company should be letting the police tackle the problem of antisocial behaviour and not discriminating against disabled people? Will Ministers join me in sending a clear message to TransPennine Express to open the gate?

Victoria Atkins: I hope the hon. Lady will forgive me if I am not familiar with the precise railway gate in question. However, she will know that the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 provides at least six powers for not just the police but local authorities to tackle antisocial behaviour. It might be that the train company would benefit from a bit of discussion with not just the police but local authorities to see whether they can come up with a better solution.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Over the last couple of weeks, my constituency has been rocked by two serious incidents of crime. I am sure my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will want to join me in thanking the emergency services and in wishing a speedy recovery to those who were physically injured in those attacks. However, what cross-departmental discussions has he had about providing a more holistic approach to supporting the victims of such crimes?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Having visited her constituency recently, I am incredibly sorry to hear of the experiences her constituents have had. She will know that the Government have recently published the victims strategy, which, although led by the Ministry of Justice, very much had the input of the Home Office as well. We want to ensure that we lead that change, but it might well be someone he is quite close to, so he might want to lobby them too. However, I am very sympathetic, and I will happily work with my hon. Friend.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Absolutely, Mr Speaker. Whose interests were served by tearing Lianne Zietsman away from her family, business and community, and deporting her against the wishes of the entire community of the island of Arran?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman will understand the distinction between deportation, which happens to foreign national offenders, and removal, which happens to those who are immigration offenders. There is a very clear difference. He will know that I cannot comment on individual cases, but it is worth stating that the Supreme Court has upheld the Government’s minimum income requirement to have dependants and spouses in this country. That is an important principle, which the Government support, because we want people to have an adequate level of income that will enable them to integrate into society.

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): Given that we ran a highly successful seasonal agricultural workers scheme from 1945 to 2013, what do the Government think they can learn from a two-year pilot? Since we have an urgent labour shortage in agriculture, will the Secretary of State commit to convert the current pilot into a fully operational scheme next year?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend will be conscious that at the moment free movement still prevails, which is one of the reasons why this is still a pilot. The Government will of course carefully evaluate the outcome of what is scheduled to be a two-year pilot to understand the impact and to look at what we can do going forward.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, but this will have to be the last inquiry, as demand exceeds supply. I am sure the Home Office ministerial team are delighted to know that they are parliamentary box office.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The cornerstone of community policing in London, to use the Minister’s words, is the safer neighbourhood teams, which have been cut by 50% to 60% and more. When will they be returned to full strength?

Mr Hurd: That is ultimately a decision for the Mayor in his capacity as police and crime commissioner, working with the Metropolitan Police Commissioner. Our role is to ensure that the Met has the resources it needs. That is why we have taken through funding settlements resulting in the Met receiving £100 million of additional investment last year and £172 million this year, with more to come. How that money is spent and allocated is down to the Mayor and the commissioner.
Detainee Mistreatment: Judge-led Inquiry

3.41 pm

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con) ( Urgent Question ): To ask the Prime Minister if she will make good on her Government’s commitment, made over a year ago, to bring to the House within 60 days their view on reinstating the judge-led inquiry into detainee mistreatment and rendition that the former Government promised in 2012.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): As my right hon. and learned Friend indicates, this issue has a lengthy history. It was in July 2010 that Prime Minister Cameron announced Sir Peter Gibson’s inquiry into allegations that the United Kingdom had been implicated in the improper treatment of detainees held by other countries in the aftermath of 9/11.

In December 2013, the Government published Sir Peter’s preparatory work and asked the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament to follow up on the themes and issues which that work had identified, to take further evidence and to make a report. At the same time, the Government said that they would: “take a final view as to whether a further judicial inquiry still remains necessary to add any further information of value to future policy making and the national interest.”—[ Official Report, 19 December 2013; Vol. 572, c. 916.]

In June last year, the Intelligence and Security Committee, its work having been interrupted by two general elections and the task of reconstituting the Committee after those elections, published two reports: “Detainee Mistreatment and Rendition: 2001-2010”, and “Detainee Mistreatment and Rendition: Current Issues”. In response to an urgent question from my right hon. and learned Friend on 2 July last year, the Minister for Europe and the Americas, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister for finally producing consolidated guidance.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Mr Clarke: You have asked the most penetrating question, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister for finally producing some indication of when we might get a decision and for saying that the Government have reached conclusions. I will not repeat his precis of events, which goes back to the most firm undertakings in 2010 and 2012 that there would be a judge-led inquiry. The preliminary inquiry by Sir Peter Gibson set out the questions that the inquiry had to answer. It was postponed only because of the police inquiry into the further revelations of rendition to Colonel Gaddafi in Libya. After that, the resumption of the inquiry was postponed while the parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee examined matters. When the ISC finally discovered the extent of British intelligence services’ complicity in cases of torture and their involvement in hijacking and the unlawful rendition of people for interrogation, mainly in America, the Committee’s investigations were stopped and it made a report saying what it would have liked to examine if it had been allowed to interview witnesses.

For years and years, this has been put into the long grass in the hope that it would eventually go away, so I hope that that comes to an end this week. We need to know how there was such a terrible breakdown in responsibility and communications that produced the misdeeds that took place in the time after 9/11, so that we can avoid the culture of the intelligence services and their relationships with Ministers ever slipping back into the same thing again. I hope that we will not just be told, “It is too late. Everything is all right now; there is no need to do anything,” because if it is all right now—as I trust it is—we have to reduce the risks that in future, we as a country will ever get involved in torture and rendition again.

If this decision comes out in the last days of this Session, on the eve of the summer recess and in the middle of the appointment of a new Prime Minister in an attempt to bury it away in the pages of Hansard and to escape any further challenge until the autumn comes around, it will be the most blatant further attempt to get out of the most solemn undertakings that were given by me when I was Justice Secretary and Lord Chancellor on behalf of the then Prime Minister. That Prime Minister gave these undertakings himself, in a Government in which the present Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and many of their colleagues were serving. We had cleared that line and should honour it, and the whole House should demand a proper, full statement later this week. If there is one success that the delay may have achieved, it is, I regret to say, that for serious personal reasons—not because I am going on holiday—I may miss the final denouement and the statement later this week, because I may be absent from the House. However, I hope that the House will hold the Government fully to account if they try to slip out of their commitments and obligations in the end.

Mr Lidington: I can reassure my right hon. and learned Friend that, far from there being any attempt on behalf of the Government to slip things out under the radar as the summer recess approaches, the Prime Minister has been very clear that she regards it as her responsibility to ensure that the decision is taken and announced to Parliament before she leaves office. It...
would be understandable if a new Prime Minister on taking office wanted to look again at or acquaint himself with the material that was coming to the present Prime Minister. This decision and its timing are actually designed to ensure that we do not slip anything out under the radar.

I would just say to my right hon and learned Friend that the Government are very clear that officials in our agencies have not been involved in torture and that this Government and previous Governments have been resolute in opposing torture. We are talking about the extent to which it is alleged that there was knowledge of or to some extent complicity in the treatment of detainees held by the authorities in other countries.

In my right hon and learned Friend's time, a number of significant changes were made, both in internal Government practice and in the law, that I believe have put us in a much better position since his time in office. I agree strongly with him about the need for us when we take office to ensure that we do not slip anything out under the radar.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank the Father of the House for securing it and for being so diligent on this issue. He has spoken with typical lucidity on this matter, and I agree with everything he has said, particularly about the unfortunate long grassing.

There is no need for me to repeat what the right hon. and learned Gentleman has already said concerning the constraints that were placed on a nevertheless damning report from the Intelligence and Security Committee. He rightly says that the only way to lift those constraints is to authorise a judge-led inquiry where all the witnesses can be called and all the evidence examined so that finally we can get to the full truth about the historical allegations of torture and rendition that took place under a Labour Government and about the operation of secret courts established by the current Government under the Justice and Security Act 2013.

The inquiry would be for the benefit of all future Governments, whichever party is in charge, as it would enable us all to truly learn the lessons from what has happened and to put in place new procedures and any necessary changes to the consolidated guidance so that we can absolutely guarantee that these abuses will never happen again. The reason it is so urgent is that in fewer than 10 days we will have a new Government in charge led by a Prime Minister who has proven by his actions not just as Foreign Secretary but also on the debate stage last week that he cannot be trusted to stand up to Donald Trump—a President who, let us not forget, has publicly said that he believes that water boarding and other forms of torture are effective and that we have to "fight fire with fire". If we have a new Prime Minister who is willing to throw our ambassadors under the bus, we must have new procedures in place to stop that Prime Minister allowing our Government once again to be in danger of becoming complicit in torture and rendition by the United States or any other country to whom he kowtows.

I am glad to hear that there will be a further statement, and hopefully that statement will include a decision by the Prime Minister, but will the Minister tell the Prime Minister to establish the inquiry that we were promised seven years ago in the next week and to provide at least one fitting legacy from her time in office and one necessary protection for the country from the recklessness of her successor?

Mr Lidington: Obviously I will not pre-empt the content of the Government's statement later this week, but I think it is clear from the way in which the right hon. Lady has posed her questions that it is acknowledged that the Government are very clear that officials in our agencies have not been involved in torture and that there has been no complicity or involvement in this. Whatever it is, I hope that whatever the Minister says about obeying international law, it is clear from the Prime Minister's apology to the Libyan victims alone that the British Government, at very best, came perilously close to breaching article 3 of the European convention on human rights, which forbids torture but also its facilitation or complicity in it. Moreover, without an independent judge-led inquiry, the Government may now be in breach of article 13, which, as well as encapsulating centuries of established common law, provides for the right to "an effective remedy".

I do not know what is making the Government take so long to decide whether to pursue a judge-led inquiry. It may be pressure from the agencies, although I doubt that now, or it may be pressure from allies who were complicit or involved in this. Whatever it is, I hope that whatever the Minister says next will help my right hon. Friend in his argument with them. If he does not announce an independent judge-led inquiry in his statement later this week, or next week, I will certainly seek advice on whether we have broken either of those articles, and, if need be, use the proper judicial mechanisms to ensure that the Government are put back within the bounds of the law.

Mr Lidington: As I said earlier, it is the duty of every Minister, in line with the Ministerial Code, to comply with our international as well as our domestic legal obligations. In the case of officials, those obligations are statutory, because the civil service code is itself...
incorporated in statute. I hope that when my right hon. Friend sees the detail of what will be announced later this week, he will be able to feel reassured by it.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I commend the Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), for bringing this matter to the Floor of the House, and for securing what seems to be something of a concession in relation to an announcement later this week. However, it is still very unclear why there has been such a lengthy delay since the undertaking given more than a year ago that the decision would be brought to the House “within 60 days”. Can the Minister elucidate?

Before the publication of the Intelligence and Security Committee’s report on these matters last year, the United States Government were given the chance to review the report and to request redactions. Will the Minister tell us what discussions have taken place with the Trump Administration about a potential inquiry, and will he reassure us that the Government’s delayed response is not a consequence of pressure from the United States?

Mr Lidington: This has taken time because the Government have felt, I think rightly, that an issue of such importance and sensitivity requires very careful and meticulous consideration. The Government’s decisions are made on the basis of the United Kingdom’s national interest, and nothing else.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Not withstanding my right hon. Friend’s mellifluous and reassuring tones, it is pretty reprehensible that the Father of the House has had to raise this matter yet again. Not only were he and I members of the Cabinet that promised the House this inquiry nearly 10 years ago, but it is day 378 since the 60-day promise made by the Government and reinforced by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office in answer to a written question from me. The damage that this has done to the UK’s precious international reputation is not well understood. This is not about hauling individuals before the courts; it is about transparency, openness, leadership and lessons learned.

The right investigation would have been by the Intelligence and Security Committee; a senior group of Privy Counsellors would have been best placed to handle this, and it would have been cheaper, but we are asking for this inquiry, the Government having hobbled the ISC’s inquiry. We are thrown back on a judge-led inquiry, but it must be a judge who is not part of the securitocracy.

Mr Lidington: Looking at international practice, I think we in this country can point to a system that requires high standard, and that is remarkably transparent, given the extremely secret nature of some of the personnel and operations that are relevant here. We now have a statutory role for the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, and we have his annual reports, including on detainee policy. We have enhanced powers for Parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee, and the Prime Minister no longer has the power to appoint its Chair. The framework established by the Justice and Security Act 2013 and the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 measures up against the best standards in the world.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Intelligence and Security Committee, on which I sit, finished its investigation on rendition, but the Government refused it access to certain individuals, so it could not interview them on the matter. If there were to be a judge-led inquiry, would the Government allow all individuals to give evidence to the judge?

Mr Lidington: I will not speculate on the content of the decision later this week, but I take on board the challenge that the right hon. Gentleman has posed.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I note my right hon. Friend’s answer to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) about high standards for the United Kingdom, but if the United Kingdom’s reputation for having the highest standards in this area is to be sustained, surely it is important, in this case and in others in which our security services come into contact with potential violations of fundamental aspects of international law, that there is proper accountability, driven by the Ministers who are meant to oversee it.

Mr Lidington: I agree with the final point that my hon. Friend makes, but I ask him to take account of the fact that we are dealing with the work of security and intelligence agencies—work on which the safety, and indeed the lives, of our citizens often depends—and that information about how operations are carried out can be of great value to our adversaries.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): It must surely be the objective of all civilised countries to ensure that such events as rendition and the mistreatment of detainees never occur across the world. If we are to achieve that, should we not stand on the highest possible moral ground?

Mr Lidington: We should certainly act on the highest possible moral grounds. I believe that we have a statutory framework in which we can take considerable pride, and that marks a significant improvement on the practices that the Intelligence and Security Committee previously criticised.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): As a member of the Committee, I think it is worth putting on record our extraordinary respect for the young men and women who serve in our intelligence services and who make impossible decisions, often at a moment’s notice. I think that an inquiry would show the extraordinary times in which they lived and how life has changed since many of the cases in question came before us. For example, there was no consolidated guidance in the earliest stages of the period we were looking at, and I believe that the Government made a fundamental mistake in not allowing us to see the witnesses we wanted to see, because we would actually have been able to show something that assisted the Government—namely, that we live in a completely different regulatory regime. I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Minister made the point about the changing powers and the extension of the consolidated guidance. Will he tell us whether the examination of the consolidated guidance will be announced soon, or whether we will have to wait a long time for it?

Mr Lidington: First, I thank my right hon. Friend for the just tribute that he paid to the men and women working in our security and intelligence agencies. I can give him what I hope is a reassuring answer to his question. Yes, we will be publishing Sir Adrian Fulford’s conclusions and recommendations in full later this week.
**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Minister accept that any UK involvement in extraordinary rendition is a stain on our reputation as a country that claims to uphold the rule of law and defend human rights? Does he agree that the best way to deal with this is for him to announce this week that there will be an independent judge-led inquiry, and also to announce the appointment of the new Investigatory Powers Commissioner?

**Mr Lidington:** I cannot promise the right hon. Gentleman an answer on that final point this week, but I believe that Sir Adrian’s recommendations will give him considerable reassurance.

**Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): May I seek an assurance from my right hon. Friend that the scope of any inquiry will include reports of extraordinary rendition through UK territories such as the British Indian Ocean Territory?

**Mr Lidington:** As I have said in response to earlier questions, I cannot pre-empt what will be in the Government’s statement later this week. However, I take note of my hon. Friend’s question.

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): When a Minister of the Crown stands at the Dispatch Box and says that something will be brought to the Chamber within 60 days, how should we understand such a commitment? Given the utter failure to deliver on this occasion, surely the House is entitled to a fuller explanation than the one the Minister has given so far, which is that this is terribly difficult?

**Mr Lidington:** It is not just a matter of something being difficult; it is a matter of Ministers having to consider the best course of action when we are talking about the work of security and intelligence agencies, which, by definition, has to be done in secret and whose disclosure could do considerable harm to our national interests.

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (IGC): Governments all over the world are challenging international law and the rules-based international order, and we have a President in the United States who clearly does not support those laws, so is it not time for our Government to accept that the promises they made at the Dispatch Box should be carried out? The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), the Father of the House, is one of the most experienced figures in these matters, and he has been persistent in trying to get the clarity we need on these issues. When the Government make what I hope will be an oral statement on this, should they not bring the matter to a conclusion rather than forcing us to come back to it again under a new Prime Minister?

**Mr Lidington:** It will not be in my power to decide whether the House wishes to return to these issues, but I can promise the hon. Gentleman that this will be a definitive statement.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the Government on their work on human rights, but does the Minister share my concern that failure to protect human rights by complicity by mistreating detainees diminishes the UK’s capacity to be a champion for human rights abroad?

**Mr Lidington:** It is important that we demonstrate through our actions, not just our words, our commitment to human rights. Moreover, when one has the privilege of speaking to officers in the intelligence agencies about these matters, they make it clear that they want to uphold human rights. The intelligence agencies have to operate within the statutory remit that Parliament has given them. Anything that they do that breaches their lawful purpose and objective is something that they should not do.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): Although the Gibson and ISC inquiries were curtailed or restricted, nevertheless they revealed hundreds of cases in which the UK was complicit or benefited from torture or mistreatment. Does that not mean that there is more of a case to set up such an inquiry than there was nine years ago, when the then Prime Minister said that there should be a judge-led inquiry “fully independent of Parliament, party and Government”—[Official Report, 6 July 2010; Vol. 513, c. 181]? The only thing that has changed in those nine years is that it would be difficult now to reach the truth because of the effluxion of time. Will the Minister at least say that there will be an inquiry, even if we hear the details later this week?

**Mr Lidington:** I disagree with the hon. Gentleman in his assertion that little has changed. There have been important statutory changes in the Justice and Security Act 2013 and the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. There have been important changes in the powers of the Intelligence and Security Committee, and in the statutory basis of the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, and in the practice that Ministers must be consulted whenever an intelligence officer involved in a planned operation believes that a detainee is at risk of mistreatment by a foreign state. That obligation applies even when consulting a Minister might be thought to lead to a risk of a terrorist act succeeding. The rules are much stricter than they once were.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): Given that Britain’s reputation is at stake in relation to human rights when we talk to the world about our values, an oral statement should be made in the House so that we can make a judgment on what sort of inquiry should take place and so that we can question the relevant Minister, even if that is the Prime Minister herself.

**Mr Lidington:** I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. What we are discussing as, in fairness, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) acknowledged, are historical allegations, particularly concerning the period from 2001 to 2010, and the immediate aftermath of the appalling 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. The statutory and administrative basis on which our affairs are now organised give us much greater assurance in the House that decisions are made appropriately and that our agencies adhere to the highest possible standards of conduct.
Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister made it clear that he thought that the change in the legislative, statutory and administrative frameworks were sufficient to assuage concerns that the House might have, but how can the House assess that unless it is thoroughly tested in this inquiry? That is the only way truly to understand whether it is effective or not.

Mr Lidington: The tests would be threefold. First, there will be an annual report from the Investigatory Powers Commissioner on how Government and the agencies use the powers with which they have been entrusted. Secondly, there are the reports from the Intelligence and Security Committee, and the confidence that the House should have that that Committee now has much greater autonomy and power than was once the case. Thirdly, Sir Adrian Fulford, the commissioner, was asked by the Government to review, reflect on and recommend changes to the consolidated guidance, and that is what we will put before the House later this week.

Points of Order

4.14 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise for taking time on another point of order on the question of the Home Office’s failure to answer questions satisfactorily, but you will recall that it is just over a year since, in June 2018, I raised a point of order on the Home Office’s refusal to provide information about tier 2 general certificate of sponsorship visas in response to written questions that I had tabled. This information was subsequently released in response to a freedom of information request.

When, subsequent to the information being provided via that FOI, I tabled a further question asking for updated figures, I assumed the Home Office would provide them to me, given that the information was now in the public arena, but it refused again, hence my point of order last June. In response, Mr Speaker, you shared my concern about the danger of FOI requests becoming a more effective way for colleagues to obtain information than a parliamentary question, and you said: “There is a basic issue here of parliamentary self-respect”. —[Official Report, 18 June 2018; Vol. 643, c. 78.]

That is clearly relevant to all Members.

Mr Speaker, you also advised me on how to pursue the matter, and I followed up with a letter to the Home Secretary, on 19 June 2018, highlighting your comments. Despite repeated phone calls and emails to the Home Office’s correspondence unit, I have not yet received a response to that letter—over 12 months later.

I finally tabled a written question asking when I could anticipate a response, and I was told that it was “being prepared”. No reason has been shared with me that would explain why an answer about the procedure for parliamentary questions has taken over a year, Mr Speaker, so I would be grateful if you could advise me on how to pursue this matter and how I might receive a response before the House breaks for the summer recess.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of his intention to raise it.

In summary, the matter is very unsatisfactory. The way in which the hon. Gentleman has been treated does not fall foul of any particular rule or Standing Order of the House. That said, it does not in any way become any less unsatisfactory. The essential issue at hand is, as I indicated in response to his previous point of order, a matter of parliamentary self-respect and, I say to occupants of the Treasury Bench, of courtesy on behalf of Ministers towards Members of the House seeking to discharge their duty of scrutiny.

It is therefore very disappointing that the hon. Gentleman has not achieved satisfaction in this matter, and what I want to say to him is as follows. First, he has been dogged and persistent in pursuit of this matter and, as he indicated, he has waited over a year for a Minister to answer his letter, which referred to my answer to his previous point of order.

I would hope that the delay in replying—I say this as much in hope as in expectation—is because Ministers are keen properly to address the underlying issue of
providing a less helpful answer to elected Members of the House than to those who pursue freedom of information requests.

I hope that Home Office Ministers, having heard this point of order, will ensure that the hon. Gentleman receives the full ministerial reply for which he has waited so long, and that he does so in a matter of days—specifically, before the summer recess.

The final point I would make, on which I expect concurrence, not least from senior and experienced Members of the House who have been here for decades, is this: it was at one time a very established expectation that, if Members were experiencing difficulty in securing replies from Ministers to letters or, indeed, written questions, the Leader of the House would see it as her or his responsibility to chase them in order to secure expeditious replies. I am sorry if that is not currently the case, but it used to be the case—[Interruption.] I note that the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) is nodding from a sedentary position, and I assume this view would be shared by Members in other parts of the House.

What I would say to the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) is that he should approach the current Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), and try to extract a commitment from him that he will engage in the matter and pursue Ministers. That is not only right for the hon. Member for Sheffield Central and his constituents but is in the interest of the effective functioning of all Members of the House. This is a matter not of rules but of parliamentary courtesy, and we need to return to it.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I would have spoken to you earlier about this if there had not been a muddle in our diaries. I had a similar example, where I had tabled questions on how many victims of modern slavery were held in detention centres. The Home Office replied that it did not know, but an outside organisation, after two Freedom of Information Act requests, gained that information, which the Home Office had denied having. Might I therefore also register through you that there is something much more rotten in the state of Denmark than just one simple question taking a whole year to answer?

Mr Speaker: On the back of what the right hon. Gentleman has said and of the initial intervention of the hon. Member for Sheffield Central, I will raise these matters in correspondence with the Leader of the House. But on the principle both of repetition and of reinforcement by numbers, I would strongly advise Members to do so themselves.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Late last week, the Parole Board announced that Vanessa George, the prolific serial child abuser from Plymouth, is being released from jail. She abused toddlers and babies at the now closed Little Ted’s nursery in Plymouth and then shared these images with a national network of paedophiles for their sexual pleasure, and was rightly jailed. I cannot express to you the pain and horror felt by the families involved at the release from prison of Britain’s most prolific female paedophile. As she has not revealed the full list of the children that she has abused, the horrors are probably much greater than those for which she was convicted. What advice can you give me as to how I can place on record the concerns of the people I represent, and have you had any indication from the Ministry of Justice that a Minister will be coming to the House to make a statement on this matter, so that we can question why she was released and why they feel she is no longer a threat to children?

Mr Speaker: I have received no indication from any Minister of an intention to make a statement on the matter. However, the matter is very important and of intense concern to the hon. Gentleman, to his constituents and, I rather imagine, to a lot of people around the country. What is my advice? My advice is that he should persist, persist, persist, as I invariably advise. What persistence means in this case is looking for opportunities to air concerns in the Chamber. My suggestion to him is that he seek an Adjournment debate, either on the specifics of the case or on what he considers to be its wider implications. If he does seek such an Adjournment debate, such applications tending to come my way, he might find that he is successful.

BILL PRESENTED

EMPLOYMENT (MINIMUM HOURS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57) Heidi Allen, supported by Frank Field, Ruth George, Ruth Smeeth, Justin Madders, Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck, Rosie Duffield, Anna Turley, Martyn Day, Kerry McCarthy, Mrs Madeleine Moon and Jeremy Lefroy, presented a Bill to require employers to offer workers on zero hours contracts the option of guaranteed minimum hours; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read the Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 421).

HIGH SPEED RAIL (WEST MIDLANDS - CREWE) BILL: BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to proceedings on the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill:

Timetable

(1) Proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption at this day’s sitting.

(2) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption at this day’s sitting.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(3) If, following proceedings on Consideration of the Bill, a Legislative Grand Committee withholds consent to the Bill or any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill, the House shall proceed to Reconsideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(4) If, following Reconsideration of the Bill—

(a) a Legislative Grand Committee withholds consent to any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill (but does not withhold consent to the whole Bill),

(b) the Bill is amended to remove any provisions which are not agreed to by the House and the Legislative Grand Committee, and

(c) a Minister of the Crown indicates their intention to move a minor or technical amendment to the Bill as so amended, the House shall proceed to consequential Consideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

Legislative Grand Committee withholds consent to the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill, without any Question being put.

(1) Proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption at this day’s sitting.

(2) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption at this day’s sitting.

Without any Question being put.
For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1) or (2), the Speaker or Chairman shall forthwith put the following Questions (but no others) in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply—

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;
(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;
(c) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Speaker or Chairman for separate decision;
(d) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown; (e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded.

On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Speaker or Chairman shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (5)(d) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Speaker or Chairman shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (5)(c) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Speaker or Chairman shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply so far as necessary for the purposes of this Order.

High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill

[Relevant document: Government overview of the case for HS2 Phase 2a and its environmental impacts, CP 118.]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Select Committee, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

Quarterly reports on environmental impact, costs and progress

“(1) The Secretary of State must publish quarterly reports on the scheduled works throughout the period in which those works take place.

(2) Each such report must contain an assessment of—

(a) environmental impact;
(b) costs; and
(c) progress compared to the scheduled timetable.

(3) The first such report must be laid before Parliament within the period ending three months after the day the scheduled works commence.

(4) Each subsequent report must be laid before Parliament within three months of the publication of the last report under this section.”—(Rachael Maskell.)

Brought up, and read the First time.

4.24 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—Compensation scheme for tenants—

“(1) The Secretary of State must by regulations make provision for a scheme to compensate tenants adversely affected by the scheduled works.

(2) Regulations under this section may contain such supplementary, incidental, consequential or transitional provision as the Secretary of State considers necessary or expedient.

(3) Regulations under this section must be made by statutory instrument.

(4) A statutory instrument containing regulations under this section is subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.”

New clause 4—Independent peer review—

“(1) The Secretary of State must commission an independent peer review of the High Speed Rail (West Midlands to Crewe) project.

(2) The review must include consideration of the project’s—

(a) environmental impact,
(b) economic impact,
(c) engineering, and
(d) governance.

(3) In this section, “independent” means it is carried out by persons who are independent of—

(a) Government,
(b) HS2 Ltd, and
(c) persons contracted or subcontracted to carry out the scheduled works.

(4) In this section, a “peer review” is a review conducted by experts of equivalent professional qualifications, expertise and standing to the persons responsible for each aspect of the project set out in subsection (2).
It is in our name, Labour. Of course, we all knew that quality jobs and opportunities to inspire a generation.

The north. That is what Labour is about: creating high-
and the south-east, it was a Labour Government who
age and how that was not being met.

the potential in the midlands to spark a new industrial
particularly across the north and the midlands, needed
what we see today. We recognised that the generations,
those of my hon. Friends? When Labour envisaged

Labour supports phase 2a, which will be the shortest leg
of the route, at just 37 miles in total, and provide that
vital north-south link, north of Birmingham to Crewe. Our support is not unreserved, though, and we believe colleagues should join us in the Lobby today to vote for Labour’s new clauses.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): As the hon. Lady knows extremely well, I have opposed this Bill and its predecessor Act of Parliament, which inaugurated the first phase, absolutely 100% all the way down the line. Although I have a great deal of sympathy for the new clauses that the hon. Lady has tabled, I cannot quite understand how she can reconcile what she has just said with the origins of the proposals. New clause 4 says that an independent peer review ought to consider questions relating to the project’s environmental and economic impact and its engineering and governance and that that review must be carried out by persons who are independent of the Government, HS2 Ltd and all the rest. It sounds to me like the hon. Lady is not terribly keen on the proposals.

Rachael Maskell: May I thank you, Mr Speaker, for selecting the new clauses that stand in my name and those of my hon. Friends? When Labour envisaged HS2, it was a very different infrastructure project from what we see today. We recognised that the generations, particularly across the north and the midlands, needed far better connectivity. We wanted to regenerate the northern towns and cities of our country, and we saw the potential in the midlands to spark a new industrial age and how that was not being met.

After decades of disproportionate investment in London and the south-east, it was a Labour Government who saw how improved connectivity was needed to attract vital inward investment and to revitalise economies in the north. That is what Labour is about: creating high-quality jobs and opportunities to inspire a generation. It is in our name, Labour. Of course, we all knew that rebuilding connectivity had to start in the north, particularly with the east-west connections, to truly join up what is now aspiring to be the northern powerhouse. However, without the power of investment in the transport system, that will be nothing more than a soundbite. That is why Labour supports phase 2a, which will be the shortest leg of the route, at just 37 miles in total, and provide that

High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill
Perhaps that is a project for the future, but to get that long overdue connectivity in the north, it is vital that we press on and build a network for the future. We will then see serious modal shift, not only of passengers but of goods.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): Is the hon. Lady not also worried by the very long delay before there is any additional capacity north of Birmingham? Is it not a paradox that something that was designed to help the northern powerhouse will actually produce only a Birmingham-London additional railway for the foreseeable future?

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As I have already said, we would focus on the north and on making sure that we get those trans-Pennine links in place. We see that as a priority over all rail infrastructure projects, because we understand the power of joining up Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield and the cities and towns beyond. We want to see that investment coming forward. Electrification will also ensure that we benefit from better journey times, reliability and connectivity, which are vital for building our railways into the future. However far into the future it will be until we see the realisation of new rail, it does not mean that we will neglect that ambition to build more capacity north to south, which is vital if we are to take lorries off our roads and give freight an opportunity to move on the west coast main line.

**Sir William Cash** rose—

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab): I will, if I may, finish my point.

Although we all get frustrated because we want projects delivered sooner rather than later, what is crucial to us is that, if we do not start now, we will put the completion date even further away. That is why we are keen to get on with it today.

4.30 pm

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I share her enthusiasm for this ambitious project. She talks about journey times. To achieve that modal shift, particularly between Scotland and London, we need to get rail journey times below three hours. Does she agree that that requires much more ambition in the future to ensure that we have a UK-wide network, which includes integrating Glasgow and Edinburgh into the high-speed network?

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab): I certainly do agree with those excellent points, because HS2 cannot stop at Crewe. We must build further north and right into the heart of Scotland, particularly into the major cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, to ensure that we get the connectivity right in the future. We know the power of infrastructure to transform people’s lives. We want to see inward investment into those conurbations, which is why we believe that, at this point—this is where the Government have been far too silent—we need to ensure that we build that vision for Glasgow and Edinburgh and beyond as we move forward. As my hon. Friend is such an excellent champion for his city of Glasgow, I am sure that he will be making those points to the Government time and again until we see more action.

**Sir William Cash** rose—

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab): I wish to make a little more progress, and then I will be happy to take the hon. Gentleman’s intervention.

Let me continue talking through a bit of the history of this project. We know that, by 2011, HS2 was being mapped out at a cost of £37.5 billion. We have seen that cost rise to £55.7 billion today. The narrative around the project has also changed. Frustrations have been expressed by the public, and often echoed in this place, because they want to fully understand the benefits that this project will bring. I trust that the Minister will go back and review the communications on this, because clearly people up and down the country have been hearing about the costs involved but not about the benefits. We need far more clarity, particularly when we know that this will be such a powerful instrument in creating jobs. We also want to give hope and new opportunities to businesses in the supply chain up and down the country, and there is work to do on that.

We need to ensure that those people who are making a sacrifice for this project—whether it is their home or their business that they are having to relocate—get the answers that they need. Labour wants far better governance of the project so that the public get their answers in a timely way from HS2, so that they can make their plans in confidence as they move forward.

**Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Scepticism is shared by many of my constituents, especially given the track record of non-delivery for the north. If we genuinely want to power up the north, major infrastructure projects are essential, but we need to see Crossrail for the north. I am sick and tired of hearing about Crossrail for the south, and it is great to see some of the southern colleagues on the Government Benches now seemingly speaking up for some constituents in the north as well as those in the south—if only they had done that in the past. I want assurances that this will be transparent and that investment will go into the north.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and of course constituents right across the north really do want to see that investment, which is so long overdue. Therefore, again, the Government need to bring forward greater commitments in statute that they will deliver Crossrail for the north. We on the Opposition Benches are concerned that Crossrail 2, yet another infrastructure project in London, could well take priority and we will not see the full power being put into the electrification of the trans-Pennine route, which was promised, and let us all remember that that was cancelled by the Secretary of State conveniently on the day that Parliament rose. We want to see that investment for the future for our northern towns and cities, and that is certainly what we would see under a Labour Government.

**Michael Fabricant** (Crewe) (Con): I totally agree with the hon. Lady: she is absolutely right about there being a need for a Crossrail in the north because the east-west communications are so bad, but I just want to ask her one thing. She is quite right to say that investment in the capital programme of HS2 will generate jobs and skills, which we so much need, but she also says it will create employment opportunities afterwards; does she not fear that Britain might go down the French route whereby jobs are in fact sucked south into London rather than being generated in the north?
Rachael Maskell: France is a very different country from the UK, and we must bear in mind the potential opportunities from improved connectivity across the north given, for instance, the power of the ports in Hull and of course in Liverpool. There is an opportunity for the economy to be built up through those ports, particularly when the Government are looking at our whole trade policy. So there is real opportunity in this project if we get the infrastructure built right, and that is why it is so important that HS2 does not stand alone but is fully integrated across the whole of our transport and rail network to ensure we get the power of the whole project.

Sir William Cash: I am not sure whether this will come as music to the hon. Lady’s ears, but I am proposing to vote for her new clauses. However, I am really puzzled by new clause 4(4) and (5) and what they say about the independent review, which I am completely behind, as it is to be completely independent of HS2 and the Government and the persons contracted and so forth. Is this not just window-dressing, however, because the new clause goes on to say the report “must be laid before the House of Commons within 12 months of this Act receiving Royal Assent”?

In other words, it will be enacted, although I want to see it repealed—[Interruption. Yes, I do indeed. What is the use of a report being produced by all these incredible independent experts if it will simply not be carried through?

Rachael Maskell: There are two separate points. We want to ensure that we get value out of the project, and it is astonishing that the Government have not put in place the peer review mechanisms over it—both economic and engineering peer reviews—as has been the case for other major infrastructure projects. This is a way to build public confidence and to ensure that we have a real comprehension of the power of these projects. Unfortunately, HS2 is working very much in isolation, and that responsibility sits with the Secretary of State, who is not calling it to account enough: it is a shame not to see him in his place today because he is answerable to the House for this project, and he has not done his duty in ensuring that HS2 fulfils its responsibilities. But perhaps we will get a showing from the Secretary of State later—let us hope so.

I want to talk about the environmental concerns that have been raised and the costs. Many have also questioned the engineering itself. In my experience, senior engineers from across the rail industry—not necessarily involved in the HS2 project—have been making these points and have called for greater scrutiny. It is therefore really important that we identify any fault lines in the project to ensure that amendments are made. Of course, it takes time to ensure that there is a proper review and that the project is built for the long term.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): Just before the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), the hon. Lady mentioned that she was in favour of—I think these were the words she used—a joined-up transport project with better co-ordination. At staggering expense, this project will take passengers from my constituency who want to go directly to Heathrow to a place called Old Oak Common. Now, I have never been there—it might be a most charming place—but I suggest that my constituents will want to go directly to Heathrow. If they wanted to go to HS1 and link up to Brussels, Paris or wherever, as it is they would have to go to Euston, and either walk down the platform, get in a taxi or get on a bus. That does not seem to be very clever co-ordination of the most expensive railway that man has ever yet conceived.

Rachael Maskell: My new clauses are so important to ensuring that we get that desperately needed connectivity built into the infrastructure. The fragmentation across our rail network is incredibly costly; there are delays and there is no joined-up thinking. That is why Labour wants to bring rail together. It is so important to re-unite the whole network in one public body, of which we envisage HS2 being a part. We will then get the connectivity that the public would expect from a rail network. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will support my new clause later today to take that idea forward.

Mr Paterson: Does the hon. Lady therefore question the current arrangements as proposed, and is the Labour party prepared to vote against us unless this railway is realigned—with a direct link to Heathrow or a direct link to HS1?

Rachael Maskell: Labour is very clear that we will be supporting phase 2a that is before the House today, but we have called into question the way in which the Government are approaching the whole governance of the project. That is why we want to drive the project forward in a different way. I call on all hon. Members across the House to join us in the Lobby today to ensure that we get the right scrutiny over this project to drive it forward in the interests of their constituents, the public and the whole economy.

Members who attended the Westminster Hall debate last week will have heard the excellent speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), who so eloquently set out the idea that we measure what we treasure. I hear the powerful case for the east midlands, where over 60,000 jobs—high-quality ones, at that—have already been created, and we know that this project will bring opportunities across the country.

I hear the same expectations from Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Greater Manchester; from Steve Rotheram, the Mayor of the Liverpool city region; from my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), the Mayor of the Sheffield city region; and from Judith Blake, the leader of Leeds City Council. Not only will 30,000 jobs be developed across the project; hundreds of thousands will also result from investment across the north and the midlands, including in my home city of York. That in itself is a game-changer in tackling social mobility issues and rebalancing national inequality, and will draw investment into places that are in urgent need of regeneration. The issue is not whether HS2 is the right project, but the governance that surrounds its planning and construction.

As I have already said, Labour would integrate HS2 with the rest of our rail enhancement programme and integrate the northern sections of the route fully with new trans-Pennine connections, ensuring the connectivity, journey times and reliability that are so desperately needed. This is what we can achieve with one transformative, publicly run rail service, and it is also what we believe
the Government can achieve if they are serious about delivering the rail system needed for the future of the country. We also believe that the environmental value of this project needs greater scrutiny.

4.45 pm

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point about why we need to improve the governance and oversight of this project, to ensure that the maximum benefit is realised for the country. I am thinking of the supply chain benefits, particularly in my constituency, which was once a world leader in locomotive and railway manufacturing. We are just about to lose the last railway engineering works in my constituency because of a lack of coherent planning. There is a lack of capacity in the rolling stock overhaul business in this country, because of the failure to anticipate it. That is exactly the opportunity that this new clause presents, to ensure that we can respond better to changes in the market.

Rachael Maskell: I thank my hon. Friend for his point. The jobs in his constituency are vital. Having met some of those workers, I know that many of them have tremendous skill and could participate in this project. I urge the Minister to look at that situation and ensure that the gates do not close and that those jobs can be saved and integrated into the HS2 project. I trust that she will want to meet my hon. Friend. Friend, to advance the case that he has been fighting so hard for.

John Redwood: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachael Maskell: I will continue for a little bit, if I may.

HS2 provides a crucial opportunity to create a significant number of freight paths on the west coast main line, thus moving freight from road to rail, with additional capacity, which will attract more passengers to move from air to train and car to train, due to the attractive journey times. That is a crucial shift if we are to reduce our emissions, which are currently at 29% in the transport sector, and our carbon footprint. Of course, that means saving lives, from the poor air quality that so many people experience because of the use of poor fuels on the transport that many people use to get about our country.

Labour’s new clauses seek to address something that is vital to rebuilding public confidence in the project: a transformation in the way that the governance works. We truly believe that the Secretary of State has failed in his obligation to hold HS2 fully to account and certainly has not brought the level of transparency we would expect from a Secretary of State to such a major infrastructure project. He cannot and must not hide, as he is today.

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Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Again.

Rachael Maskell: Indeed. In the light of concerns expressed by Members from across the House, Labour’s new clauses 1 and 4 seek to drive greater transparency and accountability for the project.

John Redwood: Does the hon. Lady agree that early and rather more moderate expenditure on digital signalling could greatly increase capacity and, along with short sections of bypass track, could improve reliability of fast train services, which is needed?

Rachael Maskell: I am honoured to have a centre for digital signalling in my constituency and have seen the power of it, but sadly, to achieve the capacity that we will need for the future, we have to build more routes. That is what this project will do. It is not either/or—both are required for the future of our rail network, but the right hon. Gentleman makes an important point.

First, we are calling on the Secretary of State to bring quarterly reports on the environmental impact, costs and progress of the HS2 project to the House. This is far too important a project for the Bill to be passed and then for us to read in the press that the costs have gone up and there are delays. The project must be far more accountable to the House, as should the Secretary of State.

Secondly, Labour believes that the scheduling, the integration, the engineering in places and the scope of the project need review. We cannot simply have HS2 Ltd saying, “This is what it is.” There are major issues to be resolved, not least the vital Yorkshire hub and getting the right connectivity into Sheffield. Members and community groups have undertaken detailed work on how improvements can be made to parts of the route, and that is one such example. Labour is calling for the whole of HS2, including phase 2a, to undergo a complete peer review appraisal by independent engineering and economic specialists. We believe that that is the only way that Parliament and the public can have full confidence in the HS2 project. Such a process will ensure that the scope is right, that the integration with the wider network is right, that governance is put right and that the maximum environmental gain is harvested while the cost of the project is minimised. It will not delay the project but enable it to proceed in a way that delivers maximum benefit.

Ensuring that the best modelling of the wider economic benefit is properly appraised is also urgently needed on this project, while at the same time proper security can clearly deliver a focus and confirm that north-south connectivity—and, I trust, east-west too—is really integrated to deliver and to ensure that we get maximum benefit from it. I trust that hon. Members on both sides of the House will support the new clauses, which would answer many of the questions that they have been asking and enhance the Bill and the project.

Michael Fabricant: I just want to emphasise the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). I understand the logic of what the hon. Lady says about peer review and so on, but supposing that says that the project must be done in a completely different way, for example using the original Arup route to which I referred earlier. That will not be possible if the Bill has become an Act. Surely she should oppose the Bill, have a peer review and then decide whether to support the legislation.

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Gentleman appears not to want to see the line built in his lifetime, my lifetime or the lifetime of any current hon. Member. The reality is
that we believe that the route needs tweaking, changing and integrating, but that does not mean ripping everything up. We will never be able to satisfy everyone, because in the history of the railway there has always been a farmhouse, a field or a golf course in the way. Indeed, 27 vintage trees will be in the way on this section, and we are very concerned about them.

It is important that we press ahead, but that we review the project—especially the governance. That is about the management that we proceed with.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Would it not be right to think about my hon. Friend’s proposal in new clause 4 as an attempt to learn the lessons as we go along? It is not as though this is a project without review or evaluation. Already it has oversight from the Department for Transport, the Treasury, the Cabinet Office and the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, and it is subject to National Audit Office review. It is hardly as though people are completely deprived of information. What we need to do is pull together that information and learn clear lessons as we proceed.

Rachael Maskell: My hon. Friend speaks eloquently and is right. We need to pool the information, including the scrutiny the House has put over the project and the external scrutiny, to ensure that we get the project right. That is what will build public confidence as we move forward.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): My hon. Friend is doing an excellent job in making the case. Does she accept that the information that is available to the House through the various bodies and institutions that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) mentioned is massively undermined by the number of non-disclosure agreements that have been applied to former members of staff of HS2? More than 270 NDAs prevent people from saying what they really believe about the capacity and costs of the scheme. What does she think about that in terms of transparency and openness?

Rachael Maskell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point and I will return to it shortly.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachael Maskell: Not at this time—I am going to move on.

As raised in Committee, there is a major issue with compensation for those who rent. For example, a tenant farmer who works on the land may be moved and have to work away from their farm. People who rent privately consistently miss out when infrastructure projects force them out of their homes or away from their businesses. We believe that they must receive compensation. The issue was raised at the petition stage of the Bill and it would be right to respond today. The new clause would enable that to happen when the statutory instrument is laid.

Let me briefly move on to new clause 5. I am looking forward to the contribution from the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), and I confirm that Labour supports her new clause. There has been a lot of learning around non-disclosure agreements, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) alluded to. I know from my time as a trade union official, and from my time on the working party on bullying and sexual misconduct procedures here, that these agreements are used to see that commercially sensitive information is not shared with external parties, but they are also used around failures of management, and bullying would be one such example.

If the culture is wrong, it is not right to put money into it, and the management should be held to account. My hon. Friend said that 270-plus non-disclosure agreements have been signed, so we need to ensure that there is proper scrutiny and transparency. New clause 5 addresses that issue very comprehensively, ensuring that commercial sensitivities are not undermined, and also that all of us can have a real grasp of what is happening in the culture of HS2. It is a sensible way of addressing the serious amount of money that is being spent on these agreements. We certainly believe that the culture in HS2 must move forward.

We will listen to the debate to decide how we handle the new clauses I have laid before the House. I hope the Minister will give us assurances on them, and I will be listening carefully to determine whether to proceed to a vote. With these enhancements to the Bill, the whole HS2 project could proceed with far greater confidence and far greater support.

Sir William Cash: I made it clear in my remarks to the shadow Minister that I am minded to vote for these new clauses. However, towards the end of what she said, serious doubt began to descend on the House as to whether she would actually push them to a vote. She is therefore welcome to come back to the Dispatch Box to tell me whether she in fact intends to do so.

On new clause 1, it would be eminently sensible to have quarterly reports on environmental impact, costs and progress. One thing that has been completely lacking is any proper analysis by the Government or HS2 of all three of those issues.

Sir Edward Leigh: On the question of environmental impact, does my hon. Friend think that we were too obsessed by speed in the early years of this project? The Government now justify it on the basis of capacity, but there would still be much less environmentally damaging ways of increasing capacity—for instance, by laying more of the line along existing motorways such as the M40. Will my hon. Friend and other hon. Members also bear in mind counties not directly affected by the line, such as Lincolnshire, which are being starved of resources for our rural and commuter lines?

Sir William Cash: I entirely concur with my right hon. Friend. The very fact that he is in the House, as are other Members who are not directly affected by the line, is a reminder of the fact that, on the last occasion the Bill was voted on—on Second Reading—the number of people who actually voted was very small compared with the number of people who could have voted, from which one might infer that the enthusiasm for this proposal is minimal. I think as many as 200 MPs did not vote, which was quite extraordinary.

On the question of environmental impact, I would simply say that my constituents will be deeply and profoundly affected not only by the havoc that will be created by forcing this juggernaut through my constituency.
from top to bottom, but by the dislocation, the highways and the impact on businesses. A quarterly report is, quite frankly, a very good idea, but I am more interested in getting an answer from the shadow Minister—it is not forthcoming at the moment because there is no point in putting forward the proposals if they will not see the light of day in a vote.

5 pm

Cost is another issue of monumental importance. I do not need to go into it all now—I made my case in a nutshell in the Westminster Hall debate I secured on this issue—but I would be grateful if the Minister could give us a clearer indication on cost, to unravel the mysteries of the continuous failure to be able to give an accurate idea as to what the project will actually involve.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): We started off with a figure of about £35 billion or £36 billion. The latest figure is somewhere around £55 billion. My hon. Friend and I have seen credible estimates upwards of £80 billion. Should the House not know what it is actually voting for tonight? How much will it be?

Sir William Cash: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend—a real friend, quite apart from being an hon. Friend—and I would add that we only have to look at clause 61 to realise the financial implications and how costs will be dealt with. There is talk about the overall cost being about £51 billion—there has been an upgrade in the amount of money intended to be applied to this part of the proposal. We cannot separate out the cost of distance between London and Birmingham, and then leave out Birmingham to the ultimate destination. The reality is that we are faced with a proposal under the Bill that is excessive in its totality and unjustified in the unbelievable havoc it will cause my constituents.

The other point I would make on new clause 2 relates to the compensation scheme for tenants, an idea I put forward on a number of occasions. There is no doubt that a huge number of people will be adversely affected by the scheduled works. It is not just tenants who will be affected but property owners. They will be severely damaged. Many of my constituents have been put under the most incredible stress and anxiety. There have been suggestions that some people, elderly people in particular, have been under such intense stress that they have died prematurely.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): There are some unusual cases in my constituency. There are a number of people with canal boats who pay for moorings. They are very hard to locate, and they will get no compensation. There are those with farm tenancies that give them security in their home, which is very difficult to replicate under the Agricultural Holdings Act 1986. Those are the kinds of tenants who need to be compensated, are they not?

Sir William Cash: They certainly are, and there are also freehold properties. People who own property, as I have just described, are being put under the most intense anxiety, so I understand the reasons that lie behind the principle of new clause 2.

On new clause 4, I made my point in my intervention on the shadow Minister. I simply cannot understand it. Notwithstanding the intention that appears to be behind the first part the new clause—I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) for backing me up on this—it is inconceivable that the report should only come into effect within 12 months of the Act receiving Royal Assent. It is nonsense. I ask the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) to note that although I shall vote for the principle of an independent peer review, it will be on the strict understanding that that is without prejudice to my concern that the Act will need to be repealed.

I make this point now and may do so again on Third Reading: we are about to experience a new Government, effectively, with a new Prime Minister, depending on the outcome of the leadership election. The two contenders for the leadership have differing views on HS2: one is in favour and the other says that he wants to put it under review. Although rumours are like bats that fly in the night, the fact is that there are very strong feelings in favour of abandoning this entire project. We understand that it has already cost about £5 billion or £6 billion. That is enough money in itself, but to subject this country to unbelievable havoc as the project goes through constituencies such as mine, with all the attendant problems and anxieties that I have described, and to say, at the same time, that the proposal will go through and that the Labour party, by all accounts, will vote for it seems to be completely at variance with all the evidence and reports—I referred to them in the Westminster Hall debate and on many other occasions—which indicate that this is not a viable project. It was dreamt up by a Labour peer. I am never quite sure what the noble Lord Adonis's allegiance is these days, but he was certainly a Labour member of the Government when this was proposed, and he deserves to be thoroughly condemned for it.

John Redwood: Did my hon. Friend notice that while Labour says that it wants a 12-month review of fairly fundamental things, it made it very clear that it does not want any material changes to the project that might delay it? I do not really see what the point of the review is.

Sir William Cash: The hon. Member for York Central is smiling as she looks across the Chamber.—[Interruption.] She says that it is unbelievable, but it is anything but unbelievable—it is entirely true and entirely credible. My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield backed me up on this. What is the point in having a first-class, independent review of the kind that is being advocated and saying that it will come into effect only after this has been made into the law of the land? [Interruption.] I see the Opposition Front Bench, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), chuntering, but perhaps he would like to come to the Dispatch Box and explain the nonsense that lies behind that reasoning.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that this is just good governance? If we are spending this amount of taxpayers' money, we have to have decent oversight to make sure that the money is being used to the best effect. That should perhaps have been built into the process earlier, but the fact is that it is being brought forward at this stage. Presumably that is why he supports it, but let us be honest: whatever is introduced, he will never support this project, which I do strongly, because
this is not just rebalancing the UK economy but connecting the north to great opportunities across the whole of mainland Europe.

Sir William Cash: The hon. Gentleman is completely right to say that I will never accept this project. I have made it abundantly clear that I believe that an independent peer review would be a good idea. However, it should come before Royal Assent, not after.

Michael Fabricant: My hon. Friend is making complete sense. He mentioned Lord Adonis earlier. Is my hon. Friend aware that the original plan for HS2, designed by Arup, would have gone up the M40 and connected with Heathrow, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) said, and it would have connected with HS1 not by linking in the south at great expense, as the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) suggested, but by going directly through St Pancras?

Sir William Cash: That all sounds frightfully interesting, but I am afraid that it is not what we are dealing with. We have this Bill and a project that is the biggest white elephant that has ever been seen in modern history, as far as the United Kingdom rail system is concerned. It is a complete outrage that my constituents should have this perpetrated on them.

I am serious when I say that I shall be campaigning not only for a review of these proposals but in pretty short order to have the Act repealed, because that is the only way this can be sorted out. It is a complete disgrace that the Government have introduced the Bill in the dying days of this Government. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) is laughing because she knows I am right. These proposals almost certainly would not survive the review that will be taking place under a new Prime Minister. I am making a fair assumption about who that person will be.

Jim McMahon: I must support the Bill and also the vision that underpins it. We disagree on almost everything, but I do sympathise massively with people’s concerns about their property and will always support them as their constituency MP.

This is a significant Bill of vital importance to our future prosperity and a key feature of any strategy to build a more balanced economy. My contribution to this debate will outline the reasons why I believe we must support the Bill and also the vision that underpins HS2. Without that strategic outlook, we risk losing the bigger picture to narrow debates about direct benefits such as commute times or becoming distracted by false choices, such as whether to spend on HS2 or northern powerhouse rail.

Of course, it is important that any publicly funded project be wholly transparent and subject to proper scrutiny. Let me begin with my own constituency of Crewe and Nantwich. It goes without saying that Crewe needs to look at the benefits of HS2 for people in his constituency, such as the jobs that it will bring. I do not think that it is all doom and gloom for his constituents, and I will continue to speak positively about my own constituency.

Sir William Cash: The hon. Lady might anticipate what I am about to say. The proposals put the railhead down at Yarnfield, which itself is an absolute and total disgrace. It was originally going to be in her constituency. She has just been rightly praising the people of her constituency. It goes without saying that Crewe works and ours is now widely recognised as one of the most historically significant railway stations in the world.
5.15 pm

The railway went on to open a cheese market and a clothing factory, and donated the land that would become Queens Park, which to this day attracts visitors from outside the town. At its height, Crewe Works provided employment for more than 20,000 skilled workers in a vast span of workshops stretching for nearly two and a half miles: forges, carpenters, boilermakers, machinists and apprentices. It was common for several generations of the same family to enjoy fruitful careers there, and the sense of pride in our works is still felt today.

By 2019, the workforce had fallen to fewer than 400, a fraction of its former size, and much of the former site has now been sold off. In its place stand icons of the modern economy, a supermarket and a cinema. Now the wall on its western boundary has been selected for demolition. For many local people, that will be a visual metaphor for the sense of loss and decline that has afflicted too many families.

However, it is not all bad. The railway still plays an important role in our local economy. Now owned by Bombardier, Crewe Works still offers quality employment opportunities to local people. Crewe is also home to Bentley Motors, a global success story providing thousands of skilled jobs. In addition to the large employers, we have many small and medium-sized businesses that are punching well above their weight, and a number of them are already benefiting from HS2.

I am not one for looking back on a fictional past through rose-tinted glasses. Change—for the better—is not only welcome, but must be pursued. It is in all our interests for the UK economy to produce the goods that people need and want. Nevertheless, the narrative really does matter, and the way in which our economy has changed has not benefited everyone. Decades of inaction by successive Governments have left the north to the mercy of market forces, and those forces have themselves been turbo-charged by aggressive globalisation. Many northern towns and cities are still struggling to recover from the industrial decline of the 1970s and 1980s, and the north-south divide threatens to hold back our national productivity.

The median wage in Crewe and Nantwich is literally thousands of pounds less per year than the UK average, despite the existence of well-paid jobs such as those that I mentioned earlier, which will be pushing up the average. Many workers in my constituency have seen little or no improvement in their living standards over the last decade, and some have even seen their living standards fall dramatically. Relatively high employment levels mask the reality of an increasing number of people finding themselves in precarious jobs, or working for poverty pay in low-productivity employment. As a result, more people in poverty now live in working households than in non-working households, after housing costs are taken into account. Consequently, our economy has become reliant on household debt, which has grown to worrying levels.

We have been told that inequality was the inevitable price of economic growth, but such arguments are now outdated, and a body of research now finds that economies in which income and wealth are shared more equally tend to have more stable paths of economic growth. If we are to build an economy that prioritises both sustainable growth and economic justice, addressing regional inequality must be part of that strategy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. What the hon. Lady is saying is important, and I presume that she will be linking her remarks to the new clauses.

Laura Smith: My speech is all about the way in which HS2 will help to deal with these matters, but I will speed it up, Mr Deputy Speaker. My apologies.

I am not for one moment suggesting that HS2 will solve all these problems alone, but it can and must play an important role as part of a wider strategy. As I said on Second Reading:

““My vision for HS2 is not as an end in itself, benefiting only businesses and commuters, but as a catalyst for the radical rebalancing of our economy”.—[Official Report, 30 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 741-42.]

I firmly believe that we need to shift our economy towards investment-led growth. The choice that has been presented between HS2 and better east-west links in the north is an entirely false one. In any case, Northern Powerhouse Rail services will, at two of their most important regional links, run on HS2 infrastructure.

Some businesses choose to pay almost four times as much per square foot for premises in London and the south because of the poor connectivity in the north. Last year, a report by the Institute for Public Policy Research North indicated that planned transport investment in London was two and a half times higher per person than in the north of England, and productivity in London is reported to be some 40% greater than in the north, demonstrating a strong correlation between connectivity and productivity. In its recent report, High Speed Rail Industry Leaders set out why it believes that improved connectivity will lead to greater regional productivity, and enhanced specialisation that will help us to bring about a more balanced economy.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend makes the case eloquently for her constituency. This independent review is so important because it is not about the pounds being spent globally; it is about the impact on jobs and local communities, economies and supply chains.

Laura Smith: Absolutely. The review is incredibly important. What does the review mean for places like Crewe? Crewe has the potential to build on the 360° connectivity it already has to become the key regional hub bridging the north and the midlands. The local enterprise partnership is working alongside Cheshire East Council on a proposal for a Crewe HS2 growth corridor that will bring together strategic development sites in Crewe, Middlewich and Winsford, so that they can build on their traditional strengths in high-value manufacturing. As for the model through which the LEP proposes delivering that corridor, it will invest up front to unlock development, and will be repaid through the generation of new business rates. Any surplus income will be used to help finance station improvements.

I am coming to the end of my speech, Mr Deputy Speaker; I get the impression that I might have pushed my luck a little, but I am still fairly new to this process, so please excuse me. I reiterate that the passing of this Bill is not nearly enough to unlock my constituency’s full potential. I would like the Government to commit to seven HS2 trains per hour stopping at Crewe, and more frequent regional train services to and from Crewe.
on each of the lines radiating out of the town. A northern junction at Crewe is essential to allow Birmingham-Manchester HS2 services to stop at Crewe, and to allow Crewe to be part of the Northern Powerhouse Rail network, which would open up the possibility of direct service to Leeds and other destinations east of the Pennines.

I am concerned that some appear to be flirting with the idea of scaling back HS2, either through shortsightedness or, worse, for political gain. HS2 has shaped our local planning framework, and so much work has gone into bringing all stakeholders together to realise the potential of HS2 in Crewe that it would be nothing short of tragic if the Government failed to deliver.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is always interesting to follow the hon. Lady, who is my neighbour. She extols the virtues of HS2, but it is not her constituents but mine who will feel an impact. The rolling stock depot and the northern Crewe junction that she speaks of are not in Crewe; they are in Eddisbury. Largely owing to the extremely hard work of her Conservative predecessor, Edward Timpson, who argued for a tunnel under Crewe, a massive amount of the local impact will not be felt in Crewe. Perhaps the hon. Lady ought to spare a thought for constituents whose homes and lives are being destroyed.

Laura Smith: I absolutely agree. Constituents and businesses have come to me, as they have done to the hon. Lady, and we have dealt with them. I also agree with her new clause. I am not saying that what is happening is simple, and I have every sympathy for everybody affected, but I am looking at what benefit can come to Crewe and Nantwich, and the whole area, because of HS2. Without doubt, this is a huge project, and there will be winners and losers, but I think the positives outweigh the negatives.

Antoinette Sandbach: Sadly for Eddisbury, the number of losers there is very large. It will cost an extra £100 million just to do the extra 20 km of track from Crewe past Winsford. The geotechnical engineer’s report that was served on HS2 many years ago has not yet been answered. I would much rather see that money going into improving public services and housing stock in my area.

New clause 5 seeks to restrict use of non-disclosure agreements by HS2. The reason that I tabled it is that a business in my constituency has been asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement, and it potentially affects the jobs of 166 of my constituents. I do not think it right that Members of Parliament are being denied information on each of the lines radiating out of the town. A northern junction at Crewe is essential to allow Birmingham-Manchester HS2 services to stop at Crewe, and to allow Crewe to be part of the Northern Powerhouse Rail network, which would open up the possibility of direct service to Leeds and other destinations east of the Pennines.

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Mr Ivan Lewis: Last week, the hon. Lady rightly called for Labour to do something about non-disclosure agreements in relation to staff employed in the Labour party. Does she agree that, to be consistent, Ministers should instruct HS2 to release people from their obligations under non-disclosure agreements so that they can share with the House the truth about their experience of the capacity and cost issues when they were working for the organisation? Her new clause deals with the future, but does she agree that it should be able to deal with the past, too?

Antoinette Sandbach: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. He will see from the drafting of my new clause that it would allow an assessor to assess NDAs that have already been signed, and to allow them to be retained only in circumstances of exceptional commercial confidentiality. I would argue that that is the only ground for retaining them, and that an independent assessor—either a QC or a former High Court judge—should be appointed to assess those NDAs.

John Redwood: Could my hon. Friend give us some idea of what kind of information she thinks might be suppressed that we ought to know about? What is the inducement being offered to make people sign these things?

Antoinette Sandbach: So far, HS2 has refused to answer freedom of information requests. It claims, in answers given to me as a result of FOI requests, that it is unable to provide answers because it does not know how many NDAs its lawyers have got people to sign and because it would cost too much to provide a Member of Parliament with details of the number of NDAs.

Mr Lewis: Is it not true that a number of former senior HS2 employees who have expressed concerns about financial information provided to the House and other appropriate oversight bodies were soon asked to leave the organisation on the basis of non-disclosure? Does the hon. Lady agree that that is incredibly serious, which is why Ministers should instruct that those people be released from those non-disclosure obligations as soon as possible?

5.30 pm

Antoinette Sandbach: I completely agree. I am worried that NDAs are used to cover up wrongdoing in HS2, particularly in relation to redundancy payments, which have been discovered by the National Audit Office, and particularly in relation to redundancy payments, which have been discovered by the National Audit Office, and it has been agreed that the scheme was inappropriate. The difficulty is that without such provision being included in the legislation, that statutory protection is not available to those who wish to blow the whistle or otherwise highlight failures.
NDAs are also used for local authorities. I know that, because it applies to my own local authority. In answer to a written question, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), the HS2 Minister, reported that 31 local councils have an NDA in place with HS2, including Cheshire West and Chester, and Cheshire East Councils, which cover my constituency. Apparently, they are required to discuss advanced planning issues and matters of a commercially sensitive nature. However, the councils also sit on the implementation advisory group which feeds back to my community what HS2 plans to do in my area. Matters that go beyond planning and commercially sensitive information are being withheld on the basis of those NDAs signed with HS2, denying me as the Member of Parliament the ability to quiz HS2 on what it plans to do in the area. How, for example, will road movements be affected, and how will that affect my industrial estate? How is the public interest served by those NDAs, which limit the information that councils can give to my constituents?

Mr Paterson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and neighbour for giving way. I am shocked by what she has revealed. Does she have any idea what is driving those NDAs, and how long are they valid for? What is the intention behind this?

Antoinette Sandbach: I have asked for details, and for a copy of an NDA but, again, there was a refusal to disclose that to me. The claim is that that is exempt from disclosure, because it is commercially sensitive information, but I am afraid that I simply do not agree that all those NDAs are required just for commercially sensitive information. As I said, 40% have been signed in the past 12 months, and I am concerned that they are used to withhold from the public and from elected representatives information that the organisation may not wish to go into the public domain.

Mr Paterson: How long are they valid for?

Antoinette Sandbach: I do not know, but presumably for the length of the project.

That has an impact on Members representing constituencies on phase 2b of the route, because we cannot get information from HS2 about how it will impact our constituents. Any Member of the House who has had dealings with HS2 knows that it has an approach to secrecy unparalleled since the cold war. If our councils are prohibited from telling us details of their discussions, we struggle to assess local impacts. Clearly, there is a problem. My new clause tries to steer a path between an outright ban and the current approach.

HS2 already has a residents commissioner and a construction commissioner who, together, act as impartial monitors of HS2 and offer advice to those affected by the scheme, be they residents, businesses or other groups. My amendment would add an assessor, who would be a QC or a High Court judge. This individual—appointed by the National Audit Office—Parliament’s spending watchdog—would be required to approve as in the public interest any future NDAs that HS2 seeks to enter. The assessor would also have the power to review all previous NDAs and assess whether they, too, are in the public interest. If the assessor judges an existing NDA to be not in the public interest, it would cease to have effect.

My amendment would unshackle whistleblowers and elected officials to discuss HS2 freely and honestly. If, after any revelations emerge, Members wished to continue with the scheme, they would at least make that decision on the basis of the facts, and not the partial picture we see today.

I make no secret of my approach to HS2, but my amendment should appeal to everyone, whether or not they support the project. Those who see HS2 as a grand success should want to see it shouted from the rooftops, not swaddled in secrecy; and those of us who believe the costs will continue to spiral until the game is not worth the candle would be able to see for ourselves the full costs involved.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows, I take a personal interest in this matter. I am sorry that I have not been here for the debate, but my parliamentary duties elsewhere have prevented me from being in the Chamber to support her. Does she agree that the precedent for this secrecy on HS2 was set when it was revealed that the main reports on the project were going to be kept not only from the public but from this House, when the then Secretary of State for Transport refused to publish the reports from the Major Projects Authority? That, in itself, was very damaging. By setting that bar for secrecy, and through the NDAs, the largest infrastructure project in Europe continues to be concealed from Members of this House and from the public.

Antoinette Sandbach: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend, which is why I tabled new clause 5. NDAs should not be used to shut people up and prevent them from saying what is happening inside the organisation. Not only that, but NDAs are being used to deprive elected Members of this House and other officials of important information about some of the impacts and problems, which we should be scrutinising.

Jim McMahon: I absolutely respect that the hon. Lady is giving voice to her constituents, but she has been fairly negative so far. Can she think of one positive that HS2 will bring?

Antoinette Sandbach: I am glad to be giving voice, because I sound a bit croaky—I am losing my voice. I agree that there are potential benefits, but the question is whether those benefits are worth the cost and whether the business case stacks up. I would much rather see the east-west Northern Powerhouse Rail connection happen as a priority.

When a rolling stock depot is moved from another constituency to mine and put next to a school, thereby requiring the whole school to move, there seems to be either a level of incompetence or staggering complacency in the management of the project. I have been at events where my constituents have asked questions and not received answers.

There have been ministerial orders to provide mock-ups of the rolling stock depot so that we can understand the scale and impact, and HS2 has just ignored them and
said that it will not provide the mock-ups. Then there has been a change of Minister, who has taken a different approach.

My concern is that, unless this protection is in the legislation, we will potentially see a change of Secretary of State, and that we will then not have the protections in relation to this kind of infrastructure project that all our constituents deserve.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I rise briefly to support new clause 4 and the call for a full peer review of this project. I will also call for the review to go wider, particularly to look at the geographical impact of the HS2 investment and the impact on cities and towns. I raise this because, like most Members of this House, I strongly support the need for substantial investment in our transport infrastructure. I think it needs to increase; we should be spending more capital investment on transport, particularly on our railways, especially given the climate change challenges we face.

The more we look, however, at the current Government’s transport infrastructure budget, the more doubts we should have about the continued focus on cities, rather than towns, and about the continued concentration of the capital budget on cities, rather than towns. HS2 and its plans raise those serious questions, which is why serious issues need to be reviewed about whether or not HS2 is the right priority now, given the need for investment in our towns. According to the National Infrastructure Commission, the Government propose to spend £4.5 billion a year on HS2 between now and 2025, but only £200 million a year on Northern Powerhouse Rail. We must bear in mind that Northern Powerhouse Rail is also predominantly focused on cities.

I want to set out the impact on my constituency, but the towns there could reflect many across the country. It is not clear that HS2 will have any benefit for Normanton, although Ministers say that it will mean faster trains to Leeds. Normanton used to be at the heart of the rail network. We used to have 700 jobs on the railways alone in Normanton and 700,000 passengers used to go through it. Normanton used to be a central railway town, but now there is only one train an hour to Leeds, even though it is less than half an hour away. Therefore, any benefits from speeding up journey times for anyone in my constituency just disappear, because the connections into Leeds are so rubbish. From Castleford, Pontefract and Knottingley, there are a few more trains, but they are often cancelled or late, or there are just too few carriages and so people cannot get on.

After the May timetable changes, things got worse. One constituent told me that on his regular trains the seating capacity was reduced by between 58 and 130 seats, making it impossible for many passengers to get on, so they were just stuck on the platform. Some trains currently run to London from Pontefract Monkhill, but it has no disabled access. So I have had constituents with wheelchairs who have been stranded on the platform as a result or who, in one case, have had to crawl over the bridge. Yet there is no sign of the investment in our station just to get basic disabled access. This is the capital investment we need in our towns.

We are told in other parts of our area that the regular trains cannot go any faster because the lines need upgrading, but there is no sign of it ever happening.

Time and again we are told that HS2 will mean better connections for our country and for our towns, but we never see it—we never see any credible plan. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who spoke from the Front Bench, has rightly talked about boosting the connectivity between Manchester, Leeds and Sheffield. I strongly support that, because I believe that it will hugely benefit the north. Indeed, I think the House of Lords report was right when it said that investment in improving the rail links in the north of England would deliver greater economic benefit for every pound than HS2 would.

Having those connections between our northern cities would be substantial, but the economic benefits from better connecting our northern towns with neighbouring cities would be huge. That would boost our towns; give employers in our towns and our cities a far bigger catchment area, for staff and for customers; and build the size of local markets. Those town connections should be done first, before any of this, but we do not see it ever happening. We do not see it ever coming. As a result, we do not believe it is ever going to come. We get all these promises from these massive national infrastructure projects, which always concentrate on our cities, but we do not believe this is ever going to benefit our towns.

5.45 pm

Mike Amesbury: In 2017, Northern rail should have been delivering two trains an hour from Northwich to Manchester on the mid-Cheshire line; it is still not doing that. When we hear of HS2’s costs spiralling from £57 billion up to even £106 billion, people look at the northern powerhouse slogan as a real damp squib.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am just a little worried: we are obviously talking about new clauses to the Bill, and as much as we have all suffered with Northern rail, I want to try to keep the debate where it should be.

Yvette Cooper: Mr Deputy Speaker is completely right: we could go on for a very long time about the problems with Northern rail. My hon. Friend is also right. The review in new clause 4 should focus on the geographic impact and the impact for towns, because time and again we just see our town services go backwards and our chances of getting any capital investment in towns disappear, while the Government always talk about these huge billions of pounds going into connections for the cities. The compact between different parts of the country, particularly between our cities and towns, has now broken. I do not think anybody quite recognises the seriousness of that. This debate about HS2 is carrying on while we ignore that serious and growing divide.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: Does the right hon. Lady agree that the Department for Transport needs to update its national rail travel overview survey report, on which so much of its planning is dependent? It has not been updated since 2010. I received a written answer that said the Government are “currently considering updating the National Rail Travel Survey”. Does the right hon. Lady think that needs to be done as a matter of urgency, so that the survey reflects the exact points she is making?
Yvette Cooper: If there has simply been no updated assessment, that might explain why so many of my constituents get stuck on platforms in Leeds, trying to get back to Castleford, or on platforms in Castelford, trying to get into Leeds. So many more people are commuting for work, yet the commuter infrastructure for them is just not there. It is continually our towns that are being let down.

John Redwood: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Yvette Cooper: I am conscious of the time and see Mr Deputy Speaker looking at me, so I shall give way only briefly.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I am very relaxed.

John Redwood: How would a review help, given that the right hon. Lady’s Front-Bench colleagues and the current Government are united behind the current scheme, which does nothing to help our towns?

Yvette Cooper: Nobody has done a proper assessment of where transport infrastructure investment is going and what the impact is on cities and towns. Some assessment has been made of the impact on different regions of the country, and that is important. Actually, it is significant, because I think the New Economics Foundation cites HS2’s own figures showing that 40% of the benefits from HS2 will go to London, whereas only 10% of the benefits will go to Yorkshire. I want to see a broader assessment of the impact on cities and towns.

Job growth is twice as fast in cities as in towns. New digital jobs, service jobs, university-related jobs and cultural jobs are all being concentrated in cities, but manufacturing, distribution and retail jobs are disappearing from towns. That is a result of automation or changes to our economy, but public sector investment decisions, including on transport priorities, are making that worse. Public services are shrinking back from towns into cities, and the new infrastructure investment is always concentrated on cities rather than towns.

Jim McMahon rose—

Yvette Cooper: I will give way, even though I said that the previous time was the last.

Jim McMahon: I took the hint from Mr Deputy Speaker that he was relaxed about interventions.

I thank my right hon. Friend for her work to give a voice to towns, which is important. Does she accept that the capital focus of HS2 is one thing, but it is revenue spend that has massively affected towns? In Greater Manchester, we have lost 30 million bus miles because of central Government revenue cuts. One thing we could do today is reinvest the revenue that has been lost.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Certainly, for bus services, which are crucial for our towns, the loss of revenue has been particularly crucial and devastating. This debate is about towns getting their fair share of both revenue and capital investment. Currently, I do not think we are getting either.

The campaign to power up the north led by some of our regional newspapers is immensely important, and I strongly back it, but I also think that it is time to power up our towns, as they have immense potential and are not getting their fair share of investment. Time and again, whether through HS2 or Crossrail 2, too much money—the big billions—is still going into the cities rather than the towns. That is why I support this review, but ask for it to be broadened.

I urge the Minister to broaden it as well, because the truth is that Members from our towns have been respectful, we have asked sensible questions, we have been patient, and we have waited and waited and, frankly, we have got nothing. We see no sign of anything improving for our transport infrastructure. We see no sign of anything other than warm words about promises in the future. We need that review of the geographic benefits and we need a proper towns plan—a proper plan for major infrastructure investment. Until we have that, the Government’s transport infrastructure plan is simply not in the national interest.

John Redwood: My worry about the Labour new clauses is that they will not achieve the objective that Labour seems to think they will achieve. The truth is that, with the legislation already in place and the likely passage this evening of the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill, all the legal powers are there to proceed with the scheme as originally designed. As the contracts are settled, the scope for any fundamental changes arising from a review is either limited or non-existent. As the project develops, there is less and less scope to make any changes to it.

I speak as someone who, when we were first faced with the decision about HS2, decided that it was not the right project. I fully share the ambition of practically everybody in this House that we need an even more successful northern powerhouse and better transport and connectivity throughout those northern cities and towns. As someone who represents a very fast-growing and hard-pressed area of the country, just outside London, I would love to see an even more effective counter-magnet to London elsewhere in the country to pick up some of that growth and some of that prosperity, because we have the difficulties of managing so many people coming in and so many people moving around on transport systems that are woefully inadequate for the task. I share the ambition for the northern powerhouse, but I accept that a decision has already been made in principle, that a lot of money has now been committed and that various works have been undertaken in the name of the project, so it would become more and more difficult to make fundamental change or to think about cancellation.

As it happens, I think that there will be another decision taken quite shortly about this mighty project, because the very likely next Prime Minister has said that he wishes to review it and to think about it again, and I wish him every success with that. It would be a very difficult task, and it would need to be done with reasonable speed. Given that we have committed so much and that there is some reasonable merit in the project, he may conclude that he wishes to go on with it. If he were to make a more fundamental decision, all that we are talking about this afternoon in this House is a waste of time, because, clearly, the project will be cancelled and everything else will lapse.
I work on the assumption that, after review, the new Prime Minister may continue with the project, and that we are in the business of trying to mitigate the difficulties and damages. My colleagues who represent constituencies who are very badly affected by this project deserve special treatment over how it can be ameliorated and improved and how compensation can be paid and businesses dealt with.

Certainly, we need transparency. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) for raising the issue. I want to hear from the Minister about what is going to be done on transparency, so that those who are most adversely affected, should the project go ahead in full, are able to see why the decisions are being made and also have access to the information that they need to get proper compensation.

I myself will not be voting for the Labour amendments, because they simply do not bring any advantage either to those who support the project in full or those who have the problems of handling the disadvantages of the project in their constituencies. I do not see how a further review suddenly will make this a better run project. If the project goes forward, this Minister and any future Minister will have to deal with how the costs will be controlled, how the works will be carried out in a speedy manner and to a high quality with safe standards for the workforce, and how the impact of those works can be minimised on those most affected by them as they go ahead. These remain continuing management problems. An additional independent review is not going to solve any of that. We are now getting to the point where it needs individual management solutions. It is about managers on the ground, how contracts are handled on the ground, and the extent to which Ministers can and should have proper oversight of those contracts, given their commercial nature and given the technical expertise of those actually running the project.

I do not see how an independent review can help at all. I do not believe that any serious change could result from it, because the contracts will be let, and we will be told that the contractors have to get on with it. There does remain the issue of whether a new Prime Minister wishes to reopen the whole question, but assuming that he does not we will need proper answers from Ministers about what action they have taken to control the costs, improve the quality and deal with safety, and about how much power they will have in future, given the commercial nature of the operation.

Jeremy Lefroy: I am generally very supportive of additional high-speed capacity between London, the north-east, the north-west and Scotland, but I have consistently opposed HS2 and the plans for it because this is not the right way to go about it. It is not a question of whether or not my constituency is affected; I would be happy to see a sensible route through my constituency. I and my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) were quite happy to see the very large Norton Bridge junction project in our constituencies, because although it caused quite a lot of disruption, we could see the benefit for the west coast main line—for improving capacity and for increasing speeds to the benefit of everybody. He and I and other colleagues do not see such benefits from HS2 as a whole. However, I personally would like to see a different design and lower maximum speeds—not the 400 km per hour that is projected but something more sensible between 250 km and 300 km per hour. That would allow for a route that is not straight as an arrow, but that has some bends in it that could avoid the villages in my constituency. That kind of route, which would also be more consistent with the kind of trains that we currently have running on the west coast main line, would be infinitely preferable to what we have at the moment. Unlike to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) whom I greatly respect on this matter, I do not think that it is too late to think again about some changes that would make this or a similar project more acceptable to my constituents.

I will support new clauses 1 and 2, certainly, and new clause 5. My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) has already eloquently set out the reasons why we should support new clause 5, and I will certainly do so.

John Redwood: I stress that I do not want to stop my hon. Friend getting a better deal for his constituents; I wish him every success in doing that. I was saying that once the contracts had been signed for this project, he will not be able to get change.

Jeremy Lefroy: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am not a believer in breaking contracts if contracts have been signed and if they do not have get-out clauses. I would strongly recommend that we put in get-out clauses, because there will be massive changes over the coming months and years. I accept, however, that once a decision has been taken by this House, if we are in a minority, we are in a minority and it will go ahead. I am just flagging up some of the problems that may be encountered in the future.

In respect of new clause 1, I welcome the quarterly reports. This is a very sensible approach and it is something that has been lacking. We have had intermittent reports from HS2 to constituency MPs who have been affected. We have had the occasional statement from the Minister— and I welcome the work that the current Minister and indeed previous Ministers have done to keep us informed—but what we have not had is an honest assessment of the cost of this project. We were told originally that it was in the £30 billion to £35 billion range, and then a Minister came forward a few years ago and said that it was going to be about £56 billion, but since then we have had nothing. They have stuck to the figure, and what we are being asked as a House today is to vote on a figure that I simply do not believe.

The figures I have seen, calculated by experts in the field, indicate that the cost will be in the region of £80 billion. I have heard it might be more, but let us stick at £80 billion. This House is being asked to agree today to a not insignificant part of a project for which we do not have an accurate cost estimate, and which could be as much as £24 billion a year more. I agree that this is a capital rather than a revenue project, but that is two thirds of what we spend on defence every year; that is an enormous sum of money about which we are not being given any indication. If these estimates are wrong, let the Minister come forward and say that they are wrong and prove that they are wrong. Of course estimates are estimates, and we know that we cannot pin them down to the last million or so pounds, but it is possible to try to disprove the credible figures that have been put in the public domain, and so far they have not been disproved.
6 pm

John Redwood: Does my hon. Friend agree that there could be massive revenue losses once the railway is up and running, because if it turns out that the number of seats provided is greatly in excess of demand, which some people think will be the case, there will be heavy discounts and lots of empty seats, and therefore a very major demand for a taxpayer subsidy?

Jeremy Lefroy: As so often, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and what has also not been forthcoming is a proper business case. We have had the business case for HS2, but we have not had—I have asked for this time and again—a business case for the remnant west coast main line, which will still be a much larger transport network than HS2. We are told that there will be freight on it, and it is good that there will be additional freight, but freight is a very competitive market and will not replace the extremely lucrative premium revenues that come from high-speed trains.

What we will be left with on the west coast main line, which is absolutely vital for my constituency and those of my hon. Friends, is a line which takes freight, which of course is heavy and causes extra maintenance, and with suburban and stopping services such as the London Northwestern Railway. That is an excellent service and I use it frequently, but I often pay £15 or £20 for a single ticket from London to Stafford. I welcome that, but it is not possible to run a proper, profitable railway on income like that. What it relies on of course is the incredibly expensive £106 or £108 single peak fare from Stafford to London—my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield will probably be able to quote the figure from Lichfield. These are the fares that pay for the railway at the moment.

Michael Fabricant: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that—I do not know whether this is because of HS2 or not—at present the Department for Transport has no plans for the replacement of the ageing Pendolino fleet?

Jeremy Lefroy: Yes, I do. I think the Pendolino fleet, introduced by a previous Labour Government, has done a great job, and I am therefore very disappointed that Virgin Trains and Stagecoach are not going to be involved in the next phase of this service. In the nine years in which I have had the honour to represent my constituents in this House, I have used that service between two and four times a week, and it has been late a handful of times. It is an excellent and reliable service; others may have had different experiences, but that is my experience over the past nine years.

Sir William Cash: I am glad to confirm everything my hon. Friend has said, but I am a little puzzled that he left new clause 4 out of the list of amendments on which he was intending to cast a vote. I wonder if he could throw any light on that: is it because of the point that I and others have made about the report coming into effect only after the Act has received Royal Assent, or is it because of something else? Most of the measures in new clause 4(2) would give rise to the business case my hon. Friend is calling for, and with which I agree.

Jeremy Lefroy: I listened carefully to what my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) said, and in principle I support the proposal, but I also recognise the points made about the fact that a review is needed now rather than in a year’s time or a year after Royal Assent, which of course will not come until a few months after their lordships have considered the Bill.

I say to the Minister, for whom I have great regard, that there should be a proper business case for the west coast main line post the introduction of HS2. Although I do not know the east coast main line or the line out of King’s Cross nearly as well, similar questions about the loss of premium fares might apply to it, although I recognise that the geography and the areas served are slightly different.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very important point, although I am not convinced that the new clause is the right way forward. He talks about business cases, and my concern is that there are indirect impacts that should also be considered. For example, in my constituency, on the midland main line, there will be an impact on the Chesterfield Canal Trust’s attempt to regenerate our area; that has been held up now for nearly six years because we cannot get a guarantee from HS2 that it will not be impacted. Those kinds of costs must also be considered.

Jeremy Lefroy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I will come on to such matters in a moment. He makes a very important point about the eastern side of the network, which is absolutely vital; we are obviously concentrating today on the west midlands to Crewe line, but we will come to that area later this year or next year.

Finally on this matter, I ask for my point to be seriously taken into account, because at the moment large subsidies are paid into Network Rail by the operators of the west coast main line, and in my view that will no longer be the case after the introduction of HS2.

Turning to other matters, I have serious concerns about the way in which HS2 has handled two or three areas in my constituency. Ingestre Park golf club has given evidence to the Committee and has been listened to by the Committee; however, it has still not reached an agreement with HS2 over what is going to happen. It is seriously concerned about the impact on the club and its employees—is it still going to exist? I ask the Minister to urge HS2 to reach an agreement as soon as possible with the golf club, as it did with Whittington Health golf club in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield under phase 1.

I would also like to raise the village of Hopton, which will be grossly affected by HS2 in the phase we are currently considering. It has constantly asked for mitigation of the impact of the line, which goes pretty much straight through the village. Because of the impact on Hopton it is the village with possibly the highest proportion of houses that HS2 has had to purchase, certainly in this phase. We are asking for more mitigation. I know that the villagers will attempt to petition their lordships about this, but I ask the Minister to instruct HS2 to be more sympathetic than it has been so far to the needs of the village of Hopton.

Michael Fabricant: The position of Hopton is very similar to that of my own villages, and the problem is exacerbated by the fact that there does not seem to be any co-ordination within HS2 itself. On occasions villagers...
Jeremy Lefroy: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend. My office has been in touch with the gentleman in question for many years and we are also in touch with the NFU. I agree that there are many cases in which the course of action that my hon. Friend describes has been successful. The NFU has done a great job, as have local land agents and my constituency office. I particularly want to mention my chief of staff, James Cantrell, who has done a fantastic job on this for many constituents over six years. However, there are unfortunately still too many exceptions to the rule. I do not want to do down HS2’s staff, a lot of whom work very hard and try their best to work for my constituents, but they are often frustrated by decisions higher up that do not give them the latitude to make sensible decisions locally on behalf of my constituents.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way again. On the Committee, we also found that cases tended to get resolved much quicker when a Member of Parliament got involved on behalf of a constituent. I say to the Minister, who I hope is listening, that HS2 should have sufficient staff that it should not be necessary for a Member of Parliament to get involved in every single individual case, whether it involves the taking of a house, a bit of a farm or whatever. Unfortunately, it is all too often necessary for a Member of Parliament to get involved, as my hon. Friend has demonstrated with his examples.

Jeremy Lefroy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, but sadly we have had to get involved in almost every case, and some cases have taken far too long to resolve partly because of the lack of delegation.

Jeremy Lefroy: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. I did in fact refer to junction 15, which is also known as the Hanchurch junction. It is actually a series of junctions that are critical to the national road network, not just the local road network. Junction 15 is one of the most difficult junctions on the motorway network because of the topography of the area, and it finds it difficult to handle the current amount of traffic, let alone the vastly increased amount that there will be under phase 2a of HS2.

Michael Fabricant: Mr Deputy Speaker, you will know that I am not a controversial person. Far be it from me for one moment to cause any internecine warfare between my two great friends on the Back Benches, my hon. Friends the Members for Stone (Jeremy Lefroy) and for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly), but I am afraid that I am going to have to take the side of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), and I say to the Minister, who I hope is listening, that HS2 should have sufficient staff that it should not be necessary for a Member of Parliament to get involved in every single individual case, whether it involves the taking of a house, a bit of a farm or whatever. Unfortunately, it is all too often necessary for a Member of Parliament to get involved, as my hon. Friend has demonstrated with his examples.

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Sir William Cash: Only a few days ago the Stone Railhead Crisis Group, which represents the interests of my constituents around Stone, met the regional director of Highways England and discovered that there are some very serious problems for Highways England at both Hanchurch and the proposed HS2 junction at Yarnfield Lane that really require re-evaluation, which I intend to go into a bit on Third Reading. Is my hon. Friend aware of those conversations and the fact that Highways England is in fact very concerned indeed about the situation?

Jeremy Lefroy: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend. My office has been in touch with the gentleman in question for many years and we are also in touch with the NFU. I agree that there are many cases in which the course of action that my hon. Friend describes has been successful. The NFU has done a great job, as have local land agents and my constituency office. I particularly want to mention my chief of staff, James Cantrell, who has done a fantastic job on this for many constituents over six years. However, there are unfortunately still too many exceptions to the rule. I do not want to do down HS2’s staff, a lot of whom work very hard and try their best to work for my constituents, but they are often frustrated by decisions higher up that do not give them the latitude to make sensible decisions locally on behalf of my constituents.

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phase 2a. My staff and I personally have been involved in trying to get people to meet HS2 and to have meetings with the NFU and HS2; it just does not often happen. HS2 has a huge turnover of staff, including managing directors and chairmen, so trying to get any form of co-ordination between one lot of HS2 people and another lot—let alone their meeting at the NFU locally—is often impossible. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): And that is from a non-controversial Member.

Jeremy Lefroy: Sadly, I have to agree that what my hon. Friend says is sometimes the case, but I would hope that with the Minister’s intervention—she has been kind to intervene in a number of cases—matters will speed up.

Given that the Chair of High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), is in the House, let me just say that it has been remarkable how some matters have been settled just when they were about to go to his Committee. It is therefore a matter not just of an MP getting involved, but sometimes of an issue actually coming before the Committee. That should not be the case. Common sense should prevail; getting common-sense matters put in place should not depend on pressure from a Member of Parliament or the Committee.

I am most grateful for the forbearance of hon. Members, but there are several very important matters that the House needs to be aware of and which I have tried to summarise. The first is the overall cost, about which we need the Government and HS2 to be honest with the House. The second is the question of the use and reuse of the spoil from the railway, another matter about which HS2 needs to be frank and honest with the House because of the consequences for the transport network and costs. The third is a plea that HS2 is open and transparent with all those affected, that it deals with things on the spot and that it delegates authority to its staff on the ground so that decisions can be made without the great distress that has been caused to so many of my constituents.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I thank you for allowing me to speak in the debate, Mr Deputy Speaker, because it gives me an opportunity to put on record my views and those of many of my constituents regarding HS2.

I have never voted for any motion relating to HS2 in the House, over many years, and that will be my consistent position today. That is why I will not even be voting for any of the amendments or for the Bill in due course. I cannot condone any expenditure in relation to this project, and I do not believe that the further reviews and reports proposed in new clauses 1 and 4 will do anything other than reinforce my view and that of so many of my constituents that the business case for HS2 has simply not been made.

It is a hugely expensive project. It will not proportionately benefit my constituents, who time and again say to me that the huge amount of money involved would be much better spent on improving local transport services, whether it is the cycleways; the bus services, which have been reduced and need reinstating, particularly for the elderly; a bypass for Holmes Chapel; or better facilities at Sandbach station.

I need hardly mention the catalogue of concerns about local rail services that have been brought to my attention. I held a surgery a little while ago at Congleton railway station, and almost 40 constituents turned up to express their concerns about local rail services. They want to see better local rail services. That is a particular concern. If money is going to be invested in some form of Crewe hub, that will simply not be of benefit to my constituents unless there are appropriate local rail services fanning out from Crewe to Alsager, Congleton, Sandbach and Middlewich. That assessment needs to be done. I find myself in agreement with the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), who said that we need an assessment of the benefit of these proposals to local towns, not just cities. That is what my constituents have been saying for many years—what is the benefit to them?

I am entirely in agreement with many of the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), in particular regarding the current west coast main line. We need a proper business case for what will happen post-HS2 for the west coast main line. I use it every week, and I know that I am not alone among my constituents in thinking that the service currently supplied by Virgin is perfectly satisfactory. My constituents cannot understand why there is a need for them to contribute to the huge expense of HS2, particularly as only a tiny proportion of them are likely to use it.

Michael Fabricant: My hon. Friend will know that the Government argue, as indeed does the Labour party, that the reason for HS2 is to relieve the congestion on the west coast main line. Is she aware that double-tracking from just north of Rugby down to Euston, where two extra platforms are being prepared anyway, would resolve that problem?

Fiona Bruce: My constituents have often argued that solutions can be put forward using the west coast main line as it stands and that it should not be necessary to have the additional infrastructure that HS2 necessitates.

Moreover, there is real concern about the high—possibly too high—ticket prices that HS2 is likely to incur, when many rail charges are already very expensive for those who want to travel down to London. Speaking of London, many of my constituents are concerned that all this will do is draw business down to London. For a constituency like mine, which will not have a direct connection with HS2, there will still need to be local connections, whether it is from Crewe or coming up from Birmingham or down from Manchester. There is no confidence that HS2 will attract business to our area. There are many other reasons why business would be attracted to my part of Cheshire. It is a wonderful place to live—it is very attractive, with great schools and a good quality of life—but there is no confidence that the huge expenditure of HS2 will lead to increased business in our area. A proper business case has never been made for this.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Unlike my hon. Friend, I have in the past supported measures related to HS2, but this evening I shall no longer be
doing so, because the escalating cost estimates and the lack of apparent accountability for those increases is now quite frankly ridiculous. Does she agree that a fraction of this amount could be much better spent on improving connectivity within the north of England, rather than wasted on this vanity train set?

**Fiona Bruce:** That is exactly the point that I am seeking to make. I agree. It is very interesting that the Lords Economic Affairs Committee found evidence that the costs of HS2 appear to be out of control. That does not inspire confidence in my constituents. If there is going to be improved connectivity outside our constituency, many of them would prefer to see it across from Manchester towards Leeds and Yorkshire, rather than further connectivity down to London, which they already think is quite satisfactory for their purposes.

The case for speed has never been made. People work on the train and, because my constituents will have to make a connection—whether it is from Crewe or elsewhere—they are not convinced that the slim time saving justifies the expenditure that will be incurred. If the aim of the project is to narrow the gap between the north and London, the investment needs to be in the north.

**Jim McMahon:** I accept that Governments need to balance the books—they cannot spend the same pound twice. Quite a few times in this debate, we have heard northern MPs call for the money to be shifted across, but when has the same been done in London? When does London have to choose between good infrastructure and capital investment on the one hand, and affordable, efficient transport at a local level on the other? London does not have to choose. Why should we?

**Fiona Bruce:** Absolutely.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford referred to the series of junctions on the M6. Junction 17 of the M6 at Sandbach in my constituency needs improvement to take the additional traffic that is increasingly burdening it, particularly because of the additional house building. It is one of the few junctions in the country without a roundabout serving it. Each morning, we see huge pressure, in particular from those commuting from Sandbach to Manchester and elsewhere. It is highly unsatisfactory and another priority that needs to be looked at—in my constituents’ view, looked at in preference to the proposed investment in HS2.

There is going to be an impact in my constituency, because while HS2 does not pass through it, it passes within yards of it. It will pass through Stanthorne and the Bostock Hall estate, literally within yards of Middlewich. Many of my constituents will be impacted—the quality of their lives will be impacted—by this without any compensation being available to them.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a compelling case. As a London MP, I want to point out that people on Wells House Road in my seat, which HS2 will pass through, do not welcome this development at all. They are already living on a building site seven days a week, and that will carry on for 10 years. The streets are not paved with gold, and even in London, people do not want this.

**Fiona Bruce:** I fully empathise.

Of course, there are also environmental concerns. New clause 1 proposes a review of those concerns, but they are self-evident. The Wildlife Trusts says that hundreds of special wildlife habitats are under threat from HS2, including ancient woodlands, lakes, meadows and other important habitats. We do not need an assessment to tell us that—it is obvious.

**Michael Fabricant:** Does my hon. Friend not find it extraordinary that the original proposal by Arup for HS2 was that it should travel parallel to the M40 on an existing transport corridor that would have connected with Heathrow and the channel tunnel, but the Labour Lord, Lord Adonis, changed it to an incredibly environmentally damaging route?

6.30 pm

**Fiona Bruce:** It will do much damage at a time when we are becoming increasingly aware of how important it is to address issues such as environmental protection and climate change.

My constituents are frustrated that HS2 will effectively terminate at Euston. So many of them would prefer not to fly to the continent from Manchester airport, but to take a train, but it would be impractical to have to trundle heavy suitcases across London.

We started with a cost of £35 billion and the latest figure is in the region of £56 billion. No one believes that the costs will not escalate, and there are now credible reports of up to £80 billion. Those are still only estimates, and that is unacceptable. My constituents do not see HS2 as a value-for-money enterprise.

In the Lords Economic Affairs Committee, Lord Forsyth of Drumlean said:

“Commuter services in the north of England are badly overcrowded and reliant on ageing trains. Rail connections between northern cities are poor”—and between northern towns. He continued:

“rail infrastructure in the north should be the Government’s priority for investment, rather than improving north-south links which are already good. The north is being short-changed by the Government’s present plans, especially as construction on HS2 is starting in the south. Any overcrowding relief from HS2 will mainly benefit London commuters.”

If we are to have any assessments, reviews or reports, we need to look at how we can ensure a fair and proportionate benefit to constituents such as mine from an investment of this size.

**Mr Ivan Lewis:** I am happy to support the new clauses as they make a lot of sense in terms of accountability, evaluation and transparency, as well as ensuring constant review of a project as massive as HS2. It is also important to acknowledge the scandalous inequality of investment in the north of England that has been the case under successive Governments.

The former Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, deserves some credit for the concept of the northern powerhouse and the whole principle of devolving maximum power, but that has to be accompanied by resources. Since the change of Prime Minister and because it was the former Chancellor’s project, the Government have taken their eye off the ball when it comes to devolution and the northern powerhouse, and it is even
less a central component of the Government’s agenda than it was in the past. So I will actually say that the Conservative Government did more in terms of devolution in principle in England than previous Labour Governments had done, but it was not accompanied by investment and, since the change of Prime Minister, that agenda has been sidelined.

Jim McMahon: I should say that I think Labour has a good track record on devolution and devolving power. Does my hon. Friend accept that the concept of the northern powerhouse is like the concept of a cake without the ingredients?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Do not give way again.

Michael Fabricant: I am bemused by the hon. Gentleman’s talk of one or two amendments and tweaking. Does he not think it is more than a tweak when the railway line was originally proposed to use an existing transport corridor up the M40 and then suddenly was changed with a ruler to go straight through the most virgin of countryside? That was more than a tweak.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Do not give way again.

Mr Lewis: I have been following instructions from you for 20 years, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I will continue to do so in this debate. The hon. Gentleman used his usual colourful language, but my point was that for nine years Lord Adonis has been nowhere near this scheme or the Department for Transport. If the hon. Gentleman genuinely feels that a massive mistake was made, Lord Adonis’s successors have had plenty of opportunities to address those concerns.

Fiona Bruce: I want to put on the record that I believe that in the last nine years our Transport Ministers have taken a lot of cognisance of the needs of northern constituencies. My own constituency has funding for bypasses in Congleton and in Middlewich. Ministers are also looking favourably on reinstating Middlewich railway station. It is not as though our Ministers have not taken note of our requirements; it is simply that we feel that the HS2 project could provide better value for money if spent differently.

Mr Lewis: I respect the hon. Lady’s views on some of those issues in the context of the debate, but I have to say assertively to her that, in the context of austerity, those at the bottom of the pile have suffered more than everyone else. When we look at the impact of austerity on the country and on communities, we see that many northern communities were starting at an incredibly low base. The impact of austerity, therefore, is not simply that we have not been able to catch up; the inequality and disparity in terms of the investment in skills, jobs, infrastructure and public services have actually made the situation far worse. That combination of austerity and the low base of investment, which has been an historical reality under successive Governments, is having a devastating effect on many northern communities.

The hon. Lady therefore really cannot afford to be complacent; she may have had some funding for a bypass in her constituency, but the reality in many of our constituencies in the north of England is that this has been an incredibly challenging and difficult period.

The hon. Lady therefore really cannot afford to be complacent; she may have had some funding for a bypass in her constituency, but the reality in many of our constituencies in the north of England is that this has been an incredibly challenging and difficult period. If any business had 50% reductions to its budget in a four or five-year period, it would go bankrupt; that is the historical reality under successive Governments, is having a devastating effect on many northern communities.

I want to come on specifically to the new clause on the non-disclosure agreements tabled by the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach). My view, having come reasonably late to this topic, is that what we have seen in terms of non-disclosure agreements in the context of HS2 is nothing short of a public scandal. Essentially,
many of these agreements have been used to silence people inside that organisation who are concerned that Parliament has been misled on a regular basis about financial information. Let us be clear: people have been given redundancy from HS2 because, internally, they have articulated concerns about misleading information that has been presented to this House in terms of finance and capacity.

Ministers have a responsibility to disinfect this issue. They should now make it clear that, former members of staff subject to non-disclosure clauses and paid redundancy simply because they felt Parliament was being misled should be released from those non-disclosure responsibilities and should be able to share their views with Parliament and to put them in the public domain. It is totally hypocritical to talk, quite rightly, about the outrage of the Labour party imposing non-disclosure agreements on its staff, but then for Ministers not to release members of staff in HS2 from such requirements.

I would like to reveal to the House today that a consultants’ report costing at least £1 million was commissioned from a well-known consultant, which did not say what HS2 wanted it to say. That report was more or less shredded; it was certainly never put in the public domain or shared with Parliament.

We know that the costs have escalated time and time again and that some people in the organisation have alerted the HS2 board and other senior executives to the difficulties. I am not saying that HS2 should be scrapped, but for parliamentarians to make a rational, proper judgment on its viability, desirability and achievability, we have to have full possession of the facts. There is absolutely no question but that Ministers have not always been given full information by HS2. As a consequence, Select Committees and the House itself have not been given the full information that we and the public are entitled to in any debate about the desirability of this scheme.

**John Redwood:** If a Government had decided to offer all the northern councils involved their proportion of the original budget for HS2 as capital spend, to spend as they saw fit, does the hon. Gentleman think they would have spent it together on the railway or on something else?

**Mr Lewis:** I say genuinely to the right hon. Gentleman that that is a false choice. In Greater Manchester, thanks to changes the Government have made, we are seeking finally to have the capacity to reintegrate, re-coordinate and, where appropriate, re-regulate our buses. However, the level of subsidy per commuter in Greater Manchester, compared with London, is frankly shocking in terms of the Mayor of Greater Manchester’s capacity to radically improve bus services across the conurbation. I genuinely say to the right hon. Gentleman—this is not a party political point—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. We are straying way off. We are not about bus services. We are not about subsidies. I am sure the Member for Bury South will not be tempted. That is what Members are trying to do: they are trying to tempt him into a debate that we are not having at this stage.

**Mr Lewis:** I entirely accept what you say, Mr Deputy Speaker. I simply say to the right hon. Gentleman that he was talking about a genuinely false choice, and we should not go down the road of such false choices.

I am agnostic about HS2. The reason I have become agnostic is that I am absolutely convinced that Members of this House and people in this country are not being given full, appropriate and adequate information on cost and capacity, both of which are central to whether this project, compared with other projects, should go ahead and whether it can be delivered in budget and on time, in the way that Ministers have suggested.

I want to conclude by saying this to the Minister. It really is time for Ministers to insist that there is maximum transparency and maximum disclosure of information in terms of the amounts paid and the number of non-disclosure and similar agreements issued. Ministers also need to go further and instruct HS2 to ensure that people are released from these non-disclosure responsibilities where it is clearly in the public interest to do so. It is most definitely in the public interest to do so when senior members of staff were made redundant simply because they articulated concerns within the organisation that false financial information was being put in the public domain, which is not in the public interest. In those circumstances, Ministers have a duty and the right to instruct HS2 to release people from their obligations. For us to make considered and measured judgments about the future of the scheme, we need all the facts in the public domain, as do the people of this country.

**Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con):** I rise to support the HS2 rail development and to support the Government ahead of the votes this evening. The name HS2, as many have said, is somewhat misleading, because the project is clearly more about capacity. The greatest gain will be in terms of capacity and therefore improved resilience, allowing us to connect the north to the south and, I hope, the east to the west.

As it is Monday, I feel particularly able to talk about rail, because I have just enjoyed my twice a week, five and a half hour commute. I travel from Bootle village to Barrow, and change. Then, I move from Barrow to Lancaster, and change. Then, I move from Lancaster to Crewe, and it was lovely to hear the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) talk about her constituency, because I enjoyed a most memorable 25 minutes on platform 5, before moving again, from Crewe to London Euston. That is a journey I make twice a week—a round trip of 11 hours.

I can see for myself how vulnerable the infrastructure is and how one train being delayed impacts, with cancelled trains, thousands of inconvenienced commuters, thousands of pounds in compensation claims and, most importantly, lost confidence. That is at a time when the ability to travel by public transport is so vital if we are to decarbonise our transport systems and try to hit that 2050 target.

The Minister for HS2 rightly argues that it is critical to unlocking Northern Powerhouse Rail by providing the foundations on which Northern Powerhouse Rail can be realised. It is also planned that HS2 will link over 25 towns and cities, from Scotland through to the south-east, joining up nearly half the UK. It is important to recognise that the funding for HS2 does not come at
the expense of wider investment in the railways; it is not either/or—from my perspective in the north of England, it is in addition. That is about the investment in the Cumbrian coast line. Living on the train line as I do, I see from my living room window the increase in services. There are 21 trains on a Sunday, which is a first between Whitehaven and Millom. Never before have we had trains on Sundays. It has made a huge improvement to our tourist economy. We now have 205 services between Whitehaven and Millom. After the tricky situation with the timetable change in May 2018, we have seen huge improvements in reliability on our line—now up to 93.5% reliability. Since the new timetable was introduced last year, the extra services have been running at record reliability, thanks to the intervention of the Department for Transport. That is great news for commuters.

We have seen an end to the very unreliable Class 37 locomotive. I am pleased it has been relegated to the scrapheap—or possibly the museum. We are also seeing an end to the very uncomfortable Pacer trains, or “nodding donkeys” as they are more commonly known in my area. As long as that investment continues locally, with the recently announced millions of pounds to develop preliminary works on the Cumbrian coast line to improve the rolling stock and to ensure that a reliable service connects people to places seven days a week, then I welcome the additional infrastructure investment that the Government propose with HS2 and, critically, Northern Powerhouse Rail. We have in the past referred to HS3 as a follow-on from HS2, but that northern connection is now termed Northern Powerhouse Rail, with a focus on connectivity from east to west from Liverpool to Leeds via Manchester.

New clause 1 refers to quarterly reports on environmental impact, costs and progress. However, the environmental statement, at 11,000 pages, is already incredibly extensive, so I do not believe we need another layer of reporting on a statement that is already out there. The environmental statement has been scrutinised independently and by the Select Committee, which has made its own decisions. It is important to recognise that not all scrutiny must take place in public. Ministers can maintain pressure through a co-operative, sensible, business-like environment, rather than having to shame a contractor on the Floor.

Mr Wragg: Surely, the point of scrutiny is not political point scoring, but accountability for the billions of pounds for this project. We are not yet entirely sure about the total amount. Surely, that is the point of accountability, rather than political point scoring?

Trudy Harrison: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, but I refer him to the 11,000 pages of the environmental statement. We need less pen pushing and paper shuffling, and more progress and more connecting people to places.

We already have compensation schemes in abundance. A plethora of schemes are available: in a safeguarded area, the express purchase scheme and the need to sell scheme; in a rural support zone, we have the cash offer, voluntary purchase schemes and the need to sell scheme; and in the homeowner payment zone, we have the homeowner payment scheme and the need to sell scheme. Outside the zones, we also have the need to sell scheme. How many layers of payment schemes do we really need? Surely, we can recognise that the current compensation packages are sufficient for those affected by the project?

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the complexity of the compensation schemes, and no compensation scheme is perfect, but in my part of the world, which is in phase 2b, there are problems with the compensation scheme in the town of Staveley because it does not adequately reflect what is happening on the ground. We have to accept that there are many issues on the ground. There are tenants who are renting from their parents. There are people in trusts to support their elderly parents living there. I hope that the Government will consider those kinds of nuances, on an ad hoc and case-by-case basis, in a way that I have not seen so far.

Trudy Harrison: I do not have HS2 or, indeed, any significant infrastructure projects in my constituency, but I look forward to doing so. In my constituency, we are looking forward to the Moorside development, which will have similar kinds of inconvenience and unintended consequences. I served the Minister in the past. I am confident that she will work with Members across the House and that, where there are issues, she will work with communities.

The independent peer review is another raft of bureaucracy and scrutiny that has been more than adequately covered by this House, its Committees and the Government. The four points addressed—environmental impact, economic impact, engineering and governance—have been reviewed time and again over the past five years. It is time we got on with this project and recognised that this country is crying out for greater north-south capacity.

Antoinette Sandbach: I am very interested in the point my hon. Friend is making. Can she tell the House why, if the reviews she mentions have taken place, the costs of this project have escalated by many billions of pounds?

Trudy Harrison: Any large-scale project, particularly a first like HS2, will see unintended costs, resulting in an increased budget. “You don’t make an omelette without smashing some eggs,” is a common phrase in my Copeland constituency. Regardless of that increase, for every £1 spent on HS2, £2 will still go back into the economy.

The north-south and east-west divides have for far too long separated our nation and stifled our economy. I am not interested in even more bureaucracy. This is about connecting people and places. That is why I will support the Government this evening, and look forward to HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail being delivered.

Mr Paterson: It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate. I have listened carefully to the arguments. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) might be interested to know that I was actually minded to support her new clauses until she spoke. Her new clauses would have no consequences: they would just lay a report and nothing would happen.
[Mr Paterson]

I have gone on a journey on this issue. I voted for the project when I was in Cabinet, and I have become more and more sceptical about it. At one stage I thought it might just die, because the finances were becoming less and less sensible. Now, however, I have real concerns. There are problems with it in my own constituency and nationally. I would have supported new clause 1 on assessing environmental impact, costs, progress on the timetable and economic impact, but I realise that all that would happen is that a report would be laid and there would be no consequences.

In an earlier intervention—I am not sure whether you were here, Mr Deputy Speaker—I raised the issue of the route. My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) pointed out several times in interventions that originally the route was going to follow an existing corridor up the M40, but is now going to smash through virgin countryside and cause huge damage at vast cost. One thing I have in common with my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison)—it is a great pleasure to follow her—is that we both went to platform 5 at Crewe this morning and changed trains. I moved on to platform 11. I do that every week, twice a week. I raised this point in an intervention: my constituents want to go direct to Heathrow. I am sure Old Oak Common has many attractions and is a lovely place with charming people and wonderful things to do, but my constituents do not want to go to Old Oak Common. They want to go direct to Heathrow or direct to HS1.

7 pm

Rachael Maskell: I remind the right hon. Gentleman that we are debating phase 2a of the HS2 project. That is the remit of the Bill—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. That is for me to judge. I have been very lenient to Members on both sides throughout the debate. To try to stop these remarks at this late stage would be a bit unjust. I have tried to stop Members being tempted, but everybody is trying to build on the debate that took us out of scope, and I recognise that at times, we have gone out of scope. We have been in this area once already and it would be remiss of me not—

Rachael Maskell: It was with regards to my amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Of course we will come to your amendment.

Rachael Maskell: I just wanted to say to the right hon. Gentleman that my amendment can therefore apply only to phase 2a. His aspiration may be to review the whole project, but my amendment applies only to the contents of the Bill.

Mr Paterson: I totally get that point, but one cannot get from Crewe to the end destinations in phase 1 without getting this part of the project done, and the point is that Labour’s amendments do not allow any action. If the hon. Lady compelled the Government to do something, I might be minded to support that, but as I said, I have become increasingly disillusioned by the cost and the damage to my own patch.

The first I knew about the damage to my constituency was when a notice went up in the village of Woor, which the hon. Lady is probably not aware of, in the most extreme north-eastern corner of Shropshire. It is a salient that sticks out to the east between the counties of Cheshire and Staffordshire. Woor is a village of 1,200 people, with a nursery and a primary school of 1,200 people, with a nursery and a primary school of 1,200 people, with a nursery and a primary school of 1,200 people. They want to go direct to Heathrow or direct to HS1.

John Redwood: Does my right hon. Friend have any sympathy for the amendment from our hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) about non-disclosure agreements?

Mr Paterson: I am going to come to that in a minute. I am wholly amazed by the revelations from my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), and I look forward to the Minister’s comments on that, because I was really shocked by what my hon. Friend said. Given my experience of having a series of meetings with HS2 officials, all of which have been—at face value—thoroughly satisfactory and an open exchange of views, but have got absolutely nowhere, it now appears that there might some other reasons why that is. Given what she is saying, I cannot find out why, so if she presses her amendment, which I very much hope she does, I would like to hear from the Minister whether the Government will accept it. If they do not, I will be very happy to vote in favour of it. My hon. Friend has flushed out a most serious issue.

Jim McMahon: I absolutely accept the constituency issues that the right hon. Gentleman raises, and the poor consultation cannot be excused, but he must accept that with a route and project of this scale, the minor changes that are made in one part of it will have a massive impact if that is held across the whole route, and that has an impact on the budget and the timescale. Whether he supports the project or not, he must accept at some point that it is either time to back it or scrap it. There is this idea that we can keep throwing on hundreds of small, different issues and take that as a measure of the project, but that is just not a way forward. This is a major project for this country and it should be debated in that way.

Mr Paterson: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his interventions. He has been busy making these points throughout the debate and I understand that he is fully in favour of the project. I began my working life...
by spending 25 years on Merseyside. I am fully aware of
the need for transport connections for the north, particularly
including west to east across the north of England. I
began with a personal interest in the project, but the more I
look at it, the more worried I become.

Let me finish my points on my local issue in the
village of Woore. We cannot just dismiss these as tiresome
little irritations in a huge juggernaut of a project. These
are real people: 1,200 people live in Woore and they will
have 300 trucks a day going through a village where, in
some places, there is no footpath. In schedule 1, on page
48, Members can see some proposals on mitigations,
such as a “realignment of the A525” in a few places.
These are just passing places. They in no way satisfy my
constituents with regard to what they are looking for
and are not good enough at all.

Will the Minister, who is beginning to get her notes
together, comment on the proposals from Woore Parish
Council that section 17 of the Town and Country
Planning Act 1990 should be invoked? As I understand
it, under that section, the unitary council’s—in my
case—permission is required if there are heavy vehicle
movements exceeding 24 a day. In Woore, we were faced
with the horror of 600 movements. As a result of
stretching out the length of the project, we are now
looking at 300 a day, so we are massively over the
threshold. I would like to know what would happen if
Shropshire Council did not give permission as required
under section 17 of that Act. Where would these trucks
go? As I said, they are already taking a perverse route,
over three sides of a quadrangle, to go from Baldwins
Gate to Madeley.

I want to pick up some points that, again, could have
been flushed out if the amendment had been properly
drafted. Let me look at the economic impact. My worry
about this project is that this is actually Victorian
technology. Large steel boxes rolling around on steel
wheels on steel tracks is not modern technology.
[Interruption.] My neighbour, the hon. Member for
Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), is laughing at that.
We are looking at the most expensive railway ever
imagined. The original proposals were set in 2010 and
the projected cost was £32.6 billion. That is now up to
over £60 billion. Some estimates are talking about £80
billion, while others suggest £100 million. Let us compare
that with what we could do on broadband, where we are
miles behind other countries. We have only 4% full fibre
connections at the moment. Spain has 71% and Portugal
has 89%.

Laura Smith: Can we not start looking at this perhaps
as broadband infrastructure and rail infrastructure? All
these things in the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency
and in mine would be a great benefit to us all. It should
not really be either/or.

Mr Paterson: That is a perfectly fair point, but there
is no money tree. There is a limited amount of private
and public money. I put to the hon. Lady that her
constituents and mine have suffered for generations
from the innate disadvantage of living in a remote rural
area, 200 miles from London. With this new broadband
technology, they can suddenly be level pegging with
someone who is in the middle of Manchester or the middle
of London. They can be just as competitive when talking
to a customer in Ulan Bator or San Francisco. We are
all absolutely level, but we have to have broadband.

A spokesman from Openreach, picking up on the comments
of my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and
South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), said last week that
“building full fibre technology to the whole of the UK isn’t quick
or easy. It requires £30 billion and a physical build to more than
30m front doors, from suburban terraces to remote crofts.”

Think of the benefit to our constituents if we had full
fibre for £30 billion, which was the original estimate for
HS2. This project is getting out of control.

John Redwood: People call this project an investment.
Now, one aims to get a return on an investment. If we
wanted a very modest 3% real on this £55 billion slug of
capital, it should be generating profits of £2.75 billion
every year. I do not think it will make a single penny.
The case for investment has not been made.

Mr Paterson: I agree. There were questions about its
original cost of £32 billion. We are now at £55 billion
and looking at £100 billion. We know categorically that
we would massively improve the productivity of every
single human being in this country if we had full fibre
broadband.

I am not prepared to vote for the Labour party
amendments. I thought they were good when I first
skimmed through them, but they place no consequential
requirements on the Government. If the Government
do not support my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury’s
amendment, I will vote for it, if she presses it. I am also
minded to change my opinion of the whole project,
mindful that my constituents have not been given
satisfaction and mindful that their lives will be turned
upside down for a long period by this project, and to
vote against the Bill on Third Reading unless I hear
otherwise from the Minister.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport
(Ms Nusrat Ghanbarali): It has been a pleasure to hear so
many passionate speeches about the power of transport
to transform the outcomes of our constituencies and
our country. Even though there have been some strong
speeches from Members who have HS2 running through
their patches—obviously they defend their patches and
constituents—we have heard too about the transformative
nature of HS2.

There is no denying that HS2 is a large infrastructure
project—it is the largest of its kind in Europe—but it is
also absolutely key as it links up eight of our 10 great
cities. It will be transformative not only because it will
increase capacity and reduce the time it takes to reach
eight of our top 10 cities, but because, along the way,
it will smash the north-south divide, creating jobs and
opportunities for people in the midlands and the north.

I need to respond to quite a few Members and go
to each of the new clauses, so I will be as swift as I
can. I thank the shadow Minister for her comments
supporting the project as a whole and her recognition of
the number of jobs that will be created along the
route and in the supply chain. At the peak, there will be
30,000 jobs, most of them outside London. I also
welcome the comments about the urgent need to get on
and deliver this vital infrastructure project and about
how it is about not just speed but capacity.

I could talk about my passion for the project, but I
thought it might be relevant, considering that we are
sitting here in the middle of London talking about
those who are supportive of HS2 and those who are critical of it, if I mentioned voices that do not often get mentioned in the Chamber. The Birmingham chamber of commerce has said:

“HS2 is a game changer for our region as Birmingham will proudly sit at the centre of a brand new network.”

Judith Blake from Leeds City Council said:

“HS2 will be transformational for Leeds and the region”.

Leader of Derby City Council, Chris Poulter, said:

“Whist I’m aware that there have been some concerns about the impact of HS2, we mustn’t lose sight of the benefits to Derby, and the wider Midlands area.”

There was also a fantastic article put together by the leaders of Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle and the Mayors of Greater Manchester and the Liverpool city region. These people represent 15.4 million people, and they say there is no realistic alternative to the delivery of HS2, which we know is key to delivering Northern Powerhouse Rail as well. I am concerned that sometimes the criticism comes from so far south. We should focus on the needs and aspirations of people in the midlands and the north.

Mr Wragg: I am probably as much from the north as Andy Burnham—I am from Greater Manchester—and I am critical of HS2 today. Although my constituents are unaffected, they are none the less aware of the scale of the increase in the expenditure and would consider it a waste of money as much as any Member from the south.

7.15 pm

Ms Ghani: The people I mentioned have all made it very clear that they do not think it is a waste of money. I can confirm for my hon. Friend and others that there is only one budget for HS2, and it is £55.7 billion. The bit we are talking about today, phase 2a, is £3.5 billion. The benefit-cost ratio is £2.30 for every £1 spent. There will always be people—we have heard some today—who will never support the project because of its impact in their constituencies, but we must not deny the positive impact it will have on the whole of our country.

I want to take a moment to refer to some of the contributions to the debate before I get to the new clauses. I know that hon. Members will be listening very closely to the words I use. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) has been an incredibly passionate advocate for his constituency. I wanted to mention his staff member who has spent years dealing with constituent complaints, but I forgot his name.

Jeremy Lefroy: His name is James Cantrell. I am sure his situation is the same as that of staff in many other colleagues’ constituency offices.

Ms Ghani: I want to put on the record my thanks to James for doing such fantastic work. My hon. Friend raised an important point. It should not be up to Members and their staff to continually liaise between HS2 and their constituents. It is HS2’s job to ensure that the community engagement is appropriate and done with humility and that cases are dealt with swiftly.

My hon. Friend once again challenged the budget. As I said, it is £55.7 billion. It is the job not only of the Department but of the chairman and the CEO to keep budgets tight. He also talked about spoil and its impact on traffic in his constituency. It is expected that 92% of excavated material generated by phase 2A will be used across the HS2 route and that 4% will be directed to local placement along the route. I am more than happy to meet him again to go through his issues and will make sure that Highways England is in the room as well. He mentioned three cases—the golf club, Hopton and Hanchurch. I have an update on all three and am more than happy to put them in writing to save time on the Floor of the House. If he wishes to meet, I can also provide him with an update then, but progress is being made. I understand from my notes that they are more or less satisfied with the arrangements made with HS2.

I welcome the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison). I agree about the transformative nature of public transport and its impact on national prosperity, which is why we are making such a significant investment in our railways. I remind her, because I know it is incredibly important to Copeland, that there will be more than £2.9 billion of trans-Pennine rail upgrades—the single biggest project commitment in control period 6.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) asked repeatedly what HS2 would do for her constituency. At its peak, there will be more than 300,000 people travelling daily on this line. It will connect eight of our top 10 cities. Two technical colleges are already in place to make sure that our youngsters and older people who want to reskill have a job for life. It will connect our country. I completely understand, as a constituency Member, how Members should and must fight for the best deal for their constituents, but this will be a transformative project. All the cases raised today by Members on both sides of the House of where HS2 Ltd is not acting as swiftly as it could be have been put on the record, and I will do my best to take forward any cases that remain undealt with.

I hesitate to respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) in case he makes a passionate intervention, but I cannot see him in the Chamber. No doubt he will come back in. I thank the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) for her support for the Bill. She referred to businesses. There are 2,000 businesses already involved on the line and 9,000 people working on the line, and 98% of the businesses involved in HS2 are small and medium-sized enterprises. I have personally tasked HS2 with making sure that it makes it an easier process for smaller businesses to bid for projects. I want this project to transform not just large but small businesses, making it easier for them to pitch for work.

The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) spoke about investment in the north. I was lucky enough to be in the Chamber earlier with the Rail Minister; my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), and I can confirm that we are investing more than £40 billion in our existing network. Network Rail estimates that about 100 cities and towns could benefit from new or improved rail connections as a result of HS2. As some
of the passionate speakers have noted today, it is not an either/or project; we need HS2 as well as continued investment in our rail and road network.

I do not see my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) in the Chamber, so I will move on. As I am running out of time, I will now deal with the new clauses. I welcomed what the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) said about new clause 1, but I do not recognise the need for quarterly reporting. I think that once I have explained why, she will agree with me.

Let me first say something about the environment. The project is already bound not to exceed the likely significant environmental effects that were assessed and reported to Parliament. The environmental statement clearly sets out our approach to the monitoring, reporting and mitigation of environmental impacts during the construction of the phase 2a scheme, and follows industry best practice. Most important, the monitoring and reporting of individual environmental impacts must be tailored to the impacts in question. During phase 1 we are already publishing monthly and annual reports setting out compliance with air quality and dust commitments, and similar monthly reports on noise and vibration impacts are published.

Subject to Royal Assent, local environmental and management plans will be developed for each local authority along the phase 2a route. They will explain how the scheme will adapt to and deliver the required environmental and community protection measures in each local authority area. If we make a decision here today, we will tie the hands of local authorities, which will not be able to engage in important discussions. We should not, here in London, impose something separate and arbitrary that may not be locally appropriate. When authorities have those conversations with HS2 Ltd, they can make arrangements to receive monthly reports.

Contractors working for HS2 Ltd will be required to comply with the measures in the local environmental management plans in order to meet the environmental minimum requirements. HS2 Ltd will also consult statutory agencies and independent experts, such as the HS2 ecological review group, which will advise on the monitoring regime and report impacts on ecology and biodiversity. The hon. Lady said a lot about the need for local engagement, local empowerment and monthly reports. All that can and will take place if we allow it to happen, as it has in relation to other parts of the line. She may not have been aware that that was happening, but I think she will agree that if we accept her new clause we will not only increase costs, but create an unintended consequence whereby local authorities will lose their monthly reporting.

New clause 2 proposes a compensation scheme for tenants. We discussed that in the Public Bill Committee on 25 June, when I responded to a similar proposal. As I said then, the starting point is that the land compensation code does not shut out those who hold land, whatever the duration of their tenancies. It does not bar them from compensation. We have a responsibility to be absolutely accurate when we are talking about policies and the support that is provided. We may make people even more nervous about coming forward if they do not know what measures are available.

Most types of tenancy are already provided for under existing compensation, if they are impacted by the scheme. When they are not, the Government can use their flexible, non-statutory compensation arrangements to provide support where appropriate in a typical case, which is the category into which most of these cases will fall. The amount of compensation payable is set by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. It applies to all Government-led infrastructure projects, and not just to HS2. Those arrangements have been debated, agreed and set by Parliament, together with a vast body of case law on the subject.

The hon. Lady may not be aware that HS2 Ltd has published a useful information note—“C15: guide to compensation for short term residential tenants”—which covers atypical cases. I am more than happy to sit down with her and explain it. I am also more than happy to ensure that, if necessary, the position is communicated to local community engagement forums as effectively as possible. I have previously hosted events in the House to enable Members on both sides of the House to manage particular scenarios with their constituents.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I apologise for missing the start of the Minister’s speech. I was chairing a debate in Westminster Hall.

Can the Minister assure me that the property registers and the holdings of properties will be accurate? I was recently given two lists of properties in my constituency that had been bought by HS2 Ltd, and they did not match. Properties that were missing from the second list had appeared on another list some years earlier. Can the Minister assure me that she will update the property registers, and will ensure that they are accurate in the first place?

Ms Ghani: My right hon. Friend has raised the important issue of transparency and the need for data to be up to date. Members of Parliament who are working hard for their constituents need to know exactly what data they are speaking about. I shall be happy to ensure that any case that my right hon. Friend raises is dealt with by HS2 Ltd, and also to ensure that there is even greater clarity about the compensation packages that are available.

Let me now deal with new clause 4. Phase 2a has been under independent scrutiny since its conception. All elements of high-speed rail have been subject to scrutiny since the outset, not least in the House, through the petitioning process, through Public Bill Committee scrutiny and debate, and also through independent scrutiny conducted by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority and the National Audit Office.

Let me assure the House that, while HS2 is making huge progress in supporting 9,000 jobs across the country and being backed by businesses and business leaders in the midlands and the north, we will continue to scrutinise the project. HS2 will boost economic growth across the UK, and we are already seeing the benefits in the midlands and the north. However, I do not see the benefits of a further environmental assessment, given that we have already consulted extensively. That includes a seven-month consultation on the route back in 2013, a scope and methodology consultation in preparation for the environmental impact assessment in 2016, a consultation on the working draft of the environmental impact assessment—also in 2016—a consultation on the environmental statement deposited alongside the Bill in 2017, and two more consultations on the environmental statement and supplementary environmental statement alongside the additional Bill provisions in 2018 and 2019.
I hope Members agree that a huge amount of scrutiny has already taken place. There is also a board, which was strengthened last year by a new chairman, Allan Cook, who works closely with the executive to review the capability and capacity of HS2. It is the job of the chair and the board to ensure that the entire programme continues under scrutiny. I do not see what more another review will achieve, apart from adding another layer of bureaucracy and another cost, given that there have already been so many.

Let me now deal briefly with new clause 5. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) for being so patient. She has cited some very complicated cases, some of which have taken a long time to resolve. I can only apologise on behalf of HS2 Ltd if it has not worked as efficiently as possible with her constituents, or in providing information about local schools.

Mr Paterson: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ghani: Very briefly.

Mr Paterson: If my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) presses her new clause, will the Government encourage other Members to support it? While I have the Minister’s attention, may I also ask her to address my point about schedule 17, which deals with the Town and Country Planning Act 1990? The local council must give permission for more than 24 heavy vehicles per day to travel down a route. My constituents in Woore will be afflicted by 300 per day.

Ms Ghani: I completely understand my right hon. Friend’s frustration with the impact that the build has on his constituency, but I am sure that he and his council would agree that this is better done sooner rather than later. I am more than happy to sit down with him and go through the lorry movements in his constituency.

On new clause 5, I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) that non-disclosure agreements are used for good reason, and not for any underhand purposes. I do not think that it would work effectively. There is already a statutory framework in place for HS2, which includes the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004. The new clause is designed to prevent HS2 Ltd from acting as a commercial organisation, and tries to prevent it allocating most of its money, which, I remind everyone in the House, has already taken place. There is also a board, which was strengthened last year by a new chairman, Allan Cook, who works closely with the executive to review the capability and capacity of HS2. It is the job of the chair and the board to ensure that the entire programme continues under scrutiny. I do not see what more another review will achieve, apart from adding another layer of bureaucracy and another cost, given that there have already been so many.

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On new clause 5, I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) that non-disclosure agreements are used for good reason, and not for any underhand purposes. I hope that when I list some of the good reasons for their use, she will understand—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The Minister is trying to address points made in the debate, so it would be appreciated if we could listen to what the Minister is saying: there is a lot of chatter.

7.30 pm

Ms Ghani: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The NDAs that HS2 has are fundamentally to ensure that it can continue to work with businesses, communities and local authorities on issues that are competitive and sensitive. They enable conversations with companies and local authorities about options under consideration. They allow HS2 Ltd to make better recommendations to Government, and to develop better proposals, because it has had access to the right information when making decisions.

We must not forget that NDAs provide value to the taxpayer by reducing uncertainty and by helping to reduce generalised blight. For example, HS2 Ltd entered into such agreements with local authorities in the early stages of exploring route options. I am more than prepared to ensure that HS2 Ltd, if it is able to, sits down with my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury and goes through every NDA case that she wants to bring forward. HS2 Ltd is not exempt from the national whistleblowing policy in primary legislation. It has not entered into any NDAs with any HS2 staff.

Antoinette Sandbach: HS2 has a number of subcontractors and contractors, and it has entered into NDAs with them. Under my new clause, an independent assessor would assess past NDAs. HS2 is incapable of even saying, in reply to a freedom of information request, how many NDAs it has. Given that it cannot comply with that request, I am concerned that the Minister is not in receipt of full, accurate information.

Ms Ghani: I would uphold my hon. Friend’s concerns if they were valid. As I have said to her, HS2 Ltd has not entered into any non-disclosure agreements with HS2 staff, but when it is business-critical, it needs to be able to have confidential conversations. Agencies have to agree to NDAs. There are also processes in place; two sets of legal teams provide review. I am not sure that my hon. Friend wants an outcome in which a third legal team is put in place. That will not really help what she is trying to achieve, which is ensuring that HS2 does not have one-on-one NDAs; there are none of those with staff on the project.

Mr Ivan Lewis: Will the Minister confirm that what she said to the House a few moments ago is true—that no former member of HS2 staff has an element of non-disclosure in their redundancy package?

Ms Ghani: I cannot speculate on why people are made redundant. I can confirm that no member of staff is subject to a non-disclosure agreement.

Antoinette Sandbach: The Minister has explained why it is important for the efficiency of HS2 that it should have NDAs, but does she think that is right if it comes at the cost of constituents being able to respond to consultations? What if, for example, a council is withholding information under an NDA, or if employees who are at risk of losing their jobs at an affected site find that their company is covered by an NDA, and information cannot be disclosed to them? The NDA must surely be subject to a public interest test.

Ms Ghani: I feel that my hon. Friend is talking about particular cases in her constituency, on which I am more than happy to provide further information. I will work with her to ensure that she is able to represent her constituents, and that they get satisfactory responses from HS2 Ltd. It takes part in many local engagement events; it has met several thousand residents up and down the country. I do not believe that new clause 5 will deliver what she is asking for.

John Redwood: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ms Ghani: I am running out of time; forgive me. New clause 5 would slow down the process, and I do not think that it would work effectively. There is already a statutory framework in place for HS2, which includes the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004. The new clause is designed to prevent HS2 Ltd from acting as a commercial organisation, and tries to prevent it allocating most of its money, which, I remind everyone in the
House, is from the public purse, directly to the programme. Unfortunately, I therefore cannot support the new clause tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddsbury.

Rachael Maskell: I have listened carefully to the Minister, and in the light of the power of our new clause 4, I withdraw new clause 1.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 4

INDEPENDENT PEER REVIEW

(1) The Secretary of State must commission an independent peer review of the High Speed Rail (West Midlands to Crewe) project.

(2) The review must include consideration of the project’s—
(a) environmental impact,
(b) economic impact,
(c) engineering, and
(d) governance.

(3) In this section, “independent” means it is carried out by persons who are independent of—
(a) Government,
(b) HS2 Ltd, and
(c) persons contracted or subcontracted to carry out the scheduled works.

(4) In this section, a “peer review” is a review conducted by experts of equivalent professional qualifications, expertise and standing to the persons responsible for each aspect of the project set out in subsection (2).

(5) A report of the review in subsection (1) must be laid before the House of Commons within 12 months of this Act receiving Royal Assent.”—(Rachael Maskell.)

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 213, Noes 253.

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Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 213, Noes 253.

Division No. 433] [7.36 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Heidi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cash, Sir William
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Forbes, Lisa
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Fridh, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Khan, Afzal
Kilien, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Madders, Justin
Mahwood, Mr Khalid
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kevin
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Mearns, Ian
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
Onwaruch, Chi
Osamar, Kate
Peacock, Stephanie
Pannock, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma (Proxy vote cast by Mr Pat McFadden)
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Ruan, Chris
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast
by Vicky Foxcroft)
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smithy, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Turner, Karl

Reynolds, Emma (Proxy vote cast by Mr Pat McFadden)
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Ruan, Chris
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sherriff, Paula
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Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smithy, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Turner, Karl
Tellers for the Ayes: 
Jeff Smith and Colleen Fletcher

NOES

Afroimi, Bim
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Barclay, rh Stephen
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella (Proxy vote cast by Mr Steve Baker)
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Caufield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert (Proxy vote cast by Tom Pursglove)
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, Sir Jeffery M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver

Woodcock, John
Wragg, Mr William
Yasin, Moham mad
Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly negatived.
NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENTS

(1) The nominated undertaker, or any subcontractors thereof, must not enter into any non-disclosure agreements with any party in connection with the scheduled works unless the assessor of non-disclosure agreements related to the scheduled works (“the assessor”) has certified that it is in the public interest.

(2) The Comptroller and Auditor General must appoint a person to be the assessor.

(3) The assessor must be—
(a) independent, and
(b) a current or former high court judge, higher judge or Queen’s Counsel.

(4) In this section, “independent” means independent of—
(a) Government,
(b) HS2 Ltd, and
(c) persons contracted or subcontracted to carry out the scheduled works.

(5) The assessor must undertake his or her work with a presumption in favour of transparency and public accountability in matters connected to the scheduled works.

(6) The assessor may not review any non-disclosure agreement between the nominated undertaker, or any subcontractors thereof, and any party in connection with the scheduled works and in place before this section comes into force to certify whether it is—
(a) in the public interest, or
(b) not in the public interest.

(7) The assessor may not determine that a non-disclosure agreement is in the public interest for the purposes of subsection (1) or (6) except for the reason that it is justified because of exceptional commercial confidentiality.

(8) If the assessor certifies under subsection (6) that a non-disclosure agreement is not in the public interest that non-disclosure agreement immediately ceases to have effect.

(9) In this section, a “non-disclosure agreement” means any except for the reason that it is justified because of exceptional commercial confidentiality.
**High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill**

**15 JULY 2019**

**Tellers for the Ayes:**
Colleen Fletcher and Jeff Smith

**Afoami, Bim**
**Alidou, Peter**
**Allan, Lucy**
**Amess, Sir David**
**Andrew, Stuart**
**Archer, Edward**
**Atkins, Victoria**
**Bacon, Mr Richard**
**Badenoch, Mrs Kemi**
**Baker, Mr Steve**
**Barclay, Sir Stephen**
**Bellingham, Sir Henry**
**Benyon, rh Richard**
**Beresford, Sir Paul**
**Berry, Jake**
**Blackman, Bob**
**Blunt, Crispin**
**Bone, Mr Peter**
**Bowie, Andrew**
**Bradley, Ben**
**Braverman, Suella**

**Proxy vote cast by Mr Steve Baker**

**Tellers for the Noes:**

Dinenage, Caroline
Djungloy, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Dovey-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evennett, rh Sir David
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Sir David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Glen, John
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy

Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lloyd, Stephen
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Munro, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse

O’Brien, Neil
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Phillip, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quin, Will
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rutley, David
Scully, Paul
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shebrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe (Proxy vote cast by Jo Churchill)
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Rhos
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, rh Andrew
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Henry
Tomlinson, Justin
Tracey, Craig
Tryst, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheler, Mrs Heather
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
8.7 pm

in the Vote Office and will be distributed by Doorkeepers.

consent motion, copies of which will be available shortly.

certification, the Government will be tabling the appropriate

motion, copies of which will be available shortly.

Vote Office and on the parliamentary website.

2018. Copies of my final certificate will be available

Speaker’s provisional certificate, issued on 24 January

Order. I have confirmed the view expressed in Mr

28 and 30 to 32 to, the Bill (Bill 397).

will speak in the Legislative Grand Committee but,

one day, as I have said before, Members from England

Scottish constituency, I am completely diminished in

Leader of the House he introduced the EVEL—English

unremarked. In particular, it is good to see the Secretary

let these sittings of the English Parliament go completely

Gr and Committee (England) (Standing Order No. 83M(3)).

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair; decision reported.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Consideration completed. I will now suspend the House for no more than 10 minutes in order to make a decision about certification. The Division bells will be rung two minutes before the House resumes. Following my certification, the Government will be tabling the appropriate consent motion, copies of which will be available shortly in the Vote Office and will be distributed by Doorkeepers.

8.3 pm

Sitting suspended.

8.7 pm

On resuming—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I can now inform the House that I have completed certification of the Bill, as required by the Standing Order. I have confirmed the view expressed in Mr Speaker’s provisional certificate, issued on 24 January 2018. Copies of my final certificate will be made available in the Vote Office and on the parliamentary website.

Under Standing Order No. 83M, a consent motion is therefore required for the Bill to proceed. Copies of the motion are now available. Does the Minister intend to move the consent motion?

Ms Ghani indicated assent.

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

[DAME ROSIE WINTERTON IN THE CHAIR]

8.8 pm

Question accordingly negatived.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Consideration completed. I will now suspend the House for no more than 10 minutes in order to make a decision about certification. The Division bells will be rung two minutes before the House resumes. Following my certification, the Government will be tabling the appropriate consent motion, copies of which will be available shortly in the Vote Office and will be distributed by Doorkeepers.

8.3 pm

Sitting suspended.

8.7 pm

On resuming—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I can now inform the House that I have completed certification of the Bill, as required by the Standing Order. I have confirmed the view expressed in Mr Speaker’s provisional certificate, issued on 24 January 2018. Copies of my final certificate will be made available in the Vote Office and on the parliamentary website.

Under Standing Order No. 83M, a consent motion is therefore required for the Bill to proceed. Copies of the motion are now available. Does the Minister intend to move the consent motion?

Ms Ghani indicated assent.

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

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That the Committee consents to the following certified clauses of, and Schedules to, the High Speed Rail (West Midlands – Crewe) Bill:

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

Clauses 1 to 33, 35, 37 and 40 to 62 of, and Schedules 1 to 28 and 30 to 32 to, the Bill (Bill 397).—(Ms Ghani.)

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): We should not let these sittings of the English Parliament go completely unremarked. In particular, it is good to see the Secretary of State for Transport in his place because, of course, as Leader of the House he introduced the EVEL—English votes for English laws—processes in which we now rejoice.

As you said, Dame Rosie, as the Member for a Scottish constituency, I am completely diminished in these proceedings, having no opportunity to vote, but I am glad the House had an opportunity to do so earlier.

One day, as I have said before, Members from England will speak in the Legislative Grand Committee but, once again, I fear we are to be disappointed this evening.

Question put and agreed to.

8.10 pm

Ms Ghani: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

In 2015, the Government decided to accelerate the construction of the section of High Speed 2 between the west midlands and Crewe. This has become known as phase 2a. Our intention is to open this section of railway earlier than the rest of phase 2, to start bringing the benefits of the new railway to the north as soon as we can. Today, we can give an unequivocal statement that we are investing in our rail network, and in the midlands and north of England. This House has already given its backing to the building of phase 1 of High Speed 2, paving the way for the first new railway north of London in more than 100 years. Our creaking rail network, which the Victorians took the bold step of building, has continued to serve us well, perhaps beyond the dreams of the visionaries who brought it to us.

However, it is bursting at the seams, with more passengers than ever before, and certainly more than were ever envisioned. We have exhausted the options for just “improving” our existing west coast main line; 60% of the peak capacity from the £9 billion west coast route modernisation project, completed as recently as 2008, had already been used by 2014, so we can have no more sticking plasters.

I am delighted that the Bill for phase 1 received cross-party support. High Speed 2 was a 2017 manifesto commitment of not just my party but Her Majesty’s official Opposition. We all recognise that High Speed 2 is needed, not least because it will reduce congestion on our important rail transport arteries—it will also increase capacity. Adding an entirely new line between the west midlands and Crewe will increase capacity elsewhere on our existing rail network.

Michael Fabricant rose—

Ms Ghani: I will be delighted to give way to my hon. Friend, as I referenced him earlier, but he was not in the Chamber.

Michael Fabricant: I think that if my hon. Friend, and she is my friend, had been in the Chamber earlier, she would have heard a number of interventions. May I invite her to check Hansard? Perhaps she is forgetting that I was in the Chamber. Perhaps now I should ask my question. She will know that there is no direct benefit to Lichfield, because the train does not stop in the area. She will also know, because I gave her a copy of a motion that was passed by Lichfield District Council, that it asks that “all enabling works for HS2 in Lichfield District should be paused until the notice to proceed to main works...has been approved.”

It has not been approved yet and will not be until December. May I ask her to comment on that and reassure my local council that no works will go on in the district?
Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before the Minister replies, I should say that I was in the Chair earlier. The Minister did look around eagerly during her wind-up for the hon. Gentleman and I fear he was not there.

Michael Fabricant: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I did speak to the Minister earlier and she suggested that I intervene only once Third Reading had begun and not during the earlier stages. I only wished to comply with her.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. I think we should now probably just resume the debate.

Ms Ghani: I am not sure who is chastised there, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I am pleased to see that my hon. Friend is in his place. The notice to proceed and the business case will be in the public domain later this year, which is why we need to have enabling works, so that they support the “pre” work that needs to take place before the line can be built. I know that my hon. Friend loves progress and speed, and he would like our country to be seen as a progressive country that connects cities to cities. He will want to see this line built as fast as possible and he would never want to be held responsible for slowing it down.

Steve McCabe: The Minister will no doubt be aware, as are other Members, of how often the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) likes to refer in this Chamber to the wise words of the Mayor for the West Midlands Combined Authority. Does the Minister think he may be interested to know that when I met the Mayor this morning he was extolling the virtues of HS2, and insisting how important it was for his work and the benefit of the entire region?

Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, which gives me an opportunity to put on the record the phenomenal support that Andy Street gives this project. I do not doubt that my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield will have to try to deal with that later on.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ms Ghani: I am afraid that I am going to have speed on and perhaps not take any more interventions.

As I have said before, the intention is to smash the north-south divide. This line is about progress, opportunity and skilled jobs, and radically improving connectivity between not just London and the Midlands, but the Midlands and the great cities of the north—it is about connecting eight of our 10 largest cities. This is more growth in the UK economy, more skilled jobs and more opportunities. In particular, these new opportunities will be brought to the Midlands and the north earlier than before.

We debated the principle of the Bill thoroughly on Second Reading in January 2018, when we voted overwhelmingly for the Bill and commended it to a special Select Committee. As we know, phase 2a will take HS2 to the north. It is the enabler for phase 2b and the northern powerhouse rail. I must take a moment to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), who ran the Committee that oversaw that work on this phase of the Bill. The Committee received 302 petitions, which it had to work through. I apologise for not mentioning him during our earlier debate and I hope he will recognise our recognition of and respect for all the work undertaken by him in chairing that Committee.

As we know, the phase 2a Bill will help to take this project even further north and it is the enabler for phase 2b and the northern powerhouse rail. Without this section of the line, we cannot make progress towards a three-hour journey time to Scotland. Colleagues from across the House will know how much support there is for these two projects among business and local authorities.

I have said it before and I will say it again: there is no either/or between the second phase of High Speed 2 and northern powerhouse rail. High Speed 2 is vital to the provision of the network improvements that northern powerhouse rail will build on. I encourage all Members of this House to visit the places benefiting from High Speed 2 to hear the enthusiasm for the project—these include Birmingham, which I have no doubt my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield will be visiting soon—and to hear about the ambitious growth strategies at first hand. Leeds intends to use High Speed 2 to almost double the size of its city centre. The East Midlands wants to use Toton to attract new homes and jobs; the Toton innovation campus has the potential for up to 10,000 new jobs to be created. Manchester’s continued prosperity can be ensured by High Speed 2 trains calling at Manchester Airport and Manchester Piccadilly. None of that is possible without the support for this legislation today.

This short section of railway will take trains beyond Birmingham, bringing the High Speed 2 network one step closer and unlocking phase 2b and northern powerhouse rail. We must not forget the two bespoke colleges, one in Doncaster and one in Birmingham, which are enabling more skilled young and older people to continue to build for our country. I do believe that we are responsible for bringing economic growth to our regions, and that is exactly what HS2 does, as well as improving capacity and connectivity between our great cities. I do believe we should be steadfast in unlocking the investment this project will bring. I, for one, want to look forward and be ambitious on behalf of our country. I want us to succeed as a nation, on the back of a high-speed, interconnected railway line. I urge you, Madam Deputy Speaker, my colleagues and the rest of the House to help support the next stage of HS2 railway by positively supporting the Third Reading of this Bill. I commend it to the House.

8.19 pm

Rachael Maskell: We have had an extensive debate on phase 2a of HS2. Although the Bill is not as robust as the Opposition would have wanted it to be, not least in respect of the accountability and transparency that are needed to make the project succeed, it is so important that we press ahead by investing in vital infrastructure that will benefit not only the Midlands but the north and beyond.

We look back with nostalgia and admiration at the Victorian rail infrastructure that has served us for 200 years, but it was a very different story in this place at the time. If one reads the debates in which Members tussled over...
different routes and projects, it feels like our approach to rail infrastructure has rarely progressed. One of my predecessors as MP for York, George Hudson, took things to the extremes; I assure the House that my dealings seek to achieve consensus and, ultimately, the right infrastructure across the transport network for our long-term future, and to do so transparently.

I formally put on record my thanks to the Clerks who have been so helpful trying to support our efforts to improve the Bill. As ever, we are indebted to their wisdom and advice in ensuring that we can use the mechanisms available to try to improve legislation. I thank all Members who have participated in debates and Committees to ensure that this part of HS2 is given the necessary scrutiny. In particular, I thank my hon. Friends the Members for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) and for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) for their important role on the petitions Committee, and my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), who kindly stepped in for me in Committee when I totally lost my voice.

It is always hard to pass legislation on infrastructure when many of us may not live to see the project’s completion, or may live far from the line; however, HS2 is a vital legacy that we must pass on to the generations to come, because the whole country will benefit from this infrastructure project. We have heard about the power of jobs to transform people’s lives. Whether in respect of building the infrastructure or the inward investment that we will see in towns and cities throughout the country, it is such an important project.

As we connect Birmingham to Crewe, over just 37 miles in phase 2a, confidence can start to build and investment can start to flow into places such as Crewe. My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) is fighting so hard for that. She will regenerate her community and provide all with new opportunities as a result of the decision taken by the House today. But it does not end there: the rest of the midlands and the north can now be encouraged that they, too, will benefit, as we start the process of debating the next phases, including delivering for Scotland. All we need now is to fully integrate HS2 with the rest of our rail network, to start to see the real benefits.

I am sure the House will not have to wait long, because a Labour Government is in our sights. We will build a public rail service, under the leadership of my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), that is there to serve towns and cities up and down the country. The power of modern rail services will not only transform communities and people’s life chances, but the scale of investment will enhance our environment as we realise the potential of rail to change how we move goods and people across the land. Let us have confidence that, in getting the arteries right to the midlands and the north, we can restart the heart of the economies and communities that have longed to connect to the transformative power that inward investment and jobs will bring. Labour is about transforming lives, and that is why we will support the Bill today.

8.23 pm

Sir William Cash: Having listened to the Front-Bench speeches from both the Government and the Opposition, I could not disagree with both of them more. This Bill is a travesty. It is an abomination. I heard the Opposition spokesman say just now that it will transform the midlands, providing huge opportunities. I do wish that she would understand from what I said earlier that my constituents most emphatically do not agree with one word that she said—or, for that matter, with what the Minister said, either—because, as far as we are concerned, HS2 is a disaster. It is causing havoc in my constituency, in respect of property ownership, the environment and the economics. The trouble is, as I said earlier, that not a single report is in favour of this monstrosity. This white elephant should be condemned to the rubbish dump.

On the question of highways, let me refer briefly to a meeting that took place only two or three days ago. It was attended by the regional director for Highways England and by my constituents, including the redoubtable Trevor Parkin. The meeting lasted for two hours, and new information emerged. HS2’s detailed borrow-pit report, which was prepared for the National Farmers Union and finalised in April, undermines its claims about the 2,500 missing heavy goods vehicles at Hanchurch, as well as the false information regarding its ability to U-turn HGVs at Yarnfield that HS2 presented to Stone Town Council on 23 April. The meeting also covered the question of HS2 Ltd’s unsafe and unacceptable proposals for changes to the Hanchurch interchange and the A519.

On 3 July, there was also a meeting in Hanchurch village hall on Whitmore Road with the residents of Newcastle Road, which is on the A519. HS2 Ltd had nothing new to say or to offer, and I am told that its four representatives “got a very hard time from the local residents. We asked for the designers (Arup) responsible for the shambolic design work, together with the HS2 person overseeing their work, to be made available for a further meeting, but HS2 stonewalled on this saying that these people did not attend meetings. We need the Minister to intervene to ensure that something actually happens. HS2 is not only an administrative disaster, costing a vast amount of money, with far too many people being hopelessly overpaid, but they just simply do not do their jobs properly.

For practical purposes, the question of lorry movements is a matter of the grassest concern to all my constituents, as, indeed, it is to my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson). As far as compensation is concerned, the amount of money made available to recompense people is inadequate. In addition, the way in which the compensation claims have been dealt with is completely unacceptable.

As was said in earlier interventions—my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and I are completely on the same page on this—the bottom line is that the amount of money that is being spent requires a U-turn. The Minister should be condemned to the rubbish dump. As I said—or, for that matter, with what the Minister said, either—because, as far as we are concerned, HS2 is a disaster. It is causing havoc in my constituency, in respect of property ownership, the environment and the economics. The trouble is, as I said earlier, that not a single report is in favour of this monstrosity. This white elephant should be condemned to the rubbish dump.
and to give it the final seal of approval from the House of Commons. This should have been deferred until the review, promised by one of the candidates for the Conservative leadership who I hope will become Prime Minister, has had the opportunity to grapple with the terrible anxieties and difficulties that have been inflicted on my constituents. I condemn this Bill. It is a disaster; it is a white elephant; and it deserves to be sent to the graveyard.

The House divided: Ayes 263, Noes 17.

**Division No. 435**

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The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I beg to move,

That the draft Town and Country Planning (Fees for Applications, Deemed Applications, Requests and Site Visits) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 10 June, be approved.

The regulations were laid before the House on 10 June 2019. If approved and made, they will remove a sunset clause in the existing 2012 fees regulations, thereby ensuring that local planning authorities can continue to charge fees for planning applications. Planning fees are an important source of income, supporting local authorities to have the resources and capacity to make effective planning decisions. It is therefore vital that the fees regulations remain in force. The regulations introduce a fee of £96 for prior approval applications for a larger single-storey rear extension to a house. If approved by this House, this new charge will come into effect 28 days after the regulations are made.

Planning application fees are crucial for a well-resourced, effective and efficient planning system. They provide local planning authorities with much-needed income to consider planning applications, which in turn provide new homes and deliver economic growth for our country. In January 2018 we raised planning application fees by 20%—the first uplift since 2012. This has increased income for the planning system and has enabled local planning authorities to improve their performance. We estimate that in England the total income raised through planning applications fees is £450 million. If there was no application fee, this cost would have to be funded by the council taxpayer.

I turn to the details of the regulations. First, the regulations propose to remove the sunset clause of 21 November 2019 contained in the existing 2012 fees regulations, the Town and Country Planning (Fees for Applications, Deemed Applications, Requests and Site Visits) (England) Regulations 2012. By removing the sunset clause, local authorities will be able to continue to charge planning application fees, in accordance with the 2012 fees regulations, beyond that date. If the sunset clause were not removed, the fees regulations would cease to have effect after 21 November. This would mean that local planning authorities would no longer be able to charge fees for planning applications.

The 2012 regulations provided that there should be a review of their operation within five years, to ensure that they continued to achieve their objectives. The accompanying sunset clause meant that no action would be required if it was decided that the regulations were no longer necessary. I am pleased to confirm that the review was undertaken in 2017 and the outcome report...
laid before Parliament in December 2017. The review concluded that the 2012 fees regulations had achieved their objective. It confirmed that they ensured an effective planning application fee regime, which benefited both applicants and local planning authorities in providing for the proper consideration of planning applications. It is therefore appropriate that I bring these regulations before the House, to ensure that the planning application fees regime continues. The regulations will also ensure that those wishing to take forward development pay a fair fee and that local planning authorities have the resource and capacity they need to make high-quality and timely decisions.

Secondly, the regulations introduce a £96 fee for applications for prior approval for existing permitted development rights for a larger single-storey rear extension to a house. The prior approval process means that a developer has to seek approval from the local planning authority that specified elements of the development are acceptable before work can proceed. The matters for prior approval vary depending on the type of development, and those are set out in the relevant part of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015. A local authority cannot consider any other matters when determining a prior approval application.

The permitted development right for a larger single-storey rear extension to a house was made permanent by way of amendments to the general permitted development order on 25 May, but currently the associated application for prior approval required to exercise this permitted development right attracts no fee. Now that the right is permanent, it is appropriate that we should enable local planning authorities to charge and receive a fee for the work they undertake to process and determine the applications they receive.

Other comparable applications for prior approval have a £96 fee, and we consider that that would also be an appropriate fee for a larger single-storey rear extension to a house, as the cost to the local planning authority of handling these is similar. Although a fee of £96 is an additional cost on homeowners wanting to extend their homes, it is not considered fair that the cost of the applications should continue to be subsidised by all taxpayers. The fee is modest, at less than half of the £206 fee that would be required for a planning application to carry out works to a house were it not for the permitted development rights. It will provide local planning authorities with resources that may otherwise have been diverted from other planning applications.

In line with existing fees for planning applications to alter or extend a home, the draft regulations provide that the fee will not apply where the application is for development designed to provide means of access for a disabled person or facilities designed to secure that person’s greater safety, health or comfort. That will mitigate the potential direct impact of the new fee on disabled persons, who might be considered more likely to make use of the permitted development right for larger home extensions.

We continue to keep the resourcing of local authority planning departments and where fees can be charged under review. We announced in the spring statement that the accelerated planning Green Paper, to be published later this year, will look at new approaches for local authorities to meeting the costs of their planning service and delivering improved performance. In the meantime, the draft regulations will ensure that local authorities can continue to charge planning fees after 21 November, including the new prior approval fee, thus providing them with the important resources they need to consider such applications. I commend the regulations to the House.

8.47 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his outline of this statutory instrument. The important first part of the SI ensures that the fee regime set out in the 2012 regulations is able to continue. Secondly, and perhaps more controversially, the SI amends regulation 14 of the 2012 regulations to include a £96 fee for an application for prior approval to build a larger rear extension to a dwelling house without the need for a full planning application to be made.

The Opposition do not seek to prevent the 2012 regulations from continuing, but we point the Government to their own consultation on devolving fee setting to local authorities. It would be good to have an explanation as to why the Government have failed to act on the outcome of their planning consultation, particularly on full cost recovery. As the Minister will know, the consultation found that there were substantial cross-party concerns that local authority planning departments do not have sufficient resources to provide an effective and wide-ranging service. The majority of respondents from all sectors supported increasing planning fees beyond the 20% increase already given by Government, often citing concerns about the low level of resourcing in local authority planning departments.

There are issues with local fee setting, as it may help resource planning departments better in areas of high growth but does little for those where development is more difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, the issue of getting more money to planning needs to be resolved urgently. Labour’s planning commission has found that poor resourcing of planning departments is the most significant issue raised by communities, planners and developers alike. The Government need to set out clearly what they are going to do to ensure that all planning departments are properly funded.

Total expenditure on planning has fallen by almost 20% since 2010. That fall would be far higher were it not for the fact that spending has been propped up by a 50% rise in planning income. If we remove income from the equation, total net expenditure on planning has fallen by 42% on average, and by up to 60% in some regions, and that of course has led to a huge reduction in the number of public sector planners. In a recent report, the Royal Town Planning Institute showed that when a high number of applications are permitted, with fewer resources committed to each, the main loser may be local communities. Another crucial issue is that planning officers may, as a consequence, have less time truly to engage communities. The impact of austerity on planning is felt keenly by planning officers, who have to operate with fewer resources and to deal with the public dissatisfaction that can arise from that. It would be useful to hear how the Minister intends to address that issue.
The second part of the SI causes significant problems for us and, we think, for the country at large. Since 2013 Labour has been consistently against the ever increasing moves by the Government to replace proper planning permission with permitted development. The fee proposed here, £96 for prior approval for a large extension, is derisory. Large extensions, as the Minister should know from his mailbag, often cause considerable problems for neighbours and the issues involved can be complex, necessitating a great deal of work by local planning officers which will not be covered by the £96 fee by any stretch of the imagination. Large extensions should have to obtain planning permission, and bypassing communities with greater use of permitted development is just wrong.

A recent report from Shelter has made clear the enormous damage the ever increasing use of permitted development has had on the quality of our built environment, highlighting that local authorities can turn down PDR developments only in very limited circumstances, and cannot require social housing contributions or enforce space standards covering minimum sizes, leading to the delivery of rabbit-hutch homes. PDR allows developers to build the slums of the future.

An open letter from the Local Government Association in January 2019 made clear the massive problems caused by permitted development, as did the large number of people who responded to the Government’s consultation on the extension to permitted development rights just recently. That includes the loss of more than 10,000 affordable homes in the last three years.

We think that the time is long overdue for the Government to get rid of permitted development and ensure proper planning and decent quality homes through the planning determination system and enabling local authorities to charge on a cost-recovery basis. Planners do a difficult and at times a controversial job, and it is time for the Government to resource the system properly.

8.53 pm

**Kit Malthouse:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her remarks. I accept the challenge that if we are to hit 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s we need to find a way to get more resources into local planning departments. It will be one of the constraints on volume, and we are looking at what we can do to enhance their ability to deal with planning applications swiftly and in volume. When we bring out the accelerated planning Green Paper later in the year, no doubt that will be included.

I also recognise the hon. Lady’s longstanding opposition to permitted development rights, although I fear she may be wrapping what is generally a domestic extension by a householder—normally in non-contentious situations—into her general opposition to PDR across the piece. The PD rights for domestic extensions have proved to be successful, and of course we made them permanent earlier this year. I note that when we did so—the hon. Lady and I were both present for that SI—she did not divide the Committee and oppose it.

I recognise the issues that the hon. Lady raises, but £96 will help to mitigate some of the impact of PDR on local authorities and we therefore think it judicious to introduce it in line with many other PDR charges that local authorities are interested in. I commend the regulations to the House.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved,**

That the draft Town and Country Planning (Fees for Applications, Deemed Applications, Requests and Site Visits) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 10 June, be approved.

**Business without Debate**

**BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE**

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Wednesday 17 July,

(1) proceedings on the Motion in the name of Mel Stride relating to the Gemma White report may continue, though opposed, for three hours after their commencement, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and

(2) proceedings on the Motion in the name of Mel Stride relating to the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme may be entered upon at or after the moment of interruption and may continue, though opposed, for one hour after their commencement, whereupon the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion if not previously disposed of; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(Iain Stewart.)

**COMMITTEES**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** With the leave of the House, I will take motions 5 to 8 together.

**Ordered,**

**DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT COMMITTEE**

That Rebecca Pow be discharged from the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee and Philip Davies be added.

**ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE**

That Dan Poulter be discharged from the Environmental Audit Committee and Jeremy Lefroy be added.

**HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE COMMITTEE**

That Martin Vickers be discharged from the Health and Social Care Committee and Anne Marie Morris be added.

**JUSTICE COMMITTEE**

That Kemi Badenoch be discharged from the Justice Committee and Andrew Griffiths be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)
Northern Ireland Motorsport Taskforce Report

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

8.55 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I wish to bring to the attention of the House the Northern Ireland motorsport taskforce report. I do so 24 hours after the historic victory by Lewis Hamilton—a wonderful British racer and a wonderful ambassador for motorsport across the United Kingdom and across the world—who achieved his sixth victory at Silverstone. We wish him and his family well as they enjoy the celebration of that event.

Northern Ireland, and indeed Ireland, boasts a rich history of motorsport prowess. It was Ireland in 1903 that gave British racing teams their green colour. Motorised transport was compelled not to exceed 20 mph on British roads, but the then Gordon Bennett cup—held in Ireland, which was part of the Union, and a very happy part of the Union, I might add—had no such restrictions on speed, and British teams painted their motor vehicles green out of respect for the roads they were racing on.

Today, Northern Ireland continues that rich history of motorsport. Jonny Rea, who is the four times world superbike champion, hails from just outside my constituency. The Dunlop family hail from my constituency. There is no better name in motorsport racing than Joey Dunlop. He, his brother Robert Dunlop, and Robert’s sons William and Michael all competed on the roads and on some of the tracks, winning Formula 1 medals for their prowess. Sadly, of course, Joey, Robert and William all lost their lives to the sport they loved.

Brian Reid is a Formula 2 champion from Northern Ireland, although on four wheels, not two. Colin Turkington, from Portadown, is the current British touring car champion. He is better than any other racer from these islands in terms of the history he has given us. Indeed, even Carl Fogarty, a wonderful British racer, was not able to exceed the record of Jonny Rea.

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The Motorsport taskforce was announced in January 2017, after a fatality at a road race on 14 May 2016 where a young man called Malachi Mitchell lost his life. The then Northern Ireland Minister at the Department for Communities, Mr Paul Givan MLA, established a taskforce to examine safety measures in motorsport and the contribution motorsport makes to Northern Ireland’s economy. It was a visionary decision by the then Minister, as no serious research had been carried out into the contribution of motorsport to the Northern Ireland economy up to that point. It also set in place a major contribution to road racing safety. In fact, the Minister’s intervention resulted in the highest spend ever on road racing safety measures in Northern Ireland: the Department for Communities contributed over £500,000 to road safety measures.

Racing on our roads can never be entirely safe. It can never be without challenges. It will always be a high-octane, high-risk sport, but there are measures that can mitigate the risks for both competitors and spectators alike. The Minister’s intervention and his Department’s spend on special safety bales, special lights and other measures, which can be shared around race tracks and other race events, has been critical in ensuring that safety has become a priority on our road circuits. In two weeks’ time the Armoy road race will take place, and it will be able to share with other road race events some of the special safety equipment that is now available. That will improve safety. Out of a tragedy, that major spend has been allowed to take place.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend will of course know that my brother Keith raced motorbikes. Sixteen years ago this August, he had a very serious accident. He came off his bike and was seriously injured both physically and mentally. It will stay with him for the rest of his life. He is still madly keen and interested in motorbikes. It is very important that we make the improvements my hon. Friend refers to, so that racing can continue on the roads of Northern Ireland.

Ian Paisley: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I remember watching his brother race. He was a brave rider and he thoroughly enjoyed the sport he participated in. The ability to spend significant money on safety measures is a way to develop the sport and to encourage people to come into the sport in the knowledge that they will be as protected as much as possible.

The taskforce was announced in January 2017. Its terms of reference were to examine the potential contribution of motorsport to Northern Ireland in the context of its being a culturally significant sport; to determine how motorsport can best address sports development, safety, marketing and tourism; and to engage as widely as possible with all those with an interest in the sport to inform its findings and to develop an action plan to ensure that the potential of motorsport is maximised in all its aspects.
I was given the honour of being asked to be the independent chairman of the taskforce. We brought together organisations and various Government Departments to be a part of the taskforce. The Department for Communities, the Department for Infrastructure, which is responsible for our road service in Northern Ireland, Invest Northern Ireland, Tourism Northern Ireland, Sport Northern Ireland and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives all contributed and have been full-time members of the taskforce for the past two years. We also drew on the secretariat from the Department for Communities, and I pay tribute to Government Departments in Northern Ireland. They stepped up to the plate and gave their very best people to the taskforce, allowing me as chairman to have at my fingertips the best people to discuss the development and future of a very important sport in Northern Ireland. I pay tribute in particular to the Department for Communities for the way in which it organised the secretariat for the last two years of the taskforce.

We were able to bring to the taskforce the various governing bodies that organise motorsport in Northern Ireland. The 2 & 4 Wheel Motorsport Steering Group, which is the overall umbrella group, the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland (Ulster Centre) Limited, the North of Ireland Karting Association, the Association of Northern Ireland Car Clubs and the Motorcycle Racing Association Ireland Limited all made major contributions to the taskforce report. They made themselves freely available and allowed us to cross-examine them and go through the evidence of the motorsport organisations.

We also heard from key event organisers. We have some major racing events, none more so than the Ulster grand prix. We also have major motocross events and, of course, the North West 200. The organisers of those private events also gave us evidence.

The most compelling evidence that we received was from the men and women behind the visor—the people who champion and participate in the sport. They included Maria Costello MBE, the late William Dunlop, Alastair Seeley, Chris Smiley, Colin Turkington and Graeme Irwin, all of them involved in either motocross, four-wheel racing, road racing or on-track racing. Each of them gave us a contribution that was unparalleled in terms of what they really need as competitors. They demonstrated to us the gaps that exist and how they need total confidence in the people around them, in the marshalling of races and in the many volunteers who contribute to motorsport. Motorsport relies on an army of volunteers to allow it to carry out the very best races. I mentioned William Dunlop, who made a major contribution to us. A few weeks later, unfortunately, he lost his life in the Republic of Ireland participating in the sport that he loved. The entire taskforce was moved by the contribution that he made and by him telling us about what he required as a participant and what he would like to see happening. The first part of the report was dedicated to William and his family as a mark of respect to him.

There are four governing bodies that organise motorsport in Northern Ireland. Together, they have about 80 member clubs and about 6,000 club participants, the vast majority of whom are male. A considerable number of them are in their early 20s and 66% of the membership are involved in four-wheel motorsport, so overwhelmingly it is four-wheel motorsport that Northern Ireland contributes to. We are often considered to be the country of two-wheel motorsport, but four-wheel motorsport is an area where we make a significant contribution.

We decided to carry out an analysis of how much the sport is worth to Northern Ireland, and it was astounding. After about a year and a half of research—the first time that such research was carried out—we found that the gross annual economic impact of motorsport to the Northern Ireland economy is in excess of £100 million. Each year, about £60 million is spent in the supply chain by people participating in the sport. Major motor events raise about £10 million a year for the economy and minor events contribute about £15 million to it. The promotional benefit in how we are able to market our little country is worth about £20 million to our economy.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is gracious and kind in giving way again. When it comes to the army of volunteers and the thousands of participants in motorsport in Northern Ireland, the spin-off is the tourism potential, which he rightly refers to. Does he agree the bed nights for the local economy, along with the clear potential for more, mean that we should insist on more funding? If we can spend and speculate more for the future, we can reap rewards through the report.

Ian Paisley: My hon. Friend has identified that there is a significant opportunity. The volunteers he mentions need to be properly recognised. The report identifies that this army of volunteers is now so well trained that it could be a provider of training for people wanting to learn about the sport, not only in Northern Ireland but across other parts of the UK. The volunteers could also be used at many other events. As the House knows, later this week we are going to have one of the largest ever events in Northern Ireland: the Open. The volunteer expertise that Northern Ireland now has at its fingertips could be utilised for other similar events.

Earlier, in one of my hon. Friend’s interventions, he asked whether there were other events we could be putting on. The Minister will not be surprised to hear me say that yes, there are. I would love to see a world rally championship round coming to Northern Ireland. We have John McGrillen, the head of Tourism Northern Ireland, saying that getting it in Northern Ireland is a real prospect and, importantly, the head of WRC saying he wants to take the sport to Northern Ireland. That is an opportunity that we should not miss. It would make the Open we are about to have in Northern Ireland look like small fry in terms of world marketing opportunities, world access to television rights and, importantly, spectator opportunities. Moreover, it would not just take place in one corner of Northern Ireland; a WRC event would take place not only in the city of Belfast, but in the north of Northern Ireland, and in the east and west. These major events suit the entire population. The benefit and enjoyment of the event would be for all.

We need these actions to sustain the existing economic impact by improving the viability of major events, we need to review who is best placed to deliver motorsport events in the future, and we need to see improved promotion of motorsport events. By population, these events just happen in Northern Ireland; they need to be better promoted. I think the organisers recognise that, but they are so busy, wrapped up in delivering their own
sport to their own sector, that they cannot get off the
dance floor, if you like, take the overall view and ask
what is the best strategic approach.

The Minister will be pleased with the thrust of the
report. We are not asking for money—for a change. We
are asking for support to put in place a sustainable
strategy for the entire sector, and the Government can
help with that by capacity building and by pointing in
the right direction. If they then come up with a strategy
that requires resourcing—from the private sector as
well as the public sector—they could help make sure it
is done in a sustainable and beneficial way. The safety of
competitors, officials and volunteers is the top priority.
It is what we spent most of our time discussing on the
taskforce. We cannot ever lose sight of the dangers
involved in the sport, but those dangers also give a huge
thrill to competitors and observers, and we must be able
to marshal and galvanise that for the benefit of the
Northern Ireland economy.

The governing bodies should work together to maximise
their own capacity. Motorsport clubs should be allowed
to generate funding to maximise media coverage and
attract new followers and new events. They should be
permitted a renewed focus on the marketing of motorsports
to a broader audience. For example, we would like to
see the delivery of a schools programme to encourage
young people to come forward. Lewis Hamilton’s story
is an amazing one of a young man who contributed
everything. His family threw everything at karting and
allowed him to come up through the ranks to be probably
the world’s greatest racing driver of all time. Can that
happen again? That is the challenge we have thrown
down. If we allow the proper resourcing and help and
identify schoolboy and schoolgirl talent, yes it can, and
there is no better place for that to come from than the
place where petrol seems to flow through people’s veins,
and that is in Northern Ireland.

The governing bodies should work with the Department
for Communities, Sport Northern Ireland and Tourism
Northern Ireland to develop an agreed partnership
model for the delivery of the major motorsport events. I
have already mentioned the WRC. Northern Ireland
would be very keen to see the Government encouraging
that. I am not going to talk about what happened in the
House last week, but when it suits the Government, and
when it suits this place, they can intervene in Northern
Ireland and make things happen, and I appeal to them
to give a fair wind to the development of the WRC in
Northern Ireland next year. It can happen, and it should
happen. I urge the Minister—who, I know, has a personal
interest in this subject—to consider the opportunities,
and to consider his own legacy: he could be the Minister
who laid the foundations that allowed a WRC to happen
in Northern Ireland.

The Department for Communities and Sport Northern
Ireland should be allowed to promote talent and
participation in Northern Ireland. The taskforce and I
would like to see the establishment of a motorsport
academy in Northern Ireland, and we have already had
discussions with Ulster University at its sports excellence
centre. Many of our sporting gentlemen and ladies pay
for all their sports development. There is a lot of skill
out there in our universities, and it ought to be possible
to capture some of the data. That could happen if we
had a proper sports academy, dedicated to motorsport
and those who engage in it.

The 2 & 4 Wheel Motorsport Steering Group should
be allowed to develop a strategic plan to address issues
that are of concern to all motorsports. I believe that
is key to the report: we need a strategy for the future of
motorsport. I therefore commend the report to the
Minister and the Government, and ask the Government
to give it a fair wind so that it does not gather dust on a
shelf, but gathers pace and achieves its objective.

9.16 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office
(John Penrose): I congratulate the hon. Member for
North Antrim (Ian Paisley) on producing the report,
with an awful lot of help from the various bodies that
were involved in its creation, and also on organising the
debate. He has made it clear just how many people and
organisations across Northern Ireland, both in the
motorsport racing sector and in industry, have contributed.
He has managed to harness their energy and interests.

The hon. Gentleman was also good enough to point
out that there had already been extensive involvement
on the part of Northern Ireland civil service and
Government organisations in and around Stormont.
That, too bodes well, both for the quality of the report
and for the direction in which the hon. Gentleman is
urging not just me but, probably, the whole Stormont
organisation—and, perhaps, Northern Ireland society
as a whole—to progress.

The hon. Gentleman provided us with a couple of
rather choice vignettes. I had no idea that British racing
green is, in fact, better described as Northern Ireland
racing green. That is the true history of it. I am now
better equipped for games of “Trivial Pursuit” than I
was before I came into the Chamber this evening.

As the hon. Gentleman said, petrol seems to run in
the veins of many people of Northern Ireland, and
there is a huge depth and breadth of talent there, not
just among riders and drivers. He mentioned Jonny
Rea, and then gave a huge list of champions who have
hailed from Northern Ireland. He also rightly mentioned
the large number of people who have been involved
in the technical side of the sport. As I am sure we all
know, the side benefits of that pool of skills—that pool
of technical understanding and ability—are enormous,
because they quickly rub off on other related sectors
and supply chains. Manufacturing companies are then
attracted to that pool of expertise, because they know
that they can readily find high-quality skills in a particular
area. That is true of Formula 1, for which the M4 corridor
in Great Britain is already famous, but it is also true of
a variety of other parts of the motorsport sector in
Northern Ireland.

The hon. Gentleman was clear and helpful in listing
all the Northern Ireland Departments, and all the
organisations, involved in Northern Ireland motorsport
that contributed to the report; I will not repeat the list. I
am not sure how long it took to produce the report. It is
not just a comprehensive piece of work; it is a labour
of love, and perhaps not just for the hon. Gentleman.
Whenever we meet people from the sector, we find that
they are involved because they have a passion for it. It is
not just that they like competing, although most of
them do; they love the noise, the smell, the technical mastery of machinery, and the manufacturing involved. There is an entire culture around motorsports that people get hugely immersed in, and which sucks them in. People can spend their entire lives involved with it. It can be an amazingly good career or a fascinating hobby, depending on their level of commitment.

As the hon. Gentleman describes it, a number of organisations in Northern Ireland motorsport have become so engrossed in the culture that, to use his phrase, they have not necessarily had time to get off the dance floor and think about how they might promote what they love to a broader audience. Yesterday’s amazing victory in the cricket world cup has probably brought cricket to a wider audience in this country—to many people who would not necessarily have given it the time of day on Saturday, but are newly enthused because they now understand what other people were on about. I think that is the kind of transformation of interest and attention that he is trying to achieve for Northern Ireland motorsport, if I understood him correctly.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the world rally championship. It would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to him for being assiduous in this matter. It is not the first time that he has mentioned this topic to me; his constituents and others in the sector in Northern Ireland should know that he has discussed this with me on numerous occasions. To be fair, he is not the only Democratic Unionist party MP to have done so, but he has been one of the leading lights.

It is clear that an enormous amount of thought has gone into the report. There is an enormous amount of opportunity here as well. What comes across most strongly from the report is the kind of commercial and cultural opportunity that could be grasped. The hon. Gentleman will have hugely endeared himself to the Treasury, because he started off by saying that he was not asking for money, and that is a guaranteed way to get the attention of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and others on the Treasury Bench. Kudos to him for having understood that, and having grabbed our attention immediately. What he is asking for is capacity building; that is the phrase he used. He is asking for support for the principle, and for strategies for developing ideas. He has got off to a tremendous start, because as I noticed and as he rightly points out, many Departments of the Northern Ireland civil service were involved in producing the report. He has clearly managed to get them engaged, which will be vital to future developments.

My Department and the Northern Ireland Departments will want to remain engaged in the development of any thinking on this issue, because if the opportunities can be developed and grasped, from that will come business cases and investment opportunities—perhaps private instead of public sector, investment opportunities. If we can harness the energy, expertise, and volunteer and commercial involvement that the report makes it manifestly clear are already there, commercial opportunities could very well blossom and develop. I think that is the point that the hon. Gentleman is aiming at.

In summary, we have here an incredibly promising report that shows what might be in Northern Ireland. It shows that we have a very high base and a very high starting point of passion, understanding and involvement, and an opportunity to go further. This could be an opportunity further to expand this part of Northern Ireland’s economy and its skills base. As the hon. Gentleman has asked, I am very happy to be part of encouraging the Northern Ireland civil service Departments to remain involved. They are already involved, and I am sure that he will enthuse them still further. I certainly would not want to do anything to undermine that or slow it down. And he certainly has my interest as well.

I would be very happy to encourage him, as these ideas develop, and to provide him with backing in any way that we can, particularly as he started off by saying that he did not need cash, although he does need broader kinds of support. We will see what comes out of this, once those business cases come about and firmer ideas are developed. There may then be further conversations to be had, but in the meantime this is an excellent start in an incredibly promising area in which Northern Ireland already shines very brightly.

Question put and agreed to.

9.25 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 16 July 2019

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Tourism Sector Deal

1. Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): What plans he has to establish a tourism sector deal under the Industrial Strategy.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): This summer we should recognise the vital role that visitors play in the UK economy—particularly, I might say, overseas sporting visitors. Overseas visitors spent nearly £150 million in Devon last year, supporting jobs and growth throughout the county. Our new sector deal with the tourism industry was published last month, and includes commitments to an additional 10,000 apprenticeships annually and an extra 130,000 hotel rooms.

Peter Heaton-Jones: As the Secretary of State will know, the best place to visit as a tourist is, of course, North Devon. I welcome the publication of the tourism sector deal, but will he look favourably on the granting of tourism zone status to my constituency? Will he also join me in thanking all those who work so hard at this time of year in the tourism and hospitality industries, especially the North Devon Marketing Bureau, which does such good work in ensuring that people know that North Devon is the place to come to?

Mr Speaker: Including the Woolacombe Bay Hotel.

Greg Clark: That is a great endorsement, Mr Speaker. I certainly join my hon. Friend in recognising that what is a time for holidays for many people is a time of intense work for people in the hospitality and tourism industries throughout the country. I also recognise North Devon’s bid to become one of the tourism zones. As my hon. Friend knows, the sector deal includes an investment of more than £26 million in the English coastal path, one of the most beautiful and popular attractions in his very beautiful constituency.

20. Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Given that 20,000 non-UK staff work in tourism in the Lake District, there is a desperate need for home-grown talent, whether we leave the EU or not. However, the Government have watered down the already delayed catering and hospitality T-level, which no longer includes hospitality. Will the Secretary of State undo that backwards move, and fast-track a catering and hospitality T-level to next year?

Greg Clark: If the hon. Gentleman looks at the sector deal, he will see a great commitment to the development of careers in the hospitality industry, including 30,000 apprenticeships a year. The new T-levels have been developed in conjunction with the sector. I hope the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that that is a great step forward, and that they will be available as a result of the commitment that has been made.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I am tempted to say that the best thing about Devon is that it is the place that one drives through on the way to Cornwall, which has again been recognised as the UK’s best and favourite holiday destination. I welcome the announcement of the tourism sector deal, but more than 50% of international tourists visit only London. What extra help can the Government give to get more of them out of London, and into places like Cornwall?

Greg Clark: I am fearful that I shall find myself in an invidious position, given the competing claims of west country Members. All I will say is that, on this day of the 50th anniversary of the moon mission, my hon. Friend will know that Newquay’s unique claim to be in pole position for a UK spaceport adds to the already considerable attractions of his constituency.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): During last week’s Westminster Hall debate, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), was enthusiastic when she told us that Amazon was leading the retail task group. I dread to think who the Secretary of State might have in mind for tourism—Airbnb, perhaps?

It is Labour that is standing up for the crucial sectors in our economy, not the likes of Amazon, with its exploitation of workers and undercutting of other businesses, not to mention its sweetheart tax agreements. When will the Government stop the gimmicks, and deliver not only hospitality deals but the retail deals that are so badly needed by those vital sectors of the economy?

Greg Clark: That is a strange point for the hon. Gentleman to make, given that our tourism sector deal—the subject of this question—has been hailed by many constituencies. However, the Government have watered down the commitment that has been made.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure a smooth transition to a zero-carbon economy.

Zero-carbon Economy

2. Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Given that 20,000 non-UK staff work in tourism in the Lake District, there is a desperate need for
The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Chris Skidmore): We have made world-leading progress, cutting our emissions by 42% while growing the economy at the fastest rate of any G20 country since 2000—a point recognised by the International Energy Agency in its recent report. The Committee on Climate Change is clear: our clean growth strategy and industrial strategy provide the right frameworks for delivering net zero. I hope Members will welcome the recent launch of the green finance strategy as a clear demonstration of how seriously the Government take net zero.

Anna McMorrin: The Government are failing to act quickly and robustly enough to tackle the climate emergency, particularly in solar and onshore wind. Will the Secretary of State welcome the actions of the peaceful Extinction Rebellion protesters across five cities in this country, including my own of Cardiff, to disrupt business as usual and send that important message?

Chris Skidmore: What I welcome is that our legislating on net zero—we are the first country in the G7 to legislate for net zero by 2050—marks a catalytic moment for everyone to recognise that we need a whole-of-society approach to this. I welcome all action, whether from the Climate Coalition, whom I met recently, or businesses and industries: organisations such as Tesco and Marks & Spencer, for example, have committed to net zero. We all have a part to play.

Rachael Maskell: In light of the Government’s abysmal progress on carbon reduction, last year the Committee on Climate Change issued 25 policy recommendations; the Government delivered just one. What clear steps will the Government take in the next six months to ensure that we get back on track for the fourth and fifth carbon budgets?

Chris Skidmore: On the work the Committee has taken forward in its recent report, we welcome that the Committee acts as a critical friend. Now that we have net zero in place, we must go much further much faster. We have over-achieved on carbon budgets 1 and 2, we are on course to meet budget 3, and we are 90% there on carbon budgets 4 and 5, but I admit that we must do much more. I look forward to going to the Business Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee later to discuss this in greater detail, but the net-zero commitment now gives the opportunity to move on this.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Three times as much energy is delivered by the gas grid and electricity grid, so what is the Department doing to support moves to hydrogen from natural gas?

Chris Skidmore: Hydrogen is a really interesting source of energy and we need to explore it further. There are lots of opportunities that other countries, in particular France, are taking forward, such as by looking at hydrogen supply and how we can combine that with the gas grid. That makes the point that innovation here is crucial. We make up 1% of the world’s emissions; if we are going to be able to make a real difference worldwide, it will be by innovating in this country—innovating in areas such as hydrogen, where we can make a far greater impact across the world.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Given our abundance of tides as an island nation, it seems to me that we could be doing more to utilise them for sustainable energy generation. What does the Minister think?

Chris Skidmore: I think we have the opportunity to look at alternative sources of all energy and power. The latest round for contracts for difference opened in May and will close on 18 June. We have looked at alternative sources of power and we want to be able to explore that. But this is also about creating a market mechanism by which we can look at establishing new technologies, moving away from subsidies and ensuring that we have a proud record for the future on renewable energy supplies.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The most recent report from the Committee on Climate Change shows that we are moving in the wrong direction in terms of meeting our fourth and fifth carbon budgets. We have now rightly strengthened those objectives to achieve net zero, but without a single policy to help us get there. The long-awaited energy White Paper has still not been published, so can the Minister confirm today that that White Paper will be published before the summer recess and that it will include policies to get us there with onshore wind, solar technology, battery storage and electric vehicles?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Lady mentions electric vehicles and battery storage. The Prime Minister made a significant announcement yesterday at her business council, attended by the Secretary of State: £500 million-worth of export finance will be provided for electric vehicles. There are also the guarantees on looking at charging points. The White Paper is due this summer; I cannot give any more guarantees beyond that, but it is absolutely critical as the next milestone going forward that we have the legislation in place for net zero, and we now need to set out a plan. The clean growth strategy was set out earlier—late last year. We are on track to meet 90% of carbon budgets 4 and 5, and we will do more to ensure that we meet them.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Publicly owned buildings such as schools and hospitals can access interest-free loans in order to retrofit their buildings and put on solar panels and so forth. What consideration will be given to allow that kind of scheme to be available to small businesses?

Chris Skidmore: I entirely agree that taking a local, bottom-up approach is the way in which the Government want to go. For instance, the rural communities energy fund has recently been established—an extra £10 million has been made available there—and we have the smart export guarantee when it comes to looking at renewable sources of power for small businesses or other small community buildings—

Anna McMorrin: But you have raised VAT on solar.
Chris Skidmore: The hon. Lady just carries on chuntering. She has asked her question and I have given her an answer. She should allow me to respond to other Members of Parliament. She needs to accept that this Government—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister is right. The hon. Lady has asked her question and it was answered. It might not have been answered to her satisfaction, but it was answered and that is the end of it. Please be quiet.

Chris Skidmore: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) that when it comes to looking at how we should be creating new schemes, this is the direction in which we need to go. We will do more and I am happy to discuss with him the opportunity to involve small businesses. This will be part of the energy White Paper, and we recognise that we need to make significant strides to ensure that small businesses are able to retrofit their properties.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee has shown that, as if being hostile to onshore wind and destructive to solar were not enough, the Department will not achieve its climate ambitions due to its ambivalence over carbon capture and its failure to emulate Scotland on energy efficiency measures. The net zero 2050 target was imposed by the Prime Minister above Ministers’ heads. As they prepare to leave their posts, will the Minister admit that his Department lacks the policies to achieve that target, and that his legacy will be one of abject failure?

Chris Skidmore: No. If anything, I think that my legacy will be as the Minister who signed the legislation ensuring that we were the first country to achieve net zero by 2050.

I also hope that our legacy will be a successful partnership bid with the Italians for COP26. The Italian ambassador came to meet Members of Parliament here yesterday. I did not see the hon. Gentleman there, but never mind about that—[Interruption.] He might not recognise that we had the Italian ambassador here to cover our COP26 bid, but he would have been welcome. An email was sent to him, inviting him to attend, but unfortunately he did not turn up. Our commitment must be UK-wide, and we are making UK-wide schemes available, including recently ensuring that we can subsidise energy supplies for the north of Scotland, which demonstrates the benefits of the Union in delivering net zero.

Mr Speaker: The key is not to speak more quickly but to use fewer words.

Drew Hendry: With bizarre and rubbish answers like that, it is no wonder that the polls in Scotland are showing greater support for the Scottish National party and for independence than ever before. Will the Minister do just one thing? Will he rule out serving under the Prime Minister above Ministers’ heads? As they prepare to leave their posts, will the Minister admit that his Department lacks the policies to achieve that target, and that his legacy will be one of abject failure?

Chris Skidmore: I will half-agree with the TUC on this point. It is concerned about reaching net zero through a just transition. We are living through a revolution, and we are going to need to take the population with us when it comes to jobs and job security. We have 400,000 green jobs now, and there is a potential for 2 million by 2030. We need to work with the unions and to ensure that when we look at the future of the world of work, we take the entire population with us.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Does the Minister agree with the TUC that, while decarbonisation presents exciting economic opportunities, the lack of a comprehensive and just transition policy and a coherent industrial strategy means that many well-paid, highly skilled unionised jobs are under threat?

Chris Skidmore: In fact, it is being within the United Kingdom that has allowed Scotland to benefit from 16 contracts for difference projects recently, allowing for 2.6 GW of green energy. Also, £4 million was recently announced for Project Acorn in Scotland for carbon capture, utilisation and storage projects. The hon. Gentleman never mentions the policy benefits of the Union or the investment that it delivers in Scotland. No—all he wants to talk about is independence. But let us look at what the Scottish people had to say about—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are grateful to the Minister. He has spoken with considerable force and alacrity, and I am sure that he is very pleased with his own words, although we have had enough of them.

Rebecca Long Bailey: Does the Minister agree with the TUC that while decarbonisation presents exciting economic opportunities, the lack of a comprehensive and just transition policy and a coherent industrial strategy means that many well-paid, highly skilled unionised jobs are under threat?

Chris Skidmore: I will half-agree with the TUC on this point. It is concerned about reaching net zero through a just transition. We are living through a revolution, and we are going to need to take the population with us when it comes to jobs and job security. We have 400,000 green jobs now, and there is a potential for 2 million by 2030. We need to work with the unions and to ensure that when we look at the future of the world of work, we take the entire population with us.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I do not believe that the Minister provided any specifics in that answer. What is his plan for the workers in the closing coal plants? Why are yards in Fife losing out to international rivals for wind farms that are only a few miles away? Why has Dyson, a British company, chosen Singapore over the UK for the production of its electric vehicles? Germany is investing €1.5 billion in battery production; this Government’s measly £246 million comes nowhere near that.

The truth is that the party that devastated the UK’s industrial heartlands in the 1980s does not have a just transition plan. Will the Minister put ideology and laissez-faire economics aside and work with us on this side to make a real green industrial revolution a reality?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Lady seems obsessed with talking about the 20th century. I want to talk about the 21st century—about what will be going on when we get to 2030. Why did she not talk about Jaguar Land Rover’s announcement yesterday that it will be investing in building electric vehicles here, in the midlands? Why did she not speak about the fact that electric Minis will now be rolling from plants in Oxford? These are positive investments for the United Kingdom, which demonstrate that we can make the change towards net zero and clean technology by having clean growth—by investing in the economy and in jobs and ensuring that we have record levels of new green jobs going forwards.
Consumer Protection

3. Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What recent steps his Department has taken to protect consumers.

[911953]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): In June, the Government announced steps to ensure that consumers will not be punished for their loyalty. We are giving increased powers to the Competition and Markets Authority to fine companies that breach the law and to enable consumers to take control of the data that businesses hold on them.

Kevin Hollinrake: Mr Speaker, when you stay at the Woolacombe Bay Hotel, you may be paying 20% too much, because online agencies such as Booking.com use brandjacking clauses to colonise search results, and rate parity clauses, which mean that even if you go direct, you still pay 20% more than you need to. Other EU nations have banned this. Will we?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point. The Competition and Markets Authority is taking enforcement action against the major hotel booking sites precisely because of those concerns. It has already secured binding commitments from those companies, which will protect consumers in exactly the way that he recommends.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Why can we not protect consumers from having their goods delivered by companies such as Amazon in filthy, dirty, polluting vehicles? Why will the Secretary of State not step in and do something about that?

Greg Clark: We have already had exchanges across the Chamber on the move to electric vehicles. The investments of recent days are moving us towards a clean and green fleet. With his industrial interests, I know that the hon. Gentleman welcomes that.

Mr Speaker: Pithiness personified: I call Mr Philip Hollobone.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Is not the best way to protect value, service and price for consumers through the promotion of competition?

Greg Clark: I completely agree with my hon. Friend.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Consumers can sign up to long-term financial commitments for broadband, television and mobile phone services by clicking a few buttons online, but to cancel those services they have to fill out arduous forms, make numerous phone calls or even write to the companies involved. Will the Secretary of State look at that anomaly, to ensure fairness, and to provide the same mechanism for getting and stopping?

Two-factor Payment Authentication

4. Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (LD): What assessment he has made of the effect of two-factor payment authentication on (a) consumers and (b) businesses.

[911954]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The implementation of strong customer authentication, which mandates two-factor authentication for some online payments, will introduce more secure payments for individuals and businesses. That was introduced by the second payment services directive. The Treasury published an impact assessment on the implementation of that EU directive in 2017.

Chuka Umunna: I am staggered that the Government are not doing more about this ticking timebomb for online retail, which is on track to cause major disruption. The British Retail Consortium estimates that 75% of retailers are unaware that it is coming into effect in September. It is the same for consumers. The implementation is forecast to lead to the failure of nearly a third of e-commerce transactions from September, due to poor access to a proper phone signal or wi-fi. Will the Minister ensure that no enforcement action will be taken for at least 18 months, to give our retail sector breathing space to adapt to the new rules?

Kelly Tolhurst: I point out that there was £309 million-worth of fraud in e-commerce in 2016 versus £13.6 million in 1998. The hon. Gentleman will know that the European Banking Authority published an opinion on readiness for implementation and the Financial Conduct Authority published a statement in June. They are working on mitigations past the September implementation date. They are working with industry and providers to make sure that the essence of the changes prevail, which is to make it safer for merchants and consumers.

Sustainable Energy: Somerset

5. David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to develop sustainable energy in rural communities in Somerset.

[911955]

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Chris Skidmore): I thank my hon. Friend for his local interest in taking action on climate change. I am pleased to say, as I mentioned earlier, that we have recently reopened the £10 million rural community energy fund. It has already supported over 150 rural communities, including through the installation of a solar capacity project in my hon. Friend’s constituency of Frome. We have also established five local energy hubs across the country, including in the south-west, providing support to local authorities that are planning green energy projects.
David Warburton: I met a large group of people from Somerset the other day at the Time Is Now rally in Westminster. It is clear that people from every walk of life are keen for the Government to lead the way in environmental sustainability, yet reductions in feed-in tariffs, a lack of incentives to use brownfield resources and a lack of obligations on new build houses make the going tough. How will the Department change this?

Chris Skidmore: The feed-in tariff scheme achieved its objectives in support of over 3,000 installations in my hon. Friend’s constituency. Its successor, the smart meter mechanism that will help to deploy without subsidy as costs continue to fall, can reassure my hon. Friend that the Government have set a clear ambition for new homes to be energy efficient and to embrace low-carbon technologies through the buildings mission and the 2025 future homes standard commitment announced by the Chancellor in the spring Budget.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Minister is a constituency neighbour of mine. If he has time during the summer break, may I urge him to visit Wyke farm in Somerset for an example of a business that prides itself on being 100% green? It has used pulp from the cider mills to supply its anaerobic digesters and is doing really interesting things on waste water. It really shows how a farm can be at the heart of the local community, using its waste and farming in a sustainable way.

Chris Skidmore: I thank the hon. Lady for that suggestion. I would be happy to come and visit during the recess. I pay tribute to her leadership on this issue locally and nationally. She has made significant commitments to this agenda for a long time and I have learned a lot from her.

Onshore Wind: Scotland

6. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What recent discussions has the Secretary of State for Scotland on support for onshore wind.

Chris Skidmore: I understand that the hon. Gentleman

Alan Brown: It is interesting that the Minister seems not to care what the Secretary of State for Scotland says, but wants to listen to the people of Scotland. That is good going forward. The Vivid Economics report shows that supporting onshore wind will create 2,300 jobs in Scotland. Will the Minister confirm that the blocker to those jobs and investment in Scotland is the Scottish Secretary of State and that he put his ideological objections in writing to the BEIS Secretary?

Chris Skidmore: I understand that the hon. Gentleman has a particular issue with the Scottish Secretary of State; and I am sure that he will be happy to take up some of those issues with him at Scottish questions. All I can say is that the hon. Gentleman has made a freedom of information request to the Department. The Government have replied and that is the Government’s official response.

When it comes to renewables, let us take the positives. Let us get away from the SNP’s negativity and endless griping. There are Scottish MPs on the Government side of the House who are committed to delivering positive action to the benefit of the Scottish people—putting politics and discussions of independence aside, getting down and doing the job, delivering for the people of Scotland, and ensuring that we have offshore wind, onshore wind or whatever supply is most appropriate for Scotland.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Chris Skidmore): BEIS Ministers regularly discuss a range of issues with their counterparts in the Scotland Office, and just last week I met with the Scottish Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands at the British-Irish Council in Manchester to discuss energy and the environment. It was an incredibly productive meeting, in contrast to what I often find with Opposition Members in this place. The Government will continue to work with Scotland on a range of issues, including strengthening the city region deals in six areas, including Glasgow, Stirling and Aberdeen.

Stuart C. McDonald: Research published today by Vivid Economics estimates that proposals by the Committee on Climate Change for increasing onshore wind capacity to 35 GW by 2035 would reduce the cost of electricity by 7%. Ahead of the energy White Paper, can the Minister confirm whether the Secretary of State for Scotland has made the case for onshore wind to receive contracts for difference support, just as that new report suggests it should?

Chris Skidmore: It is a little known fact that we have 13.8 GW of onshore wind capacity installed in the UK already—enough to power over 7.6 million UK homes—which includes 8.1 GW in Scotland. I understand that there are new projects close to the hon. Gentleman’s constituency in north Lanarkshire, with 46 MW of onshore wind projects planned. I am not necessarily interested in what the Secretary of State for Scotland has to say on this issue; I am interested in what the Scottish people have to say and in securing local community support for ensuring, whatever our range of energy supply, that we commit to renewables of all forms in meeting our net zero commitments by 2050.

The Government are determined to ensure the delivery of local green jobs. The offshore wind sector deal has obviously committed to 60% content by 2025.
or 2030. I cannot remember the exact date, but I am happy to come back to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on that.

It is important that, as we go forward with the contract for difference proposals, we make sure that we bring local suppliers with us. That is a key part of the Government's industrial strategy.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): If the Minister had an opportunity to look at today's report from RenewableUK on onshore wind, he would see that there has been a complete collapse in planning applications for onshore wind, in Scotland and in the UK as a whole, yet the report indicates that customers could have substantially saved on their future energy bills if that collapse had not happened.

Does the Minister agree that the policy of banning onshore wind in England, through planning restrictions, and in the UK as a whole, through discrimination in support, is now completely indefensible? If he does agree, what is he doing to reverse this policy?

Chris Skidmore: When it comes to renewables, we now have a record high of 52% of our electricity being generated from low-carbon sources, with 33% from renewables. We have seen with offshore wind that, actually, the reduction in our prices demonstrates that we can move towards effective renewables for the future. As I mentioned, we have 13.8 GW of onshore wind delivering for 7.6 million households. We have the local planning processes in place for the future, which was a commitment in the 2015 Conservative manifesto, but we want to make sure that we take local communities with us. That is also the case with net zero. It has to be a transition on the UK via fulfilment houses.

Specific projects to tackle the risks of second-hand and used electrical goods online sales.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): If the Minister had with the OPSS on developing a proposal for product registration at point of sale?

Kelly Tolhurst: Again, I thank my hon. Friend for his question. In last week's Westminster Hall debate I committed to developing and testing the ability for mandatory registration of electrical products, which is something we are looking at. It was initiated in a discussion at the Consumer Protection Partnership last Thursday, and we are hoping to get outcomes in the near future.

Used Electrical Goods: Online Sales

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Government have known for four years that there were 5.5 million Whirlpool tumble dryers in homes across the UK that were liable to catch fire. Last month, the Minister gave notice that she intended to order the recall of those dryers still in use, but now she has agreed a voluntary recall with the company. Will she reconsider that and use the powers she has? If she does not, how will we know that Whirlpool is taking this seriously?

Kelly Tolhurst: I recognise the hon. Gentleman's concern in this regard. He is absolutely correct to say that we issued a notice of intent to recall on Whirlpool. It submitted its proposal, which we assessed. We also took advice from an expert panel, comprising an independent QC and chief scientific officers from the Health and Safety Executive, the Home Office and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. We decided not only to accept the proposal, which has been published, but to issue a regulation 28 notice with regard to further information that needs to be shared with the OPSS, so that we can review the recall process.

Carolyn Harris: I appreciated the Minister's letter this weekend on the online sales of second-hand electrical goods online.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I have recently written to online platforms to make clear the priority I place on consumer safety. The hon. Lady will know, after her Westminster Hall debate last week, that the Office for Product Safety and Standards is undertaking specific projects to tackle the risks of second-hand and online sales, including targeting those goods entering the UK via fulfilment houses.

Carolyn Harris: I appreciated the Minister's letter this weekend on the online sales of second-hand electrical goods online. Currently, it is possible to upload details of such products on to online platforms without recall notices, or model or display numbers. Her letter states that she has written to these online platforms, but it fails to say which ones. Will she commit to publishing these letters and any advice she has given, in the interests of clarity?

7. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve product safety. [911957]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): We are providing £12 million a year of new funding through the Office for Product Safety and Standards to strengthen national capacity for product safety enforcement. The OPSS provides specialist expertise, scientific advice, support and training for trading standards, and it leads on national product safety challenges to protect consumers.

Gerald Jones: I recently attended an Electrical Safety First event on the dangers of buying second-hand electrical goods. The reality is that many people buy second-hand electrical goods, sometimes not by choice, so will the Minister commit, in the light of the Whirlpool recall, to a public awareness campaign on how to buy and use electrical products safely?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that question. Last week we took part in a Westminster Hall debate secured by the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). The OPSS is currently working with Electrical Safety First on various campaigns, to which we have an ongoing commitment. Consumer protection and consumer education are important.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Given the difficulty of tracing the whereabouts of half a million potentially faulty Whirlpool tumble dryers, what discussions has the Minister had with the OPSS on developing a proposal for product registration at point of sale?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. In last week’s Westminster Hall debate I committed to developing and testing the ability for mandatory registration of electrical products, which is something we are looking at. It was initiated in a discussion at the Consumer Protection Partnership last Thursday, and we are hoping to get outcomes in the near future.

8. Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): What plans he has to improve the regulation of second-hand electrical goods online. [911958]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I have recently written to online platforms to make clear the priority I place on consumer safety. The hon. Lady will know, after her Westminster Hall debate last week, that the Office for Product Safety and Standards is undertaking specific projects to tackle the risks of second-hand and online sales, including targeting those goods entering the UK via fulfilment houses.

Carolyn Harris: I appreciated the Minister’s letter this weekend on the online sales of second-hand electrical goods online. Currently, it is possible to upload details of such products on to online platforms without recall notices, or model or display numbers. Her letter states that she has written to these online platforms, but it fails to say which ones. Will she commit to publishing these letters and any advice she has given, in the interests of clarity?
Kelly Tolhurst: I would like to reassure the hon. Lady that I have written to not just one online platform, but all the online platforms in relation to this. I would just like to clarify that some platforms have been advertising certain models and Whirlpool has used the same model number for a number of machines, so it is not correct to assume that all models will be subject to recall. As I have outlined, if any platform is selling products that are part of that recall, the organisations are being alerted and the products are being taken down as soon as possible.

Strategic Transport Infrastructure Projects: Essex

9. Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): If he will hold discussions with the Secretary of State for Transport to discuss the potential benefits to (a) businesses and (b) the implementation of the industrial strategy of funding strategic transport infrastructure projects in Essex.

Nicky Morgan: I thank the Minister very much indeed for that answer; it sounds almost as if he knew I was going to raise Intelligent Energy, which is based in my constituency and, as he obviously knows, manufactures hydrogen fuel cells, having developed the technology. Will he confirm that the Government are technology neutral when it comes to identifying future technologies? Will he outline what recent steps have been taken to secure this commitment given by Vauxhall’s owners to invest in Ellesmere Port, but he is absolutely right that they have said that that depends on a successful resolution of Brexit that means Vauxhall can continue to trade without tariffs and friction with the rest of the European Union. That reinforces how vital it is to secure such a deal.

Fuel Cell Manufacturing

13. Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help improve the viability of fuel cell manufacturing in the UK.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): We provide support through Innovate UK for early-stage fuel cell technologies, and through the Advanced Propulsion Centre and the energy entrepreneurs fund as those technologies mature towards the market. Our £23 million hydrogen for transport programme is expanding refuelling infrastructure, and fuel cell vehicles are eligible for consumer incentives, which helps to increase demand. Two weeks ago, I was at No. 10 with Intelligent Energy, a company in my right hon. Friend’s constituency, considering further opportunities for fuel cell deployment.

UK Automotive Sector: No-deal Brexit

12. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to support the UK automotive sector in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a deal.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The industrial strategy chose to invest to make Britain a leading location for the next generation of vehicles, irrespective of Brexit. This month, we have worked with Jaguar Land Rover to secure the electric XJ at Castle Bromwich. Last week, I launched the new electric Mini, to be built in Oxford. Immediately after these questions, I am unveiling Lotus’s Evija, the UK’s first all-electric hypercar, made in Norfolk. I am determined that Britain’s automotive strength will flourish through the next generation of vehicles.

Justin Madders: As the Secretary of State knows, Vauxhall Motors in Ellesmere Port has a future if we can avoid a no-deal Brexit. In recent weeks, members of the Government have been falling over themselves to endorse a no-deal Brexit, despite the damage that will do to the automotive sector. Will he not put his own job ahead of those of my constituents—will he rule out a no-deal Brexit today?

Greg Clark: I am sure the hon. Gentleman welcomes the commitment given by Vauxhall’s owners to invest in Ellesmere Port, but he is absolutely right that they have said that that depends on a successful resolution of Brexit that means Vauxhall can continue to trade without tariffs and friction with the rest of the European Union. That reinforces how vital it is to secure such a deal.

Andrew Stephenson: I welcome my right hon. Friend’s tireless championing of the case for improved road and rail in Essex, and I am happy to lend my support to her campaign. The county has a vibrant, enterprising economy, but greater investment in connectivity would deliver more jobs, housing and opportunities right across the region.

Nicky Morgan: I agree strongly with my right hon. Friend: there is huge potential for the auto sector. The Government are committed to policies that are technology neutral as we achieve the ambitions that we set out in the Road to Zero strategy around a year ago. The Government support the development of hydrogen as a transport fuel and we are in step with international progress. However, we acknowledge that we need to go further and faster in all different types of technologies.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): We have certainly had some impressive improvements since the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill in 2017, but will the Minister outline what recent steps have been taken to secure this manufacturing facility, which was so central to the Bill and its goal?
Andrew Stephenson: I missed the manufacturing facility that the hon. Gentleman referred to, but I am more than happy to work with him and others. I have been working closely with colleagues in Northern Ireland on a range of issues, and I am keen to meet the hon. Gentleman who is a tireless champion on behalf of industry in his part of the United Kingdom.

Recycling Nuclear Submarines

14. Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions has he had with the Secretary of State for Defence on extending the provisions of the Energy Act 2004 to include recycling nuclear submarines.

Andrew Stephenson: The disposal of nuclear submarines is a complex and challenging undertaking that I last discussed with the Minister for defence procurement, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), yesterday. As the hon. Gentleman will know from the meeting he had earlier this year, the Government have an established programme of work in place and are committed to the safe, secure and cost-effective defuelling and dismantling of all decommissioned nuclear submarines as soon as practically possible. I am more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the matter further.

Manufacturing Output

15. Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions has he had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on trends in the level of manufacturing output.

Andrew Stephenson: The latest Office for National Statistics index of production figures show that, despite strong fluctuations in recent months, the level of manufacturing output in May 2019 was the same as it was in May the previous year, and the level of the three months to May 2019 was actually higher than it was in the same period in 2018. That stands in stark contrast to the situation under the Labour Government, when we saw more than 35,000 manufacturing businesses cease to exist and 1.7 million manufacturing jobs lost.

Mr Bailey: Notwithstanding the welcome news from Jaguar Land Rover, overall manufacturing production is contracting, export and domestic orders are down, investment is paralysed and employment is dropping. This has huge implications for the public finances. What discussions is the Minister having with the Treasury on the implications of all that for the delivery of the Tory leadership contenders’ tax and spending plans?

Andrew Stephenson: We have regular discussions with Treasury Ministers on a range of subjects, including the importance of the manufacturing sector to the UK economy—it is the fourth largest in the EU and supports 2.7 million jobs. We are taking several measures to support manufacturing growth, including £141 million for the Made Smarter industrial digitalisation programme and £600 million for the high-value manufacturing catapult.
UK. He has taken to support the automotive industry in the UK.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): Yesterday, the Prime Minister chaired a roundtable with automotive companies to discuss how the Government can best continue to support the industry through this period of unprecedented change. The Prime Minister announced a £500 million loan guarantee to support Jaguar Land Rover’s design, manufacture and export of the next generation of electric vehicles, with similar support also available to others in the sector. Through our industrial strategy and landmark automotive sector deal, we remain committed to keeping the UK at the forefront of new technological development.

Kirstene Hair: I thank the Minister for that answer and declare that I am vice-chair of the all-party group for fair fuel.

The automotive industry is moving apace to ensure that it can help reach the Government’s ambitious targets for electric vehicles, but of course we need to have the infrastructure in place to supplement that as well. Will the Minister outline what his Department has done to help rural communities such as Angus with that?

Andrew Stephenson: Our UK-wide grant scheme and the £400 million public-private charging infrastructure investment fund will see thousands more public charge points installed across the UK, including in rural areas. Yesterday, the Prime Minister committed that all new rapid and higher-powered charge points will provide pay-as-you-go debit or credit card payment options by spring 2020 to enable access for all in the community. We will continue to monitor whether any significant gaps in infrastructure provision emerge in the medium term and will consider whether further support is required.

Jeremy Lefroy: I very much welcome the announcements by JLR and BMW. The Minister will know that in the event of a no-deal, which I very much hope will not happen, we will face not only tariffs, but the implication of rules of origin. This was seen by BMW moving the manufacture of engines for South Africa out of Hams Hall in the west midlands to Germany. What discussions has he had with his colleagues in Government over the implications of rules of origin for future trade arrangements?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is right to say that the decisions by JLR and BMW about the electric Mini are votes of confidence in the workforce in the west midlands. However, we must prepare for all scenarios, and we are fully preparing for no deal and working with the industry to understand the potential impacts, including, as he says, the impact of rules of origin. We are determined to ensure that the UK continues to be a competitive location for automotive under any scenario. Alongside industry, we are investing almost £1.5 billion to ensure that we are at the forefront of new automotive technologies.

Support for Growth in the Midlands

21. Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to support growth in the midlands.

Jack Brereton: The ceramic valley enterprise zone in Stoke-on-Trent has been incredibly successful for our local economy by creating jobs. Will the Minister support continuing the ceramic valley enterprise zone and expanding it to include other sites in the city?

Jake Berry: Having had the privilege of visiting the ceramic valley enterprise zone during a recent visit to Stoke-on-Trent, I am delighted to confirm that, once completed, it will have created over 7,000 jobs and redeveloped 140 hectares of former brownfield land. I hope to continue to work with my hon. Friend, who is a redoubtable campaigner for his constituency, to see what more can be done to expand this hugely successful site.
Mr Speaker: I apologise; I am ahead of myself. I was so captivated by the Secretary of State’s munificence that I neglected the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), which I must tell all observers is a very risky enterprise. Let’s hear from the fella.

Kevin Brennan: I will not take it personally, Mr Speaker.

While the Secretary of State is in the mood for holiday gifts, the latest Government statistics show that 61% of those working in music, performing and visual arts are self-employed, so will the Secretary of State update shared parental leave rules to include self-employed people to prevent talented women from having to leave their careers in the creative industries and other industries when they have children?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We are evaluating the responses we have had from the creative industries and others on that issue. I fully recognise that it is an unresolved matter that we will address during the months ahead.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Given that the first ever indefinite strike action of outsourced and Commercial Services Union’s referral of the matter to the Secretary of State please explain to the House what has been done, and what I have acted to do, is make sure that our contractor staff are paid at least the average level across London for their employment. I know that that has been welcomed. I take the issue very seriously and I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising it.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): Do Ministers agree that improving the whole A303, A30 and A358 corridor would remove a significant barrier to growth across the south-west and North Devon?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jake Berry): Yes, we agree that that is an important corridor for the south-west, increasing resilience and providing alternative routes. That is why the Government have already committed £2 billion to starting the project in the first road investment strategy. Work is already under way on developing the first major improvements. The Government’s intention is that subsequent road investment strategies will fund the remaining improvements. As my hon. Friend says, this is important to driving prosperity and growth in the whole south-west.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Do Ministers support the Treasury’s proposed VAT rise to 20% for solar-based products, and what assessment have they made of its impact on installations?

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Chris Skidmore): It is not the Treasury’s rise; it is the European Union’s rise. In considering the reasons why he supports staying in the European Union, the right hon. Gentleman has to address the fact that these are EU regulations that we are putting in force while we remain a member. Of course, we will work with the expert Low Pay Commission to carefully consider the impact on businesses and workers across all sectors.

Laura Pidcock: Given the reported use of food banks by staff in the Secretary of State’s Department, and given that the first ever indefinite strike action of outsourced workers in Whitehall is happening now, does the Secretary of State not see it as his duty at least to ensure that BEIS contractors are not breaking legislation? That includes potential breaches of regulation 7 of the Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Businesses Regulations 2003, whereby an employment business may not supply a temporary worker to a hirer to replace an individual taking part in official strike action. Can the Secretary of State please explain to the House what action he has taken on the issue following the Public and Commercial Services Union’s referral of the matter to the Met police, and letters sent to him and his permanent secretary on 10 July?

Greg Clark: I value very highly everyone who works in my Department, whether they are directly employed or employed through contractors. Of course, we will always require our contractors to obey the law. What we have done, and what I have acted to do, is make sure that our contractor staff are paid at least the average...
used. What powers does the Department or the regulator have to encourage both sides to come to an amicable solution?

Chris Skidmore: I am happy to take away that specific issue. I want to make sure that the curry industry in Glasgow continues and that local businesses continue to thrive. I am happy to take away the issue and look at it in further detail. We work closely with the regulator, Ofgem, to make sure that suppliers and individuals continue to benefit from a flexible energy economy.

T9. [911984] Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): The oil and gas industry has a vital role to play in achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050. One way of doing so is by providing a commercial incentive for carbon capture and storage. Will the Minister outline what steps the Department is taking to see whether that could become commercially viable?

Chris Skidmore: We recently announced £26 million for, I think, 11 carbon capture, utilisation and storage projects across the UK, including Project Acorn in Scotland. I visited Tata Chemicals in Cheshire, which is the largest project in the UK, it is 100 times larger than other projects. The Committee on Climate Change report is absolutely clear that 50% of our carbon emission reductions will come from CCUS. We must continue to invest in that more and then take those innovations across the globe.

T6. [911981] Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): Could the Secretary of State respond to the findings of Citizens Advice that utility companies have overcharged customers by £24 billion over 15 years?

Greg Clark: As I said in answer to earlier questions, the Competition and Markets Authority has recognised the unacceptable position of loyal customers being overcharged, and it is acting to correct that, as we have done in this House when it comes to energy bills.

T10. [911985] Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that nuclear energy must be part of the decarbonisation of this country? Could he update the House on progress made with the regulated asset base financial model and the energy White Paper?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): I agree with my hon. Friend. The problem that she identifies is a real and present one. We are taking steps to require information given to Companies House, and therefore made use of, to be validated. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Someone chunterers from a sedentary position, “Can she do that?”—can the right hon. Lady demand that the Secretary of State, rather than some other Minister, answers the question? There is no prohibition. It is a matter of the force of personality, which the right hon. Lady has just eloquently exhibited, and it may well encourage copycat behaviour.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): What better week than this to discuss the potential for a tourism sector deal for Northern Ireland? After all, this week the sun has got its hat on, Rory’s out to play, the Open has come to Ulster—hopefully, it’s coming home to stay.

Greg Clark: I did not have the hon. Gentleman down as a poet, as well as his other accomplishments.

The sector deal that has been signed very much relates to the whole United Kingdom, and I hope the manifold attractions of Northern Ireland will be given a boost by the very good news that this sector deal constitutes for the industry.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I recently visited Coca-Cola in my constituency. It will be investing £50 million in its Wakefield plant this year, providing jobs and apprenticeships to my constituents. Companies are investing in Britain, demonstrating that the future will be bright after Brexit. What is the Department doing to attract further foreign investment?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. We work closely with the Department for International Trade to secure more inward investment into the UK, and we ensure through our industrial strategy that we have one of the most competitive environments for investment globally.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): What discussions is the Secretary of State having with his relevant counterparts in other departmental teams about the ability of people in the creative industries to travel around the European Union if there is a Brexit of any sort? Secretary of State, please.
Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): Some 900 jobs were put at risk when Kerry Foods announced the closure of its plant in Burton. I know the Secretary of State has been in touch with the managing director of Kerry to press it on finding a new buyer. Will he commit to doing all he can to make sure that a new buyer is found and that those jobs are protected?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. I have been in touch with the owners of the site. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the most important thing is that a new owner should be found for that historic site in Burton, so that it can continue its good track record of employment.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The chief executives of Coca-Cola, Unilever, Nestlé and PepsiCo are indirectly responsible for much of the 8 million tonnes of plastic waste that ends up in our seas. Will the Secretary of State meet those chief executives to encourage them to adopt more sustainable packaging?

Chris Skidmore: I am certainly happy to meet those chief executives. We are working on projects to deliver sustainable packaging when it comes to looking at future research and innovation on alternatives to plastics, which I think will be critical. I would like to thank this UK sector for looking at making adaptations for the future. Everyone agrees that we have to rid the UK of plastic packaging, and do so in a way that will not harm the economy. Going forward, we need to have the support of companies such as those the hon. Gentleman mentioned, and I will happily meet them.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): In approximately 1 hour and 56 minutes, it will be exactly 50 years since the launch of the Apollo 11 mission to land a man on the moon. Will my hon. Friend the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation—if I may be specific—tell the House how the Government are planning to commemorate the landing of the first man on the moon this weekend?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): It is nice to be top of the menu for once. Yes, at 2.32 pm, we will have the 50th anniversary of the launch of the Apollo 11 moon mission. On the Government’s commitment to space, I will be giving a speech at the Policy Exchange, setting out what we think is a clear priority for the UK economy—not just in space exploration, but in earth observation. To come back again to the net zero target—it is not like we have talked about it enough already—space technology is a key enabling technology that will enable us to better detect changes in the earth. The future of space is actually critical for our survival on earth.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It was a privilege to stand with 1,000 Jaguar workers and hear that the factory that built the Spitfire during the war and two generations of Jaguar after the war—it nearly closed 10 years ago—will now build the electric cars of the future. Will the Secretary of State, in welcoming yesterday’s announcement, join me in saying that we must now build the batteries in Britain so that we have a vibrant British industry?

Will the Secretary of State also join me in paying tribute to the remarkable man that was Lord Kumar Bhattacharyya for his championing of manufacturing in Britain and his drive, intellect and ambition for Britain and British workers? It is thanks to Kumar that the Jaguar plant remains open.

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It was a proud moment for all of us to have the commitment that Jaguar Land Rover has made. I know everyone is immensely proud not just of the history but of the future of that great company.

I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to Lord Bhattacharyya, the regius professor of manufacturing at Warwick and the founder of the Warwick Manufacturing Group. I can announce to the House that, in recognition of his immense contribution, we are establishing two awards. The first is the Bhattacharyya award for collaboration between academia and industry, which will be a prize of £25,000 each year to the team who best show how industry and universities can work together. Because Lord Bhattacharyya was such a champion of inclusion and helped so many young people enjoy flourishing careers in engineering, we are establishing the Bhattacharyya engineering inclusion programme, working with school and further education college students in the west midlands. It will make available 80 bursaries a year for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to study engineering, and it will also support extracurricular activities to inspire the next generation of young people to study engineering.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but demand exceeds supply, and we must move on.
**Relationship Education in Schools**

12.39 pm  

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab) ([Urgent Question]): To ask the Secretary of State for Education if he will make a statement on what steps he is taking to counter misinformation about the content of relationship education in schools.

**The Minister for School Standards** (Nick Gibb): This spring, Parliament passed the relationships, sex and health education regulations with overwhelming support. We know that many parents agree that these subjects should be taught by schools. We also know that for some parents, this raises concerns. Parents have a right to understand what we are requiring schools to teach and how their child’s school is intending to go about it. That is why we will be requiring schools to consult parents on their relationship education or RSE policy. Open and constructive dialogue can only work, however, if the facts of the situation are known to all.

We are aware that misinformation is circulating about what schools currently teach about relationships and what they will teach when the new subjects are introduced. The Department for Education has undertaken a number of activities in response. In April this year, we published frequently asked questions designed to bust myths on the subjects. They have been translated into three languages. In June, we published the final version of the relationships, sex and health education guidance, as well as guides for parents on the subjects. Alongside that, we produced infographics that can be easily shared on social media—including WhatsApp, where we know much of the misinformation is shared—setting out the facts. We also sent an email to almost 40,000 teachers, providing them with facts and information and links to various documents.

The Department has also been working on the ground with Birmingham City Council, Parkfield School, parents and other interested parties to convey the facts of the policy and dispel myths, to support a resolution to the protests in that school and nearby Anderton Park School. Nationally, we have worked with the National Association of Head Teachers to understand where there might be parent concerns in other parts of the country and to offer support. We will continue those efforts to support the introduction of the new subjects, which we strongly believe are hugely important for children growing up in modern Britain.

**Mr Speaker:** Quite so.

**Emma Hardy:** I am sure that Members from across the whole House will join me in affirming the importance of accepting that people have different family relationships and that it is not the shape or set-up of your family that matters, but only that you are loved and cared for.

Passing the Equality Act 2010 was rightly a proud moment for our country, but these rights remain only for as long as we fight to keep them. Respect and equality are the true British values. There is no reason to treat sexuality any differently from the way that we discuss any other part of the Equality Act, or families that may have a difference in age or even a disability. The misinformation is vast and in danger of spreading. With respect to the Minister, whatever efforts the Department has been making to counter that misinformation have clearly not worked.

It is clear from last night’s “Panorama” programme that protests against relationship education are growing across the country. Over 70 schools are now experiencing pressure and intimidation because school leaders are fulfilling their legal duty under the Equality Act. It would also appear, from last night’s “Panorama” programme, that pressure was applied from the Department to Parkfield School to suspend its equality programme to get the school out of the national news. This has led to copycat protests elsewhere, as protesters believe that if they make enough noise, and turn up with loudhailers and hurl abuse at headteachers, other schools will back down, too. There is a desperate need for clear, firm leadership from the Department.

Will the Minister assure the House that Department officials did not pressure the Parkfield leadership team into suspending its equality programme? Will he confirm that he will launch an investigation into such claims? Does the Minister agree with the Government’s lead commissioner for countering extremism, Sara Khan, that the Department has been slow to respond to the growing protests? What lessons have the Department learnt from that? Will the Minister update guidance to schools from “if” to “when”, to ensure that schools have a clear message about the need to teach LGBT-inclusive sex and relationship education? Will the Minister send a clear message to school protesters that LGBT-inclusive sex and relationship education is mandated by the Government, that compliance will be checked by Ofsted and that attempts to intimidate individual headteachers will not change that?

**Nick Gibb:** I agree with the hon. Lady. About the importance of the equality of relationships and families, and that is spelt out in the guidance. This is a historic document. Relationships, sex and health education will cover everything from healthy eating to the importance of self-respect and to consent, the pitfalls of social media, recognising the signs of an unhealthy friendship, online safety and first aid. What is learnt in relationships and health education in primary school will provide the building blocks for a child to develop positive relationships as they grow up and into their adult life, and it will teach children to respect those who might be different.

This is a well-crafted document that has received widespread support. We consulted widely on it and it was drafted by experts. We wanted to make sure that the relationships and sex education guidance applied to all schools in this country, including private schools and faith schools, and that is why it has been crafted as it has.

The DFE has been involved from the first minute that we understood that there were problems at Parkfield School. We have had senior officials on a daily basis liaising with the schools, Birmingham City Council and groups of parents. We wanted to resolve this issue on the ground and to try to dispel the myths, so that parents were reassured about what is actually being taught in the No Outsiders programme at Parkfield School.

The hon. Lady says that the Department was slow to respond, but I do not believe that we were. As I said, we responded as soon as we heard that there were issues at the school. We—including senior officials—have been working very closely with the school. As far as the No Outsiders programme is concerned, my understanding is that it had reached its natural end and that, in the
following term, the school would move on to religious education—that was part of the cycle. This is my understanding of the situation in the school.

The hon. Lady should understand that we want to achieve maximum consensus with this relationship education. That is why there is the requirement, in regulations, to publish the policy on the school’s website and, in the statutory guidance, to consult parents, but ultimately, it is matter for the school itself to decide on the curriculum. [Interruption.] Hang on. When the school has decided on what it wants to teach and when, it will have the full support and backing of the Department for Education and Ministers.

In terms of “when” versus “if”, paragraph 37 of the guidance says:

“Schools should ensure that all of their teaching is sensitive and age appropriate... At the point at which schools consider it appropriate to teach their pupils about LGBT, they should ensure that this content is fully integrated into their programmes.”

What is important and required is that children will be taught about LGBT at some point during their education. Both the Secretary of State and I have frequently been on the record saying that we strongly encourage primary schools to teach LGBT relationships. [Interruption.] The hon. Lady says from a sedentary position, “You must tell them.” If we had done that, the guidance would not have achieved the consensus that it has right across the country and right across different types of schools. A large number of schools would not have adopted the guidance. It has been very successfully landed, because of the careful way that we have done this.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that much of the debate about this issue, including the protests in Birmingham, are about the current curriculum and not the new curriculum, which becomes statutory in September 2020? That new and updated guidance gives people an opportunity to be respectful of faith-based views—for example, on marriage, family and relationships—when the teaching occurs. It fundamentally states that the education should be “appropriate”, having regard to “the age” and “religious background” of pupils. Does the Minister agree that the updated guidance probably has the most comprehensive section ever on respect for religious belief?

Nick Gibb: Yes, my hon. Friend is right. The current controversy is about a curriculum that is in place now. Of course, we still support the school in wanting to teach LGBT issues. She is right that the guidance states, in paragraph 20:

“In all schools, when teaching these subjects, the religious background of all pupils must be taken into account when planning teaching, so that the topics that are included in the core content in this guidance are appropriately handled.”

Most schools want to do that. My understanding and belief is that when parents are consulted and when they see the materials, the policy and the curriculum that the schools intend to teach, the vast majority of them will support the school in delivering that curriculum.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this important urgent question, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) for asking it with such passion.

I commend the Department for Education and Ministers for their work—we have made great progress—but I urge them to go further and support the school. If they did, they would have the support of this House and the other place. This is not about consultation—I do not believe that the issues that have arisen are about consultation; they are about LGBT rights, the misinformation being put out and the bigotry being displayed by some minorities on our streets. We have to hit back.

I saw it myself only a few weeks ago after marching with the Terrence Higgins Trust at London Pride. I was trolled for supporting the LGBT+ community, but the support I have received from hon. Members across the House is evidence to all that we will not opt out of equality in this place. It is time for Ministers to provide the right guidance, resource and support to face down the protests and prejudice. Many parents will not be watching this debate. In addition to the measures the Minister has already outlined, what will his Department do to combat the misinformation and to allay parents’ fears?

In addition to the information for parents, training is meant to be available for teachers, but there is only £6 million to fund it, which averages at just £254 per school. Will the Minister confirm that his Department’s estimate of the amount needed was actually over £30 million and will he share details of how that funding is being allocated? The early adopters will be starting in September—just weeks away. Will that funding be available only for early-adopter schools? If so, what resource is available for others wishing to take up the programme?

We must provide the most comprehensive support for the teachers on the frontline, and this must continue under the new Prime Minister. Inclusive education must be a right for every single child. We will not go back to the days of section 28. Every child is a gift. I hope that the Minister will ensure that his team and the Government take every step over the summer to reinforce this.

Nick Gibb: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her support for what is a landmark piece of legislation and statutory guidance. We should not allow this debate to overshadow the importance of what has been achieved. Thousands of schools do wish to adopt this policy early—in September—and we are producing an implementation guide for those early adopters on how to plan and develop the curriculum and to engage parents. We are also producing a guide on parental engagement planned for the early autumn about what the consultation means, what good practice is and where schools can get more support when they encounter the kind of problems we have seen in Birmingham.

The hon. Lady is right: we need to tackle misinformation. That is why we have produced these myth busters, which have been widely disseminated and are having an impact. On training, we are spending £6 million a year to develop online portals and material that we can spread to teachers who require that training. There should be a consensus in the House about the importance of updated guidance. It is 20 years since the last set of guidance on how to teach sex and relationships education in our schools, and she will know how much her party has helped achieve equality for LGBT people in this country in those 20 years and how the Conservative party, under the last Prime Minister, introduced the
right of gay people to marry—a right that I personally extremely grateful for. We have had to ensure that our guidance reflects modern society. I am convinced that when this guidance and the curriculum are rolled out nationally we will be helping people better to prepare for life in modern Britain.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If the Minister’s instructions had been more prescriptive, as some hon. Members appear to be demanding, would it have been easier for teachers to implement?

Nick Gibb: We were keen to obtain as wide support as possible from all the major faith groups, including the Association of Muslim Schools, the Board of Deputies, the Catholic Education Service and the Church of England. We wanted a widespread consensus for the statutory guidance, and we wanted it to apply to private schools as well as schools in the state sector. To do that and to land it successfully, I believe we have the wording absolutely right in that important paragraph 37.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): If the Minister thinks the guidance is right, he might want to come and live where I live for a while, because it clearly is not working. All that is needed in the guidance is something that says that in every school every child has to learn about every equality characteristic—simple as that—and that there is no option. We go round the houses talking about consulting and speaking to parents, but the fundamental point is completely missed. For the reasonable, consultation will help, but what we are up against here is racists and homophobes trying to impose what they think on the children where I live. There needs to be clarity. Will he promise that? The headteachers in Birmingham and across the country who are getting in touch with me want that clarity.

Nick Gibb: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her work locally to counter the kind of views expressed in those protests. Those protests, which intimidate children going to school and the teachers in those schools, are unacceptable, which is why we supported Birmingham City Council in taking out an interim injunction against the protests. Of course people have a right to protest, but they do not have a right to intimidate young children going to school.

The hon. Lady suggests, “If only we had changed the wording of the guidance to make it more of a requirement,” but I do not believe it would have prevented the protests at the Birmingham school. There is a segment of opinion at either end of this debate that will not be persuaded of the appropriateness of the guidance. Some people will never agree to LGBT issues being taught in schools. As such, I do not believe that requiring it in guidance to be taught at a specific age in primary schools would have prevented the protests.

We have been clear that we support primary schools and headteachers who wish to teach LGBT relationships and local authorities that take legal action against protests that have turned into intimidation of young people, but if we had had the hon. Lady’s advice, we would not have had a consensus for the statutory guidance, there would have been opponents of the regulations as we took it through the House and another place, and we would not have achieved its acceptance by a raft of independent private schools that we wanted to be subject to the statutory guidance.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): The Church of England, the largest provider of primary education, fully supports this updating of the guidance. As the Minister says, it has not been updated for the past 20 years, and childhood has changed greatly during that time. Does the Minister agree that one of the imperatives for this change must be to protect pupils and keep them safe in the complex online world that they inhabit? My heart goes out to the children caught up in all this.

Nick Gibb: My right hon. Friend is right that the guidance needed to be updated. It includes teaching children how to tackle the pitfalls of social media, how to recognise the signs of things such as an unhealthy relationship and how to stay safe online. These are important additions in the relationships guidance. It is an important document. People are focusing on one or two paragraphs, but we should not underestimate its importance to schools in helping children to navigate what she correctly says is an increasingly complicated and at times dangerous world for young people.

Mr Speaker: Flockton Church of England Voluntary Controlled First School and Overthorpe C of E Academy were alike privileged to benefit from the headteachship of the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), from whom I think it apposite that we should now hear.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am so impressed.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): You were meant to be.

Thelma Walker: Top of the class there, Mr Speaker. A few weeks ago, along with members of the National Association of Headteachers and my former colleagues, I signed the following pledge: “I support education in all schools which promotes equality, enabling children to leave school prepared or life in modern Britain, understanding difference and respecting diversity.” Does the Minister agree with the wording of the pledge, and does he agree that every parent and, indeed, every member of society should support it?

Nick Gibb: Yes, we do support that pledge, and, as I have said, we will support schools that decide to teach children to understand the importance of difference. That is a fundamental part of our statutory guidance, which was passed by this House.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I find it somewhat disappointing that most of the ire has been focused on the Government—who have updated the relationship guidance—and not solely on the people who protest outside schools, doing their best to deprive young people of their ability to make their choices, and harassing great teachers and headteachers and putting them under pressure. If the protesters do not desist, and if the Minister is not going to make the guidance prescriptive, which would render the protests fruitless, will he consider introducing exclusion zones around the schools so that those protests cannot bear any fruit?
Nick Gibb: We supported Birmingham City Council’s injunction against protests that had become very challenging for young people going to that school, and we will support similar action in future when protests become intimidatory for pupils. However, I disagree with my hon. Friend’s view, and that of Opposition Members, that if we had made the guidance more prescriptive, it would have prevented the protests from occurring. There is an element of society that simply does not agree with what the Government are seeking to do when it comes to LGBT relationships, and they will protest as much as they want. We were never going to be able to bring that particular section of opinion on board, although we have brought the vast majority of people on board for this curriculum, including many fundamentalist faith groups.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): On Friday I drove past the protests, which have been moved just up the road from the school in Birmingham. Apart from the fact that allowing these people to get away with it has taken up precious police resources, if the Minister saw them, he would realise that putting the onus on the school to decide the content and the appropriateness will never be accepted by them. They will see it as a point of weakness, and they will agitate and intimidate until they get their way. Only the Government will be able to change that.

Nick Gibb: No Government have ever specified that level of detail in respect of sex education, let alone relationship education. It has always been—and must remain—for headteachers and schools to decide what is appropriate for their pupils, when it is age-appropriate, and so on.

We have issued clear guidance. The Secretary of State and I have said that we strongly encourage primary schools to teach children about LGBT relationships, because there will be pupils in primary schools who have two mothers and two fathers and it is important for the other children to respect that, but ultimately such matters must be for headteachers to decide. As I have said, I do not believe that had we been prescriptive—more prescriptive than the wording of paragraph 37—we would have secured consensus among major school providers in both the state and the private sector, and I do not believe that being more prescriptive would have prevented anyone from protesting against something with which they fundamentally disagree.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): As a child of the section 28 generation who saw the damaging effect that it had in telling some people that their relationships and their families were not as good as other people’s, I want to speak up for the concerned parents of LGBT families who are now asking why the Government have essentially green-lighted protests against something that is it appropriate for those children’s peers in the playground to be taught that their families are just as full of love, just as much to be respected, and just as much to be celebrated? That is what we are really talking about: little children being taught, by omission, to hate and not to respect each other.

Nick Gibb: It was to address those very issues that we published the statutory guidance. That is why we published the regulations that were passed in the House with almost no opposition. The hon. Lady is right to suggest that when young children at a school have parents of the same sex, that should perhaps be a pointer to the headteacher to provide for children to be taught about LGBT relationships earlier than they might have been otherwise. It is important to give them that discretion. As I have said, provided that schools have consulted, and provided that their policy is on their websites as required by the regulations, we will fully support headteachers when they make decisions about the content of the curriculum and when and how it should be taught.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): We will always respect religious and cultural values and differences, but there are also fundamental values of human rights. We will never retreat back down the path to a painful past in which the love of two men for one another, or two women for one another, was demonised. Does the Minister not recognise that by using the words “It is for the school to decide”, the Government will this autumn expose dozens—potentially hundreds—of schools to the same kind of shameful treatment that we have seen in recent weeks?

Nick Gibb: No, I am afraid I do not agree with that. The guidance makes it very clear that pupils must be taught about LGBT relationships at some point in their school careers, and that that requirement will apply to private schools and faith schools, including orthodox faith schools. That is the important achievement of the guidance.

The Secretary of State and I have said on many occasions that we strongly encourage primary schools to start teaching children in primary schools about LGBT relationships, and we will support those that do so. I believe that when schools start to produce their policies and start to consult on what is being taught and the materials that will be used in teaching children about LGBT relationships, they will have widespread support from parents throughout the country.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): These changes could of course have been introduced in 2010, when the Minister was the shadow Minister, Labour was in power, and we had a plan to introduce relationship and sex education which he voted against. I am very pleased that, nearly 10 years on, relationship and sex education are to be taught in our schools, but I think that now is the time for the Minister to step up and show some real political leadership, and to say what the vast majority of people in this House and the other place agree with: “This has to be mandatory, it has to be taught, and it cannot be just left to the schools.”

Nick Gibb: As I have said, we have had widespread support—from the Catholic Education Service, the Church of England, the Office of the Chief Rabbi and the Association of Muslim Schools—and we believe that the guidance strikes the right balance between a wide
range of views. That is why we have achieved consensus in this House and in the other place. Had we not taken this approach, I do not believe that we would be where we are today in terms of the widespread acceptance of the need to teach children about LGBT relationships in 23,000 schools up and down the country.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Of course I welcome this guidance and have done all along, but I find myself frustrated by the answers from the Minister. I have met the head of Parkfield, who came to speak to a cross-party delegation just the other day, and she was very clear: the chink in the guidance—the word “encouraged” rather than “expected”—has essentially put her and her colleagues in the firing line of these parents. To state that changing the guidance would not make a difference contradicts what that head was saying. Has the Minister been to the school and spoken to the head, and if he hasn’t, will he?

Nick Gibb: The issue in that particular school is not to do with the relationship and sex education guidance—that comes into force in September 2020—and we are making very clear in the supplementary guidance the processes that are needed in terms of consultation. Consultation with parents is hugely important, not so that parents have a veto over the curriculum— they will not have a veto over the curriculum—but because it helps to dispel myths, and it helps to deal with the very misinformation that the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) has raised this urgent question to discuss. That consultation is hugely important, and I believe that as and when schools do consult up and down the country, this new policy will attract widespread support from parents.

Mr Clive Betts: I appreciate what the Minister has done on this issue in many respects, but does he not understand that while prescription will not necessarily stop the protests, it will make it clear to the protestors that it is no use bullying the schools and the heads into trying to change the policy because the requirement lies elsewhere? He says that the parents do not have a veto on this, but if a school sits down and consults with parents, and those parents who want to stop same-sex education being taught know that the head has the ultimate decision, then there is enormous pressure on that head, and parents will believe that they have a veto regardless of whether they do or do not?

Nick Gibb: I can make it clear from this Dispatch Box that parents do not have a veto over the content of the curriculum. That has been absolutely clear: it is clear from the guidance; it is clear from what I have said; it is clear from what the Secretary of State has said. In addition to that, we strongly encourage schools to start teaching about LGBT issues in primary school.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will the Minister make sure that his Department takes responsibility for ensuring that every piece of information that is made available to parents, including consultation materials, is available in community languages, in easy-read format and in other accessible formats?

Nick Gibb: The implementation guide will set out very clearly how to plan the curriculum, how to engage parents and the processes that schools need to go through to plan and develop the policy. As I mentioned in my opening comments, we have published the information in three separate languages to try to dispel myths, but the key message that I hope comes from this debate is that we will fully support and back headteachers who decide to teach LGBT issues in their school. As long as they have been through the process of consultation and they publish their policy on the school website, they will have our full backing.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I am in awe of teachers like Gillian Marshall at Red Hall primary school in my constituency who has been providing an inclusive education for many years now. She has worked tirelessly and sensitively with the parents of the children in her care and were this guidance to have a stronger, firmer legal footing, that would not stop: she would still seek to work alongside and with the parents in her community. The Minister does not need to worry that schools will abandon working alongside parents if he gives more power to the school and makes that clearer to the parents.

Nick Gibb: Yes, and I pay tribute to that headteacher. There are teachers in thousands of schools up and down the country that are teaching these issues without protests from any group outside their school gates. The hon. Lady should realise that this is the first time that we are requiring schools to teach about LGBT issues. That will not affect the school she referred to, but it will affect many thousands of schools up and down the country that will for the first time be teaching their pupils about the need to respect difference and to understand that families come in different types, including single parents or parents of the same sex. So this is a very important piece of legislation—a very important piece of statutory guidance. We should all be doing more to support and welcome it, as the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), who speaks for the Opposition, did in her response to this urgent question.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): In Bristol on Saturday the Pride event was a magnificent celebration of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality. I was there; it was wonderful. Many of the people in the parade and at the event afterwards were probably pupils at schools where they felt excluded or misunderstood. Most of the people marching either were parents or one day will be parents, and they, too, want to know that their children will have the security of having an educational experience that is better than theirs, where they feel included and wanted, and for them the word “encouraged” is not enough. I respect the Minister, but will he please reconsider that little word “encouraged”? Can he not see that the fear of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender parents in my constituency that their children will be left out of education about positive role models and positive relationships is real, not imaginary?

Nick Gibb: This is a transforming piece of legislation and statutory guidance. It will mean that in thousands of schools up and down the country—in fact, in every school up and down the country—there will be a change in the approach to teaching about relationships and teaching about RSE. And it will mean that in schools that have not been teaching about LGBT issues, those issues will be taught at some point during their pupils’ education. I also believe strongly that it will be taught in the vast majority of primary schools, because the Secretary
of State and I have made it clear that we strongly encourage LGBT issues to be taught in primary schools and not to wait until children reach secondary school. However, had we taken the hon. Lady’s advice, this guidance would not be applying to the hundreds of faith schools in the private sector, and we took the view that pupils in those schools were equally deserving of being taught about LGBT issues and about modern life and respect for difference, which they would not be taught about had it not been for this guidance and the way that we have constructed it.

Jess Phillips: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your advice about potentially correcting the record on something that has been said during this urgent question. The Minister stated that the no Outsiders programme had come to a natural conclusion and had not been shut down because of pressure from the Department. I and a number of other Members of Parliament—some present today and some not—from across parties heard a very different story from the leaders of that school last week in a meeting in this House. I wonder how I can seek clarity on that, because I am certain, as a local Member of Parliament, that had that action not been taken, the subsequent protest outside Anderton Park school would not have emerged. I have also been told by Members of Parliament from Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire and Lancashire this week that they are expecting protests at their schools this week, next week and in September, and I wish to push back against the suggestions I feel we have heard today that this is just a Birmingham problem.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady and will offer some thoughts in a moment, but the Minister is signalling a willingness to respond and I think we should hear him.

Nick Gibb: As I said in response to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle, that was my understanding from a briefing I received from officials, some of whom had been involved in the day-to-day discussions with the school. Given that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) has raised this point of order, I will go back to those officials and ask them to check again whether the briefing I was given was correct, and if it turns out that I inadvertently misled the House on that particular point I will ensure that the record is corrected.

Mr Speaker: That is a most helpful and gracious response from the Minister of State which has, I think, for now satisfied the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle, that was my understanding from a briefing I received from officials, some of whom had been involved in the day-to-day discussions with the school. Given that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley I just want to say that the House collectively and the House service alike are very proud of our record on LGBT equality. In thanking the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle for raising this urgent question, and all colleagues for participating in the exchanges, I am going to permit myself two observations. First, in my experience as a Member of Parliament for more than 20 years, I often find that when people say, “We haven’t been properly consulted”, what they really mean is “You haven’t done what I told you to do.” Second, again on the strength of experience, we cannot appease bigots and homophobes; we have to confront them and defeat them. My strong sense is that there is unity across the House in that conviction.

1.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement in relation to lotteries. The national lottery and society lotteries contribute around £2 billion a year to good causes in this country, forming the backbone of giving in the UK. As preparations start for the competition for the next licence to run the national lottery, it is important that we ensure that the wider lotteries landscape is fit for the future and allows as much money as possible to be raised for good causes within a suitable framework. To ensure that there is clarity ahead of the upcoming fourth licence competition, I am today announcing next steps on society lotteries. I am also launching a consultation on increasing the age limit for playing the national lottery.

I turn to society lotteries. In June last year, the Government launched a consultation seeking views on proposals to reform the existing limits on society lotteries, which had not been raised for over a decade. I am aware that there has been strong support from across this House for the Government to increase the sales and prize limits for society lotteries, and that changes have taken a long time to come. Society lotteries are a vital source of funds for charities and other non-commercial organisations, and in 2018 alone they raised over £300 million. I am the Minister not only for lotteries but for charities as a whole, and I want the third sector to grow the pie overall for everybody’s benefit. I am aware that society lotteries are a vital funding mechanism for thousands of charities in many of our local communities, including air ambulances and local hospices.

The consultation aimed to ensure that society lotteries and the national lottery were able to thrive, and that society lotteries could continue to grow while we maintain the unique position of the national lottery and its ability to raise funds across the country by offering the largest jackpots. We heard strong arguments from both sectors, and I am grateful to everyone who shared their views. In coming to a final decision, I have balanced the views from lotteries as a result of the current limits, or to grow the pie overall for everybody’s benefit. I am aware that society lotteries are a vital funding mechanism for thousands of charities in many of our local communities, including air ambulances and local hospices.

I am pleased to announce that I will raise the per-draw sales limit from £4 million to £5 million, and the maximum prize limit from £400,000 to £500,000, for large society lotteries. These increases will allow for significant headroom for most of the sector to continue to grow, and I am pleased that the Gambling Commission has agreed to carefully monitor these changes for any potential wider impact. This will enable us to analyse the impact of the changes over time. In addition, I will raise the annual sales limit from £10 million to £50 million. In recent years we have seen charities forced to slow their fundraising from lotteries as a result of the current limits, or to adopt costly alternative structures to avoid breaching them, thereby increasing admin costs and diverting money away from good causes. Indeed, one charity told us that introducing such arrangements could cost £345,000, with additional running costs of more than £100,000 a year. A £50 million annual limit will reduce or prevent administrative burdens for society lotteries, and I fully expect to see an equivalent increase when it comes to...
the amount of money directed to good causes as a result of the lower admin costs and this increase. I will be watching that closely.

I am aware that many Members support a higher annual limit of £100 million. I share that ambition, but this is a significant increase and I want to be certain that moving to this much higher limit would in reality increase returns to good causes across the sector. I want to be assured that an appropriate regulatory regime is in place. It is therefore my aim to launch a further consultation, looking at adding an additional tier of licence with suitable additional requirements for the very largest lotteries.

It is also important that society lotteries demonstrate the highest levels of transparency. I am therefore pleased that the Gambling Commission is also planning to consult on measures to tighten the existing licensing framework for all large society lotteries, looking in particular at the information provided to players on how the proceeds of society lotteries are used and on the good causes that benefit. We will also be looking further at how best to increase transparency in relation to executive pay, and we will seek further advice from the Gambling Commission. I will look to legislate if these measures do not go far enough. There was less support for changing the limits for small society lotteries and, having considered the evidence carefully, I do not plan to increase those limits at this time. I have previously committed to laying Camelot’s response to the society lotteries consultation in the Library, and I will also lay the other key responses that my Department received.

The age of 18 is widely recognised as the age at which one becomes an adult, gaining full citizenship rights and responsibilities. At present, all lotteries can be played from the age of 16; that is one of the few exceptions to the age limit of 18 for gambling products. In addition to the option to raise the minimum age to 18 for all national lottery games and to retain the current limit of 16, I am also seeking views on a differentiated approach that would increase the minimum age for instant-win games only. That includes scratchcards and online instant-win games.

My initial view, based on the evidence reviewed so far, is that such a split could be the best approach. This takes into account the fact that the risk of harm associated with playing the national lottery is the lowest for any form of gambling. We know that the risk of harm is slightly higher for instant-win games than it is for draw-based games such as Lotto. Given that the national lottery matters so much to so many people, I am keen to see further evidence in this area and hear what others, including operators, distributors and retailers, think about any potential impacts and benefits of any change.

This year, the national lottery celebrates its 25th birthday. Mystic Meg herself could not have predicted how successful it would be in that time, raising over £40 billion to support our local communities, protect our heritage, enhance the arts and transform funding across our sports. The national lottery has been at the very heart of creating, protecting and driving much of what we love. Each week it raises around £30 million for good causes. Since 1992 it has funded more than 4,000 world-class UK Paralympians and Olympians, and each year it invests around £325 million in protecting some of our most prized national heritage. It has funded the development of our artistic talent, and access to art. It has ensured access to sporting opportunities for people in all communities, alongside its support for 10,000 charitable causes each year, with more than £500 million of funding. I thank our national lottery players, the 12 distributors, the Gambling Commission and my Department for making that all possible.

Today’s announcements give clarity to those interested in running our national lottery when the current licence expires in four years’ time. It also gives our society lotteries greater capacity to continue to increase their work in the constituencies of my many colleagues in the Chamber. I look forward to seeing the real benefits of the changes for charities and good causes that are supported by all our lotteries across the UK. I commend this statement to the House.

1.30 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement. I appreciate the prudent approach that she has taken to the issue. As she knows, I wrote to the previous Secretary of State last summer to raise my concern that society lotteries had been waiting for six years for the result of a review into their regulation. More than a year on, it is now a full seven years that the sector has been waiting for an answer from the Government. The delay in making that decision has left society lotteries facing an increasing uncertainty, unable to make substantial plans for the future.

Society lotteries achieve a lot of good for our country, as does the national lottery. They raise hundreds of millions of pounds a year for good causes, funding charities as varied as Barnardo’s, the Stroke Association, Friends of the Earth and Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, as well as many others. Major benefits of society lotteries include their flexibility and predictability, which charities tell me is exceptionally useful because it allows them to prioritise funds where they will have most impact.

The Minister is right that transparency must be paramount, and we agree with her about the importance of openness on what the costs of this fundraising process are and where the money goes. People who take part in the lotteries need to know that they are not just taking a punt but getting value for money.

I understand the feeling that sometimes there is a conflict of interest between society lotteries and the national lottery, and I agree with the Government’s stated aim to “achieve a balance between enabling the sustainable growth of society lotteries on the one hand while also protecting the unique position of the UK-wide National Lottery”.

The Minister mentioned Mystic Meg. If she was Mystic Mims, what would she say the impact of the changes will be on the fundraising for good causes that the national lottery provides to the arts, culture, heritage and sport? When will the new regulations come into force?

The second issue is the age limit on national lottery products. There are 450,000 children gambling every week in our country; the number has quadrupled in recent years. For many young people, scratchcards are a gateway to gambling from the age of 16. We do not think that is right, particularly when we are struggling with an epidemic of gambling addiction across the country. Gambling is fun, but it can also be dangerous
when it is poorly regulated or gets out of control for an individual. In my view, and in that of the Labour party, there is absolutely no need for a consultation on this issue.

The Minister’s predecessor, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), announced last year that she would gather evidence on the topic. It is our strong view—I am sure Members across the House will agree—that we already have all the evidence we need. Those who gamble should be adults, so the minimum age for all gambling products should be 18. It is as simple as that.

**Mims Davies:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome. I believe that this is a prudent approach. I have been very mindful that, as the Secretary of State and I as well as many other Members have found, people are fed up with waiting and want to know what the lottery landscape looks like. As Mystic Mims, I would say that this sets the landscape appropriately for protecting the national lottery and all the good that it does: it keeps the £1 million prize and the jackpot for the national lottery, but allows society lotteries that support causes such as our air ambulances, which are bumping along at the top of the headroom of the money they are able to give to local causes, to be able to raise more money and support our local communities. That is the right approach.

On the minimum age issue, the hon. Gentleman will know that I cannot say any more ahead of the consultation. I seek the views of those in this Chamber and across the sector. The current licence period has seen a range of technological developments, which have changed the way that we play the national lottery, and it has also seen gambling behaviours change. We are therefore right to consider how the licence might look. It is right to consider whether it is appropriate to sell all national lottery games to those under 18 as part of future proofing it for the duration of the next licence.

On the timetable, I hope that we would lay the changes in autumn in order to see a move in 2020.

**Mr Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box. I completely agree that there is no need for a consultation about the age limit. Frankly, we should just get on with it—there is enough evidence out there.

Secondly, while I welcome the Minister’s comments, I am slightly concerned. Will she tell the House whether there was real, powerful and compelling evidence why society lotteries should be restricted to a gain of only £100,000 on the prize money? If there is clear evidence that they damage the national lottery, will she publish that? If there is not, will she tell us why we have been in such trepidation about moving the prize money total?

**Mims Davies:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. There has not been compelling evidence that the majority of the sector requires a £1 million prize limit to drive growth, so we have sought today to seek a balance to enable society lotteries to grow, while preserving the distinct space in which the national lottery operates, with the key feature of life-changing prizes. The Gambling Commission will be monitoring the impact of increasing the prize limit to £500,000, so we do not rule out further increases in the future, if we have a clear evidence base on the impact of the current changes.

**Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement. I welcome the ongoing improvements in UK gambling legislation, which the Department has been bringing forward, and I appreciate and welcome the consultation to increase the age for playing the national lottery to 18.

I do not think the Government should be differentiating between Lotto and scratchcards—it should be 18 for all. I am concerned that the Government felt the need to put this comment in the statement:

“My initial view, based on the evidence reviewed so far, is that such a split could be the best approach.”

We are approaching a gambling epidemic in the UK, and the grooming of young adults in the gambling arena should be stopped, and stopped now.

The Gambling Commission was mentioned a number of times in the statement. I have concerns that extra administration will consume its budget, which should be tackling gambling-related harm. Last year, the national lottery paid its chief executive officer £100,000 more than it donated to gambling charities, and I take the opportunity to remind the Secretary of State once again that my preferred option is a mandatory levy.

Recent years have seen an increase in Camelot’s profits against a backdrop of a decline in lottery funding for good causes. However that is to be addressed, we should never forget that we are using gambling to raise funds for charities, and that charities exist because the Government have let down particular areas of our society. Many of the charities being supported should be Government-funded in the first place. Will the Government please reconsider their age-limit review, and will they guarantee the percentage of gross profits to be allocated to good causes?

**Mims Davies:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and his hard work on protecting the vulnerable when it comes to gambling. I absolutely share the view that we should be protecting everybody from elements of harm. The risk from the national lottery is low. I understand that he feels differently about the levy, but the Department’s responsible approach of working with the industry is bearing fruit, as we have seen with the £100 million announced recently. The consultation on the age limit applies to all national lottery products, and I will welcome his and others’ response.

**Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): I thank the Minister for her statement and her recognition of the good that society lotteries do across the country through the funds that they raise. She has been clear that the jackpot will not be lifted to the £1 million that the society lotteries had hoped for and is now looking to place new transparency requirements on society lotteries. In the light of that, will she outline the problems she sees with the extensive reporting requirements on charities that justify this further action and the delay in raising the jackpot total to £1 million?

**Mims Davies:** I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. She has consistently campaigned to support society lotteries, recognising all the good work that they do in her constituency and many others. It is important
that society lotteries demonstrate the highest levels of transparency. The changes that we have announced, alongside the Gambling Commission’s plans to consult on measures to tighten the national lottery licensing framework, will help to give players of the national lottery a clear understanding of where the money is spent locally and the good causes that it is spent on. It is absolutely right that we support society lotteries and grow the pie for them, while keeping the unique position of the national lottery. As the charities Minister, I am clear that all money for good causes is very welcome.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Will the Minister explain what steps she has taken to increase the transparency of how the proceeds, particularly from large-scale lotteries, are spent?

Mims Davies: This issue has come up significantly in conversations with the national lottery and the sector. Transparency is vital when people play the lottery, so there will be further transparency measures with the change to £50 million, alongside work by the Gambling Commission. The hon. Lady will see from the consultation documents that we seek to ensure that everybody in this space understands where the money for good causes goes and what is spent on marketing, and I am sure that she will contribute to any further conversations.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Given gambling’s tendency to be habit forming, the later that it can be put off until, the better. Certainly, gambling should not begin before adulthood, should it?

Mims Davies: I agree with my right hon. Friend, but those who play sport locally or enjoy their local heritage, or who have a local commitment to a hospice or something else in their community, might feel it appropriate to support that. That is why we are listening to all views in the consultation, and all national lottery products will be looked at.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): As the UK city of culture, Hull benefited enormously from national lottery funding. Will the same amount of money be available in future for arts, culture and sport with these changes—the point that my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) raised from the Front Bench—or does the Minister think that what happened in the Netherlands will happen here and that less money will be available from the national lottery?

Mims Davies: The hon. Lady is right to mention the Netherlands, where things are set up differently from here. As the lotteries and charities Minister, I am clear that we should support our small lotteries and smaller charities, while maintaining the national lottery’s unique status. It supports our arts, heritage, sports and cities of culture, and it is vital that the unique status of the jackpot is maintained through these prudent changes—as the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) noted—that support the whole sector.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The Gambling Commission evidence that, for scratchcards, people under 18 did not really suffer was based on a small sample size. Would it not be better to have a proper consultation on and examination of this aspect?

Mims Davies: The Gambling Commission plans to consult on measures to tighten up the society lotteries framework, including by looking at the information provided to players about the proceeds of a lottery and how they are used, and publishing breakdowns of where the money is spent and the good causes that benefit. As I said earlier, if we need to, and if those measures do not go far enough, I will look to legislate to protect all players, of all ages, who are appropriate to be playing.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): With greater transparency for society lotteries, can we also publish a proper breakdown of how the money is spent?

Mims Davies: As I said earlier, it is important to use this opportunity to work with the sector to ensure that those playing charity lotteries in their local communities get the transparency that they would expect and see from the national lottery—something that the national lottery and its distributors have raised strongly. That is why we have been looking at this and why the Gambling Commission is looking at the sector more widely to support these changes to ensure that anybody playing a society lottery or the national lottery is clear where the money goes and which good causes are supported.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The £2 billion raised each year by lotteries helps to fund charities, sports and heritage initiatives in my constituency and across the country. I recognise that the Minister must strike a balance, and I know that some of the society lotteries might be disappointed at the limit not being £1 million. Will she confirm that the growth in society lotteries has not been, and will not be, to the detriment of the national lottery?

Mims Davies: This goes back to the prudent—I love that word—decisions that I believe I have made today. We had a huge response to the consultation, alongside the report from the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and we have had up-to-date information and advice from the Gambling Commission. In the broader landscape, this change clears the space for the fourth licence, but more importantly gives the national lottery a chance to celebrate its 25th birthday, with a clear differentiation in the sector and clear transparency about where the money for good causes is going and how the sector can thrive on both sides.
Domestic Abuse

1.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Home should be a place of safety and of love, but for 2 million people it is not. Domestic abuse takes place behind closed doors, turning people’s homes into places of fear, abuse and violence. We recognise the importance of building trust with victims to tackle this hidden crime—victims who for too long have felt scared or unable to come forward. I am very pleased to announce today that the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice are introducing the Domestic Abuse Bill in the House. Led jointly by the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) and me, we are also publishing our response to the pre-legislative scrutiny report of the Joint Committee on the Draft Domestic Abuse Bill.

Domestic abuse is complex and multifaceted. In addition to physical violence, it can include emotional, psychological, sexual and economic abuse, and at its heart is often controlling or coercive behaviour. We were the first Parliament in the world to recognise that when we introduced the offence of controlling or coercive behaviour in 2015. But our understanding of domestic abuse continues to grow and evolve, and this Bill gives us an opportunity to ensure that our legislation keeps pace.

Each year in this country, scores of people, mainly women, are murdered by their partners. Domestic abuse of all kinds destroys the lives of thousands more, including male and LGBT+ victims. Each and every day, those working on the frontline of our public services see the extent of the damage that it causes and the demands that it places on those who are there to help. I take a moment to thank those who work tirelessly to prevent abuse, protect victims and bring perpetrators to justice, particularly for their support in the consultation process, but there is more to be done.

In January 2019, we issued a written ministerial statement setting out our commitment to transforming the response to domestic abuse. In that statement we announced the publication of the draft Domestic Abuse Bill, as well as the publication of the response to the Government’s domestic abuse consultation undertaken last year. We also published a set of non-legislative measures, because we recognise that although the Bill is vital, so too is our practical day-to-day response.

Taken together, the Bill, the consultation response and the non-legislative measures set out an ambitious programme of cross-Government action that puts victims at the heart of our response in a co-ordinated effort to tackle domestic abuse. That includes setting out our intention to address perpetrators’ behaviour and to break the cycle of abuse through perpetrator programmes, domestic abuse prevention orders and even piloting polygraph testing to ensure compliance with programmes.

The Bill was published in draft to allow for pre-legislative scrutiny by a Joint Committee of Members of Parliament and peers, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). The Committee published its report on 14 June, and the Government are grateful to all parliamentarians on the Committee for their detailed scrutiny of the draft Bill and to all those who provided evidence to the Committee—they have my personal thanks and the thanks of all Ministers involved.

We have carefully considered the Committee’s report and have accepted many of its recommendations, either in part or in full. We have committed to giving other recommendations full consideration over the next few months, with the aim of publishing a further response to the report later this year. Where appropriate, we will table amendments to the Bill to address those recommendations.

That includes our work on refuge services. Subject to the outcome of the consultation currently under way, we will table amendments to implement the Government’s proposals to improve support to victims and their children in accommodation-based domestic abuse services in England. I ask all hon. Members to encourage their networks to respond to that consultation by 2 August.

During the development of the Bill, hon. Members have raised the issue of migrant women who are victims of domestic abuse. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration will today publish an updated asylum support policy on domestic abuse. The Home Office is using the asylum support budget to close a gap that has, until now, prevented asylum seekers and their dependants from accessing specialist domestic abuse refuge places because they are not entitled to housing benefit.

Further, we have listened to charities and victims who say that people feel trapped in abusive relationships by their immigration status. That is not acceptable, which is why we are committing to reviewing the response to all migrant victims of abuse, as recommended by the Joint Committee.

We have also listened to victims about their journeys through the legal system. The Bill prohibits perpetrators from continuing their reign of abuse through cross-examining their victims in person in the family courts, and it gives victims automatic eligibility for special measures in the criminal courts.

We want to recognise the devastating impact that domestic abuse can have on children and young people. Among the measures to achieve that is the requirement that the statutory guidance must recognise this adverse effect. We also want to meet our international obligations. The Bill includes the necessary provisions for all parts of the United Kingdom to meet the requirements of the Istanbul convention in respect of the extraterritorial jurisdiction of the criminal courts.

The Government wholeheartedly agree with the Joint Committee that victims of domestic abuse in all parts of the United Kingdom deserve effective protection and support. There has been a controlling or coercive behaviour offence in England and Wales since 2015, and the Scottish Government legislated for such an offence last year. Northern Ireland, however, has no such legislation in place. We are therefore pleased to inform the House that following a consultation undertaken in 2016, before the collapse of the Assembly, the Bill, as introduced, will include a bespoke domestic abuse offence for Northern Ireland. I pay tribute to all hon. Members who represent Northern Ireland and who take their seats in this place for their support on this measure.

Before I finish, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. She has worked tirelessly over many years as a Member of Parliament, as Home Secretary...
and as Prime Minister to ensure that the vulnerable are heard and protected and that perpetrators are brought to justice. Her determination and dedication to helping the 2 million victims of domestic abuse shines through this Bill.

We remain determined to do all we can to eradicate domestic abuse. Through this landmark Bill and our wider non-legislative programme, we will transform our response to this appalling crime and end the suffering caused by abuse. I commend this statement to the House.

1.55 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I thank the Minister for meeting me last night and for giving me an early view of her statement, and I thank colleagues who sat on the Joint Committee on the draft Domestic Abuse Bill for their time and commitment and for the comprehensive report and recommendations they produced.

As the Minister alluded to, the Bill is not yet finalised, but we welcome some areas that we know will be included. We hope the Bill will begin to transform how we deal with domestic abuse. Although we agree that establishing a domestic abuse commissioner is key, we will be seeking assurances on the authority and funding of that role. Can the Minister give further clarity on the role and independence of the commissioner?

The improvements to proceedings in family courts, which will include prohibiting the cross-examination of victims, is very welcome. However, we will seek assurances that, in cases of custody and access to children, all victims will be treated equally and that the courts will not be prescriptive and inflexible but will look at cases individually.

Controlling and coercive behaviour will be included in the definition of domestic abuse in Northern Ireland. This change across the rest of the UK has been instrumental in changing the outcomes for many victims. None more so than Sally Challen, whose murder conviction was overturned and reduced to manslaughter earlier this year, which meant she was freed owing to time already served. I was very pleased to welcome her to the Terrace two weeks ago to listen to her story. We are pleased to see this definition being extended to Northern Ireland.

We know the Government are committed to helping migrant victims of domestic abuse, and we welcome their intention to review it, but we must ensure that these women are eligible to apply for indefinite leave to remain, irrespective of the type of visa they reside under, and are able to access public funds.

Although the Bill will not be gender specific, as has been called for by some in the sector, it is my understanding that commissioning services will be, which is a welcome step towards ensuring that all victims of domestic abuse receive parity in the provision of support services.

We still believe that the Bill may be weak when it comes to the impact of domestic abuse on children, both as victims and as witnesses. By not focusing enough on the impact, there will be a knock-on effect on the specialist support made available to them. Can the Minister advise on the plans to strengthen this area of the Bill to ensure that services for child victims are widely available, robust and adequately funded?

We all know that funding for women’s refuges has been cut in recent years, meaning that refuges have had to close and that women have been forced to stay in abusive relationships because they have nowhere else to go. We need assurances from the Government that this Bill will ensure that funding is available to enable women to leave their family home and have a safe alternative for themselves and their children.

There are other issues to consider in relation to the education of perpetrators; housing; personal, social, health and economic education; healthy relationship education; a wider use of schemes such as Operation Encompass to allow schools to be more supportive of pupils experiencing domestic abuse within their families; and an increase in the number of independent domestic abuse advisers in hospitals. Those are all areas on which we will be seeking clarity on Second Reading and beyond.

This Bill was a commitment made by the outgoing Prime Minister in her final Queen’s Speech, just over two years ago. Although it has arrived very late in her leadership, and without time for her to see it through, I am pleased that she has finally set things in motion for this long overdue and much-needed legislation. We would, however, like assurances from this Government that whoever will be Prime Minister next week has the same commitment to this, and can guarantee that the Bill will be robust and that funding will be available to fulfil everything it promises. It is the intention of Opposition Members to work with the Government and the sector to take this Bill into legislation. There will be challenges, but we hope that with sensible debate, negotiation and compromise, we will help to form a lasting piece of legislation that will benefit all victims of domestic abuse.

This Bill is a golden opportunity for the Government and for all parliamentarians to transform the domestic abuse agenda, and it is our duty to ensure that we get this right.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her response, and for the constructive and co-operative approach she has taken to this Bill and to many other matters. She is always a constructive critic of the Government, and rightly so, but I thank her and her colleagues for the spirit in which they are engaging in this. I must also pay tribute to and thank colleagues from across the House, on both sides, who have always been incredibly constractive in their approach to this. I hope that that will continue, because I am sure we all want to see domestic violence stop.

The hon. Lady asked me about the domestic abuse commissioner. I am happy to confirm that we are appointing the commissioner, because we want the commissioner to hold national and local government to account. The commissioner will have the power to publish reports and make recommendations, and, crucially, statutory agencies will be required by law to respond to those recommendations publicly. We believe that will exert great pressure on local authorities to ensure that they are doing right by their local communities. Of course, in line with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government consultation, albeit that we are not prejudging its result, there will possibly be a further statutory duty through that route, to ensure that we have co-ordinated effort.

The hon. Lady raised the matter of family courts. We are reviewing practice direction 12J and the operation of the family courts more widely. I understand that we are aiming to report in September, and I know that the
Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), has this very much at the forefront of his mind. I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s comments on migrant women. She knows how complex these issues are, but we are very much entering into this with the right spirit and we look forward to help from across the House on what more we can do to protect migrant women.

I absolutely understand charities’ campaigns and the emphasis that they put on children, given the terrible impacts that domestic abuse has on them and their life chances. I often see that myself in the context of youth workers working with gang members; domestic abuse is a prevalent factor in the lives of some of those children. We will be ensuring that statutory guidance recognises the effect of domestic abuse on children, which is significant because it will have an impact on local commissioning. The domestic abuse commissioner will also be encouraging good practice in the identification of children, and we will consider whether we need to amend the definition of “harm” in the Children Act 1989 to explicitly include the impact of domestic abuse on children. The hon. Lady will know that we are investing £8 million to deal specifically with children who are the victims of domestic abuse, and of course, as I say, the MCHLG consultation plays an incredible part.

I am also delighted to confirm that this is not just a commitment of this Prime Minister, but a commitment of the Government. We have the extra confirmation of the commitment of this Prime Minister, but a commitment plays an incredible part.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend’s statement. I thank the Government for introducing a groundbreaking piece of work, and I thank the Prime Minister personally for her incredible leadership in making this issue central to this Government’s programme of work. It was a great privilege to be able to chair the Joint Committee, and I thank members of that Committee, from both this place and the other place, for their commitment, hard work and tenacity. Above all, I thank our Clerks, who did an incredible piece of work in a very truncated time, producing a top-quality report. I am pleased to see that the Government have welcomed the majority of its recommendations and have either accepted or partially accepted them.

The Joint Committee’s most significant concern was the plight of migrant women with no recourse to public funds. In her statement, my hon. Friend underlined the Government’s support for action on this issue to make sure that the gap in support is closed. Is it her objective to ensure that migrant women can be treated in the same way as any other victim of domestic abuse in terms of support, particularly given the welcome announcements by the Government on the introduction of the statutory duty in respect of the provision of refuge places? Will she assure me that she will redouble her efforts to make sure that any new support that is in place cannot be open to abuse, as that would discredit that support and affect the women who need it in order to survive?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend for her sterling work chairing the Committee. She has given so much time, effort and service to the House in doing so, and I am extremely grateful. It was a pleasure when she agreed to chair it, because I knew not only that it would be chaired well, but that the Committee would leave no stone unturned in its scrutiny of this Bill and of the Government’s action. Again, I place on record my thanks to members of that Committee.

I also thank my right hon. Friend for raising the issue of migrant women. She knows, as the Committee does from the evidence it has taken, just how complex this issue is. She has highlighted on the point about possible abuse of the system. That is one of the many factors that the Government must consider as part of their review, and it is fair to say, from meetings and roundtables that I and other Ministers have held with hon. Members and stakeholders on this issue, that everyone recognises that we need to deal with it, but in a sensitive way that does not have the potential for unintended consequences. I am delighted to put on record the fact that women who are victims of domestic abuse are just that—victims of domestic abuse—regardless of their migration or other status.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement, and for the courtesy that she and the other Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), have afforded me in this regard. I welcome the introduction of the Bill. In general, the matters it covers are devolved to Scotland and, as she alluded to, Scotland passed a domestic abuse consolidation Bill last year, providing for statutory offences and for some changes on criminal procedure, evidence, sentencing and special measures. I am pleased to see England and Wales follow suit, and I particularly wish to applaud the Joint Committee’s work. It noted that there is much to be learned from the devolved Administrations regarding guidance, training and multi-agency working, and I would like the Minister to confirm that the Government will follow that advice.

I hear what the Minister says about the Istanbul convention, but it is disappointing that the UK Government have yet to ratify it, despite the fact that the Bill introduced by my former colleague Eilidh Whiteford on ratifying it is law. So will the Minister confirm that that is going to be done and make a statement on her intention to do so before the recess, giving us a bit more detail on that? I realise that it is not an entirely straightforward procedure, but we are rather overdue with our ratification.

My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) has tirelessly campaigned on the issue of universal credit separate payments. The Bill is explicitly making economic abuse a form of domestic abuse, but the current system of a single UC payment by default can facilitate economic coercion. The Joint Committee notes that the Select Committee on Work and Pensions recommended that the Department for Work and Pensions should use the Scottish Government’s intention to introduce split payments by default as an opportunity to “test and learn” the different possible approaches to splitting payments and whether they would help survivors in this area. Will the Minister commit to introducing default separate payments in universal credit, and will she do that before recess?

Finally, I note what has been said about migrant women and welcome the points made so far. However, it was alarming that the Joint Committee heard evidence...
that some police forces share details of victims with the Home Office for the purpose of immigration control, rather than to help the victim to access appropriate support. The Joint Committee recommended that the Home Office policy should be robust and should be developed to determine the actions that may be taken by immigration authorities with respect to victims of crime who have approached the public authorities for protection and support. The Joint Committee also supported the Step Up Migrant Women campaign recommendation that a firewall be established at the levels of policy and practice to separate the reporting of crime from access to support services. Can the Minister give me some comfort that the Home Office will take those recommendations on board and that migrant women who seek help because of domestic abuse will not be shopped to the immigration authorities?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her kind words about the Bill, and I thank the Scottish Government for responding and working so quickly with the UK Government to ensure that legislative consent motions will be passed when they are needed. I am always happy to acknowledge best practice and good practice wherever it happens; indeed, I intend to copy it quite shamelessly, where appropriate. I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her efforts.

We now publish annual reports on progress towards ratification of the Istanbul convention, with the next one due by the end of October. The fact that the law in each part of the UK needs to be compliant with the provisions of the convention before the UK as a whole can ratify it has led to some of the delay that the hon. and learned Lady set out, but it is absolutely our intention that the Bill will help us to arrive at that destination.

On universal credit, we are working with the Scottish Government to establish the practicalities of delivering split payments in Scotland, and we will further observe their implementation when that occurs. We think that around 60% of universal credit claimants are the main carer, who tends to be the woman in the relationship. We are keen to ensure that, because Jobcentre Plus can be the first touchstone, as it were, between a victim and the state, the staff there are properly trained to recognise the symptoms of someone in an abusive relationship. That could be a positive turn of events to help to ensure that when victims come into contact with the state, they are recognised and identified, and then, as it were, scooped up and helped.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I think the Minister said there were 2 million victims; if that is the case, they will overwhelmingly be women, and if they are to be freed, that means changing the attitudes of men. How is that to be achieved?

Victoria Atkins: My right hon. Friend may be volunteering for a role. He is right to make the point that of the 2 million victims, we estimate that around 1.3 million are female and around 695,000 are male, and within that 695,000 we believe—it is very difficult to identify this, and there are problems in doing so—that the majority of perpetrators are male. Within the huge range of abusive behaviour in relationships, there are many, many manifestations, and what may be experienced by a couple in a heterosexual relationship may be very different from what is experienced in a homosexual relationship, for example. That is why we are so committed to ensuring that our response, particularly in relation to accommodation-based services, addresses those specific needs. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, because part of the purpose of the Bill is to raise awareness and to make the point that men can be victims of domestic abuse as well, but the overwhelming majority of victims are female, and that starts from the very beginning, so we need to teach boys and girls what to expect from healthy relationships. That is precisely why relationship education in schools is such a vital part of our programme.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement. I appreciate the commitment she has shown to the Bill and to working across the House, not only with the Labour Front-Bench team but with Back Benchers from all parties. I recognise the frustration that I know she has felt as she has pushed forward on this issue. As far as I am concerned, I hope that when the inevitable reshuffle happens, the Minister will keep her position so that she can push the Bill forward, and I hope that her colleague the victims Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), will stay in his position too.

I welcome the Bill, which I see as an important step in what has been a long struggle to tackle the scourge of domestic violence. The Bill rightly brings forward a new definition, new powers, new duties, a new office and an extension to Northern Ireland. Many of us want to add further things to it when it goes through further scrutiny. The question is, though: what happens next? Neither of the two leadership candidates has been what we might call a champion of the cause of tackling domestic violence. That is simply a fact. I hope the next Prime Minister recognises that this Bill is the will of the House and that there is commitment to it on all sides. The Prime Minister will be gone next week, but this Bill—her Bill—must go forward.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the right hon. and learned Lady for her reference to the future Prime Minister; my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) and I are grateful for that assistance. We are both determined to see the Bill through. Although the Prime Minister may be stepping down next week, she is not leaving the House. I am sure she will be a strong advocate for the Bill from the Back Benches.

The right hon. and learned Lady is absolutely right that this is not just a Government commitment, which it very firmly is, but has support across the House. We have been talking about it for long enough now that the public understand where we want to get to, and the House certainly will not let any future Government off the hook in delivering on it. That is why I am so pleased that both leadership candidates have committed to
progressing with the Bill in the autumn. There will be many colleagues making sure that they keep to that pledge.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I am very happy to acknowledge her important work on the Committee and, indeed, in many other areas of helping women and girls and of tackling violence. On the domestic abuse commissioner, we have been very anxious to get parts of this entire package moving as early as we could. We are in the process of appointing a designate domestic abuse commissioner, whose name will be announced soon. We have done that because, with the best will in the world, we are very aware that the Bill will take time to get through, so we are appointing a designate commissioner to get on with some of the really important work, such as mapping services and beginning to draw together the plans when it comes to children’s services and so on. That will enable us to see what works, because I note that the Committee queried why it was a part-time role. Look, let us see how it works and if it requires more than that, we will, of course, look at that as well, but we are just very keen to get moving.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I warmly welcome this statement, and I congratulate the Minister on the leadership that she has shown on this important issue. May I ask her about the automatic entitlement for special measures for complainants in allegations of domestic abuse? I warmly welcome that and ask her to clarify whether this means that those giving evidence in court will increasingly be able to do so by way of video-recorded evidence in chief and, indeed, video link cross-examinations, so that they do not have to experience the trauma of coming into court and sometimes facing their tormentor?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He brings his expertise as a criminal practitioner into this Chamber. I know that he has great experience of making those applications for special measures where it is painfully obvious to everyone concerned that, of course, special measures should be granted. I am extremely grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), for pressing very hard on this, and indeed it is the expectation. We want victims of domestic abuse to be able to give their best evidence in court, and if that means through a video link or whatever, then that is what we must do.

Vera Cobh House (Bath) (LD): The Liberal Democrats also warmly welcome this Bill. I thank the Minister for her statement. May I reinforce the call on the Government to urgently ratify the Istanbul convention, because any delay means a delay for victims of rape getting support? I would like to mention children who witness domestic violence. I welcome the fact that the Government recognise that witnessing domestic violence is a trauma and an adverse childhood experience. Will she clarify whether the Government went along with the recommendation of the statutory definition of children as victims who witness domestic abuse? If so, what does that mean for children in the future?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I am very happy to acknowledge her important work on the Committee and, indeed, in many other areas of helping women and girls and of tackling violence. On the domestic abuse commissioner, we have been very anxious to get parts of this entire package moving as early as we could. We are in the process of appointing a designate domestic abuse commissioner, whose name will be announced soon. We have done that because, with the best will in the world, we are very aware that the Bill will take time to get through, so we are appointing a designate commissioner to get on with some of the really important work, such as mapping services and beginning to draw together the plans when it comes to children’s services and so on. That will enable us to see what works, because I note that the Committee queried why it was a part-time role. Look, let us see how it works and if it requires more than that, we will, of course, look at that as well, but we are just very keen to get moving.

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Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady and make the point that this Bill is critical to our being able to ratify the Istanbul convention. I very much hope that colleagues across the House will have that in mind as well as many other factors when it comes to the progress of this Bill.
She mentions children. This has been one of the thorniest issues that we in the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice have grappled with, because we have wanted to reflect the impact that domestic abuse has on children living in an abusive household. We have also been mindful of the fact that the age of 16 is a significant time when it comes to how children are treated in law and the welfare of children. Traditionally, offences committed against children below the age of 16 are seen in terms of child abuse, and above 16, we move into the parameters of adulthood. We have very much taken advice from the consultation. Most responses suggested that we stick at the age of 16 with the statutory definition, so it has been a balancing act. I am grateful to the Joint Committee because it has reiterated the need for children to be at the heart of our response. The impact of having children in the statutory guidance will be very significant when it comes to the commissioning of local services, and that will make such a difference to children’s day-to-day lives.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I also want to congratulate the Ministers, the Front-Bench teams and particularly the pre-legislative scrutiny Committee on getting this Bill to this place and on its safe passage. Because of the Government’s changes to pre-charge bail in 2017, there are serious safety concerns for victims, survivors and the general public. In February, Her Majesty’s inspectorate found a 65% drop in the use of police bail in cases of domestic abuse. Earlier this month, my freedom of information requests found a 56% drop in the use of bail for child sexual abuse cases. Will the Minister accept the recommendations of the Joint Committee and the all-party group on adult survivors of child sexual abuse to create a legal presumption of pre-charge bail in cases of domestic and sexual abuse?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady, who does so much work not only in her constituency, but in a national context, to ensure that children and adults who are subjected to sexual exploitation are looked after properly. We are very aware of the concerns around the changes to pre-charge bail. The reforms were introduced to reduce the number of people in the length of time spent on pre-charge bail, but we do recognise that there are concerns in the criminal justice system about the way that that has worked out on the ground. We are working with the police, the Crown Prosecution Service, HM Courts and Tribunals Service and others to ensure that these are addressed satisfactorily, including the consideration of both legislative and non-legislative options. I cannot give her an answer at the moment, but work is under way, and I hope that I can give her some information in due course.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): May I praise the Minister and her colleague the Minister for victims—the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), for the determined and principled position they have taken in championing the Bill? I am delighted that it is being introduced today. It feels like the first parliamentary step in what has seemed like a marathon to get to this point, but I think that we can all agree that this Bill still has quite a way to go before it is exactly what everybody in this House wants it to be, which is for it to be the best thing for all women. I am delighted by the concessions and by the fact that we have been heard, specifically around migrant women, and I thank the Minister for that. We shall obviously keep our eyes focused on pushing for the Bill to be the best that it can be. I know that she has said several times that both leadership candidates to be the Prime Minister in our country have agreed to take this forward. Unsurprisingly, a number of journalists have been in touch with me today and have told me that they have been in touch with both teams; the Foreign Secretary’s team has confirmed that it would take this forward, but the team of the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) has yet to confirm that that is the case. Far be it from me to suggest that the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip is not always completely straightforward, but will the Minister share with the House specifically what the right hon. Gentleman has said to her on this matter?

Victoria Atkins: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady; as always, I take my hat off to her for the very practical experience that she brings to the House, given that she worked so avidly in domestic abuse refuges before she entered this place and given all the work she has done since then.

I had a confirmatory conversation only yesterday with a very senior member of the team of my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) who told me that they are delighted to support these measures and to make progress. I should say, by the way, that I have not declared for either candidate, so I am coming to this with genuinely clean hands. I feel obliged to point out that my right hon. Friend did some pretty impressive work drawing up a violence against women and girls strategy as Mayor of
London, so that bodes very well. I am also conscious of
the great work that the Foreign Secretary has done in
his role at the Foreign Office and when he was at the
Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that
the wishes of women are met. I have great confidence
that the message from this statement will have got
through loud and clear that this House will make sure
that it gives as much commitment to this agenda as we
all have so far.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): I pay
tribute to the many campaigners who have brought us
to this day, many of whom are survivors of abuse
themselves, and I thank them for opening my eyes to the
issue. To build on what the Minister has already said
about the need for public awareness, will she commit the
Government to a public awareness-raising campaign so
that the men who perpetrate these crimes—an overwhelm-
ing majority of perpetrators are men—know that they face
severe sanctions and, perhaps most importantly, so that
the people suffering in abusive relationships know that
what is happening is wrong, that there is a way out and
that if they take those steps people will be there to help
them, backed up by the full force of the British law?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who
has been a strong advocate on this agenda. Through
him, I also thank the survivors who I have met who
perhaps do not dwell publicly on their own experiences,
but whose accounts I have listened to very carefully and
taken to heart.

We have already funded a campaign for teenagers
called Disrespect NoBody, which we believe has had
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We have already funded a campaign for teenagers
called Disrespect NoBody, which we believe has had
some success in spreading the message. Relationships
education in schools will also very much be about
teaching people what a healthy relationship looks like. I
take the hon. Gentleman’s point about a public awareness
campaign. If I may, I will take that away and have a
think about it because I do not want to make any
promises that I cannot follow up with spending.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I welcome
today’s statement, but there was nothing in the draft
Bill about employers’ duty of care to workers who are
suffering domestic violence, so will the Minister look at
that during the passage of the Bill?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this
matter. This is an example of the non-legislative measures
that we are running alongside the Bill itself. There are
wonderful organisations including the Employers’ Initiative
on Domestic Abuse and Hestia that the Government
have funded to help on exactly this point. It is in
everyone’s interests to help identify people in the workforce
who may be suffering from abuse so that employers can
give them time off to attend hospital appointments and
perhaps to help them to set up bank accounts so that
they can siphon off part of their salary and so on. It is
everybody’s businesses, and it is through these initiatives
that I think we will make some real change.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Can the Minister
confirm that the Bill will consider social housing allocation
and prioritisation policies to ensure that domestic abuse,
including financial coercion, is taken into consideration
and recognised when it comes to rehousing and debt
management?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady raises a very important
point, and it was a pleasure to visit a refuge in her
constituency. We are very much looking at social housing
as part of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and
Local Government consultation. In fact, part of the Bill
already deals with secure tenancies. It is a careful balancing
act to ensure that we are looking at the issue on a needs
basis, but I am happy to take on board the hon. Lady’s
point about ensuring that victims and children get the
housing they need.

Forgive me for not having raised this matter before,
but there has been a lot of talk about change in mindset
and awareness. Where possible, we would like the victim
and children to stay in their home and the perpetrator
to leave. That is where we are coming from. That is our
primary aim, but of course we recognise that there will
be circumstances where the victim must flee for her or
his own safety.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab):
There is a lot to welcome in this statement. However,
almost 2,000 people fleeing domestic abuse last year
were able to access refuges and hostels, but not safe
homes on a longer-term basis. Will the Minister meet
Women’s Aid, Crisis and representatives of the all-party
parliamentary groups on domestic abuse and on ending
homelessness to look at how the Bill could provide the
guaranteed prioritisation of long-term accommodation
that everyone fleeing domestic abuse needs?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his
point and for his work on the all-party parliamentary
group on domestic abuse. Ministers meet regularly
to discuss this and other matters, but of course we
would be happy to meet him and associated partners to
discuss this issue. We have got to get it right. I might
even meet the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley
(Jess Phillips)—again.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I hardly
know where to start with my appreciation for this Bill
and for the cross-party consensus that has broken out.
Of course, there are things that I would like to be better
and the Minister knows that, but I want to draw the
attention of the House to some very strange cross-party
consensus, and that is between myself and the right
hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne),
who is no longer in his place.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about changing
the attitudes of men. When I worked with perpetrators
of domestic violence not 100 miles away from here—mostly
men—we always used to worry about what would happen
to the attitudes that we were working so hard to change,
because even in the space between leaving the group
work session and getting to the tube or bus stop, they
would have been bombarded with other influences from
friends, adverts, pornography and all sorts of places. I
therefore reiterate the right hon. Gentleman’s comments.
Has the Minister or the Under-Secretary of State for
Justice, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar),
visited a perpetrator programme to get a view on that? I
encourage all Members to do so and to join the all-party
parliamentary group on perpetrators of domestic abuse.
Will the Minister also work across the House to try to spearhead a campaign that is about not just raising the general public’s awareness about being a victim, but the things that people need to change about how they behave in their own intimate relationships and men’s attitudes in particular towards sexual entitlement in relationships, which is a specific concern to me.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for yet again demonstrating the complexity of this subject area. I am very conscious of the experience that she brings to the Chamber and her work on perpetrator management. Indeed, she has helped me to understand far more about the issue than I did before taking up this role.

I very much welcome the work that Respect and other organisations do to drive these programmes forward. The hon. Lady will know that there is a range of work happening, a lot of which takes the form of pilots because we are at the forefront of discovering what helps to break the cycle of abuse and violence. However, we are very clear that the longer-term impacts for society can be fundamental. For example, the life chances of boys and girls growing up in abusive households can be very poorly affected by their childhood experiences when it comes to what they expect from their own relationships when they are older.

I have been to so many conferences with Respect and other organisations that I have to confess that I cannot quite recall whether I have been to a perpetrator programme. Believe you me, if I have not, my very efficient officials—to whom I must pay tribute because they have turned this response around in a month, which is unprecedented—will ensure that we fill that gap very quickly.

Thangam Debbonaire: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sorry but I have to make a slight correction. When I asked my question, I forgot to mention my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I used to work for Respect and for a perpetrator programme. I apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady for that point of order, clarification and apology. I am sure the House will appreciate her offering it so speedily.

BILLS PRESENTED

DOMESTIC ABUSE BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Sajid Javid, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr Secretary Gauke, Secretary Matt Hancock, Secretary James Brokenshire, Secretary Damian Hinds, Secretary Amber Rudd, Secretary Karen Bradley, the Attorney General, Victoria Atkins and Edward Argar, presented a Bill to make provision in relation to domestic abuse; to make provision for and in connection with the establishment of a Domestic Abuse Commissioner; to prohibit cross-examination in person in family proceedings in certain circumstances; to make provision about certain violent or sexual offences, and offences involving other abusive behaviour, committed outside the United Kingdom; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 422) with explanatory notes (Bill 422-EN).

Flexible Working

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

2.40pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I beg to move.

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require employers to offer flexible working in employment contracts and to advertise vacancies as suitable for flexible working unless certain conditions are met; and for connected purposes.

Anna Whitehouse was on her way to pick up her daughter from nursery, but a bag got stuck in a tube door and made her 12 minutes late. The nursery staff sat her down in one of those tiny children’s chairs and sternly told her that she would be charged £1 for every minute she had kept the staff waiting. She felt like a failure as a parent, even though the delay had not been her fault.

She resolved not to let something as trivial as a bag stuck in a door upset the delicate balance of her work and family life again, so she asked her employer whether she could come to work 15 minutes early and leave 15 minutes early. That tiny change would have made juggling her career and her children work, but the request was denied. So she quit. For the sake of just 15 minutes, Anna left a job she loved, and her boss lost a dedicated member of staff.

Many women have similar stories. Every year, 54,000 pregnant women and working mothers are made redundant or are pressured to leave their jobs. That is why Anna, better known as Mother Pukka, is now campaigning, along with the Fawcett Society, Pregnant Then Screwed, the Young Women’s Trust and the Fatherhood Institute, for better access to flexible working. I am delighted to welcome some of those campaigners to Westminster today, and am grateful for the support of all those at home.

The Flex for All petition has received nearly 30,000 signatures so far, and one comment on it encapsulates its potential:

“Flexible means I can juggle family and work life without compromising one or the other.”

The 40-hour, five-day working week made sense in an era of single-earner households and stay-at-home mums, but it no longer reflects the reality of how many modern families want to live their lives. We no longer divide neat work families want to live their lives. We no longer divide neatly into breadwinners and homemakers. Our lives are more complicated than that—and better for it. Although some employers recognise that and are moving with the times, many are not, so it is time to shift the dial on flexible working.

As we do that, we will create more opportunities for more people, especially women and those with disabilities. We will help close the gender pay gap, and we will strengthen families by helping parents share caring responsibilities more equally. It will be good for businesses, too. I am therefore asking the House to back this Bill and make flexible working the default.

A Conservative Government introduced the right to request flexible working, but in reality just 9.8% of jobs paying more than £20,000 are advertised as being flexible. Figures are not available for people who are paid less than £20,000, but the situation is almost certainly worse.

Moreover, the grounds on which a flexible working request can be denied are vague. All the onus currently rests on the employee to make the case for why they should get special treatment, and many feel that they cannot even ask.
Flexible Working

[**Helen Whately**]

The Government recognise that the current approach is not working, and action is being taken to improve the situation. The Minister for Women and Equalities has set out her vision for gender equality at all stages, including support for organisations to introduce family-friendly policies. The Business Secretary is reviewing the right to request flexible working and consulting on whether employers should be required to consider whether a job can be done flexibly. That includes homeworking, job sharing and working different hours during school holidays.

That is progress—I am particularly thankful to the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), who is sitting on the Front Bench, for everything she is doing—but it starts from a presumption against flexibility. What if we flip the question and ask whether a job cannot be done flexibly? How many more employers would find that actually it did not make a difference where or when a piece of work was done, as long as it was done?

We know how powerful the psychology of the opt-out is, compared with that of the opt-in. Pensions auto-enrolment has successfully reversed the decline in the number of people saving into a workplace pension—10 million more people are now saving for their old age thanks to the policy. Let us apply that same principle to flexible working, and ask employers to opt out of flexibility.

Of course, I recognise that not all jobs can be done flexibly. Sometimes people need to be in a specific place at a specific time. Employers must be able to set out why a job cannot be done flexibly. This Bill, however, is about shifting the norm. The potential benefits to individuals, businesses and the economy as a whole are huge and backed up by evidence. Closing the gender employment gap could add an extra £150 billion to our GDP by 2025. Although female employment is at a record high, 42% of women are working part-time, compared with 13% of men. Women working fewer hours and accruing less experience over their careers is a major contributor to the gender pay gap.

How many of those part-time jobs could actually be full-time, flexible jobs? Although some jobs demand set hours in a set location, we are a long way from realising the full potential of flexible working. According to the Timewise Foundation, 1.5 million people are trapped in low-paid, part-time jobs below their skill level because they cannot find an appropriate new job with the working pattern they need. With superfast broadband coverage to reach 97% by next year, and a full-fibre network being rolled out across the country, it is now possible to do many jobs from anywhere, at any time.

Flexible working increases productivity. The average commute is 46 minutes a day—it can take much longer for people in rural areas—and that is time that could be better spent. Caring responsibilities are one of the top causes of short-term absence from work. Businesses that allow flexible working are less likely to report employees taking time off sick for family reasons.

Research by Pregnant Then Screwed found that 81% of people who work flexibly are happier, and happier staff, with a better work-life balance, can be more productive and more likely to stay in their job. Employees and managers agree that flexible working increases productivity and is more motivating than a bonus. Looking to the future, we see that we must increase our productivity in order to stay competitive. We work longer hours than many other countries but we produce less. Flexible working is about making much smarter use of the hours in the day.

Being more family friendly helps employers recruit more women and enables more women to stay in work. That is good for women and good for business. For example, Gocompare has seen a significant increase in the number of female applicants—from 40% to 58%—since its job adverts started including positive messages about flexibility. Employees who work flexibly are more likely to stay in their jobs, with 70% of people who work flexibly saying that they would be reluctant to quit their job. The most gender diverse companies are more likely to enjoy above-average profitability. Underusing women’s skills is costing us 2% of GDP per year, so it is costing the economy billions of pounds.

Let us not forget about men. Forty-seven per cent. of fathers say that they would consider a demotion to a less stressful job if it enabled them to spend more time with their families. That would be a huge potential loss of productivity, but it could be prevented if more men could work flexibly. However, men are less likely to make a request for flexible working, and are more likely to have a request denied. The barriers to requesting flexible working can be even greater for men because of old-fashioned perceptions about the ideal worker and the idea that caring for children is a woman’s job. I spoke to a businesswoman the other day whose husband, a lawyer, had asked to work flexibly one day a week. His bemused employer responded by asking, “What’s your wife doing?” That just shows how ingrained these assumptions are. Making flexibility the default would change workplace cultures for the better. It is not just families who will benefit from more modern working practices, but disabled people too, many of whom would like to be working or working more. Flexibility helps anyone who finds the journey to work or rigid work hours a problem.

To sum up, the Bill builds on work that the Government are already doing. By allowing the Bill to proceed today, we can go a step further towards making all jobs flexible by default, which will enable more women to stay at work and advance their careers after having children, help to close the gender pay gap and unlock productivity for businesses, and help employers to recruit more diverse candidates—especially those with disabilities. It will change the way we think about the work-life balance, shifting the culture in favour of flexible work and equal parenting, grasping the power of new technology to free workers from the nine-to-five and giving people choice about how they live their lives. Flexible working is the future, so I commend this Bill to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

Ordered.

That Helen Whately, Victoria Prentis, Rachel Maclean, Tracey Crouch, Vicky Ford, Eddie Hughes, Emma Reynolds, Tom Tugendhat, Tracy Brabin, Gillian Keegan, Kirstene Hair and Andrew Selous present the Bill.

Helen Whately accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 423).*
Courts and Tribunals (Online Procedure) Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

2.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice
(Paul Maynard): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to move the Second Reading motion for this Bill. The Bill has already been considered in detail in the other place, and it follows the Courts and Tribunals (Judiciary and Functions of Staff) Act 2018—also known as CATJAFS; we now have CATOP, the Courts and Tribunals (Online Procedure) Bill. This enabling measure is another important step in the transformation of our justice system.

Our judiciary, together with our courts and tribunals, is rightly regarded as among the finest in the world. To maintain and build on that reputation, it is critical that we position ourselves at the forefront of using new technology to improve the ease with which people can access justice. However, it is also clear that the modernisation of our court system must have ordinary court users at its heart. People need our new digital services to be accessible, understandable and easy to use, and that is what the Bill seeks to facilitate.

Of course, the Bill is only a part of our overall ambition. In total we are investing more than £1 billion in transforming Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service, making the justice system simpler to access, more convenient to use and more efficient to run. Our court reform programme will make the most of new opportunities that innovations in technology offer to revolutionise how we deliver justice.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): While I welcome the new digital procedure in the courts, I am deeply concerned that it may result in some people having difficulty accessing the courts online. Can the Minister confirm that HMCTS will not close any more courts having difficulty accessing the courts online? I am deeply concerned that it may result in some people not being able to access justice. However, it is also clear that the modernisation of our court system must have ordinary court users at its heart.

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend makes an important point with which I wholeheartedly agree. I always agree with the Lord Chief Justice in everything he says and does, and I would never dream of disagreeing with him. The fact that an online process is available makes it in no way obligatory for people to use it. There is still a case for physical hearings and very much still a case that people who wish to use a paper system should be able to do so.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): As we just heard, the Minister agrees with the Lord Chief Justice on all matters. Does he agree with him that court structures and buildings need considerable investment? Will he reassure me that digitalisation, which is welcomed by those of us who have used the courts a great deal, is not at the expense of the physical courts?

Paul Maynard: We are cheerfully straying far and wide in this Second Reading debate, but I am more than happy to confirm that any innovation in online procedures does not in any way invalidate the concerns that many have about the state of our court estate. My hon. Friend will know that we are spending an extra £50 million this year on renovating courts. There is much more to do, and I am keen to see all buckets removed as soon as possible from the court system. I cannot promise that the online procedure rule committee is the remedy for that, but I assure her that I am working on it.

The new rule committee will be judicially chaired and comprised of three members of the judiciary, a member of the legal profession and two additional members, one of whom has experience of the lay advice sector and the other from IT design. While the new committee will be smaller than existing rule committees, the Bill provides the Minister with the power to amend the committee’s membership so that it has the flexibility to respond to changes in subject matter and technology.

Bambos Charalambous: On the membership of the committee, has the Minister given thought to including a disabled user and people from the legal profession—a solicitor, barrister or legal executive—to give input into the way that the changes in court procedures are carried out?

Paul Maynard: That is one of the theoretical principles of governance that the moment we set up a committee, everyone thinks of extra people who should be on it. I hear the hon. Gentleman’s point. There is nothing in the Bill that prevents the composition of the membership from changing over time, as the online procedures that the committee is considering change. In addition, it can set up sub-committees to look at separate specific areas.
The Bill is an enabling measure. As what we do changes, I am sure that the composition of the membership will also change, to include differing skillsets, but I hear what he says and thank him for his intervention.

The committee’s combined expertise will ensure that our rules framework supports online services, while offering a straightforward, accessible and proportionate experience to those who are accessing justice. These powers mirror and do not exceed those provided in respect of the civil, family and tribunal procedure rules.

On Third Reading of the Bill in the other place, peers expressed their support for and enthusiasm about the Bill and for the Government amendments made throughout its passage. We have listened to and taken on board many of the points raised during the Bill’s passage through the Lords and have amended the Bill accordingly. In particular, the Bill now reflects the Government’s renewed commitment on two subjects.

First, people who may need support to participate online will be offered it. The Bill now makes explicit the duty to provide appropriate and proportionate digital support. The Bill also makes it clear that, before rules are made, the Lord Chancellor and the committee will have regard to the needs of those who will require digital assistance. This makes clear the Government’s commitment to an accessible justice system that supports the needs of all our users.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Online procedures will not compensate for the under-investment of this Government in physical courts, which has led to a number of IT failures, the crumbling courts estate and delays in cases being heard. Does the Minister agree that financial cost cutting should never come before the accessibility of physical or digital justice systems?

Paul Maynard: In the grand philosophical scheme of things, I probably agree with the hon. Lady, but the purpose of the Bill is to ensure, as we move online, that the rules are common across civil, family and tribunal procedures. To my mind, it is about ensuring, as we move online, that they operate to a common procedure in order to harness the user experience wherever possible, and that is what this Bill seeks to do.

Secondly, the Bill clearly recognises that some people may not want or be able to use our online services, even with support, so it makes explicit provision for the availability of non-electronic channels, which will of course include paper. That was always the Government’s intention, and we have now made clear the provision for users to choose a paper option throughout proceedings.

We are clear that this Bill will not prevent anyone from accessing justice; rather, it will improve access to justice by opening up a new route of access and creating a swifter, easier alternative for litigants. The reforms I have discussed are part of our important manifesto commitment to reform our courts and make them fit for the 21st century. For those reasons, I commend the Bill to the House.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): As a general rule, the adoption of new technologies in our justice system is something to welcome. It should, if done carefully, lead to better, more agile courts that increase access to justice. Labour recognises the need for an online procedure rule committee, given the increased use of digital courts. Our aim now is to focus on amendments that improve the proposed committee and ensure that any rules strengthen, rather than weaken, our hard-won rights.

Although digitisation is necessary, it needs to be done with diligence and accuracy. Most importantly, it must not be done simply to achieve savings. Given that digitisation will have a substantial impact on our justice system, it is incredible that there still has not been any proper, publicly funded academic research into the impact of digital courts on access to justice. Instead, the Ministry of Justice seems happy to shell out huge consultant fees—over £60 million last year—and roll out untested and ad hoc changes.

In 2018, the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee expressed concern about the scale and pace of the changes the Ministry of Justice was attempting. It expressed little confidence in the capacity of Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service to deliver this hugely ambitious programme, not least because it found that Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service had failed to indicate “what the new system would look like.” That is a vital point and one that this Bill fails to deal with.

Far too often in the last year, the changes pursued by the Ministry of Justice have had a vague direction, instead of a particular, definable endpoint; after all, we have had at least seven Secretaries of State for Justice in the last nine years. The only consistent characteristic of these reforms seems to me to be related more to ideology than judicial policy: the desire ceaselessly to cut the budget year on year. Again, in the last nine years, the Ministry of Justice has had the highest budgetary cuts in comparison with other Departments.

The Law Society has noted the backward illogic of the reform programme, criticising the decision to close courts “before the technology that is intended to replace the need for physical hearings has been tested, evaluated and proven to work.” With half of our courts estate already sold off since 2010, we now have little choice but to move towards online courts. Finance appears to have triumphed over sense in deciding what to do in relation to justice.

On the current Bill, it is notable that the Government have chosen to go well beyond the relatively modest recommendations of Lord Justice Briggs in 2016. Further, instead of piloting individual areas, the Government’s desire appears to be to digitise whole swathes of the courts system, with limited oversight. Amendments put forward in the other place tried to ensure that the piloting of new stages would be mandatory. That still seems a reasonable measure to ask for, bearing in mind how many internet breakdowns we have had in the court system in the last few months. It is really important to try out a pilot scheme to see how these things work. However, the Government do not appear to want to do this.

Another matter of importance in this debate is the question of whom the Bill authorises to make future decisions. Currently, it states that the relevant Minister may require amendments to be made, with little clarity about exactly what would justify such a requirement.
The suggestion discussed in the other place was that the committee be allowed to decline the Minister’s request, and we think that was a very relevant and valuable suggestion. Although that did not pass the amendments to clauses 9 and 10 provided some balance on the power of the relevant Minister, as they must seek the concurrence of the Lord Chief Justice.

While we welcome those important provisions, we believe that the Minister should not be the final arbiter in deciding whether the procedure rule committee makes a rule that he or she wants; that should ultimately be within the province and remit of the procedure rule committee. What is the point of having a committee to set out rules if the Minister is going to say, “No, I want you to change this”? If we have selected people to make the rules, they should be the ultimate arbiters of what the rules should be. That is very important because the Executive and Ministers cannot be allowed to get away with dictating what they want. While we accept that there needs to be a balance between a Minister and the committee, we urge the Government to reconsider and rethink this aspect.

At the moment, it is unclear how far Parliament will be able to scrutinise the rules put forward by the committee. Given that the online procedure rule committee will have the power significantly to alter the way many people engage with our justice system, it seems reasonable that an elected body should also have a say in this matter. As was highlighted by the Bar Council in relation to the Courts and Tribunals (Judiciary and Functions of Staff) Bill in 2018, this Government frequently adopt a “drip-feed”—its word—approach to change in order to avoid a full debate and proper legislative scrutiny of their court plans. That cannot be allowed to happen through this Bill. My counterpart in the other place suggested adopting the affirmative resolution procedure for clauses 8 and 9. That seems patently sensible, as it would provide parliamentary oversight of potentially major changes to our justice system.

The make-up of the proposed online rule procedure committee also merits consideration. Our amendment in the other place was to enlarge the committee to ensure representation from each of the legal professions—the Bar, the Law Society and legal executives—but, again, that was denied. That is really strange, bearing in mind that the civil procedure rule committee has 16 members, the family procedure rule committee has 15 members and the tribunal procedure rule committee has nine members, while the number here is much lower.

I heard what the Minister said in his opening speech to my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous). I may have misheard him, but the Minister suggested that there is nothing in the proposed legislation to stop an increase in the composition of the committee. That, however, is not accurate. The committee says that currently it does set out how many members there should be or who they should be. Therefore, unless the number and composition of committee members are put into primary legislation, we cannot just change it.

In my discussion with the Minister yesterday on the telephone, I explained the importance of having a barrister, a solicitor and a legal executive on the online procedure rule committee. When I practised at the Bar, solicitors would send me instructions on all the procedural parts of the case, such as starting the petition, issuing the summonses or laying the charges. All those procedural matters were undertaken by legal executives and solicitors. Barristers would often just turn up at court to speak and do the advocacy part. Therefore, to exclude from the committee the very people involved in the procedural side does not make any sense. I am sorry, but I am not reassured by the Minister that the committee can somehow change itself. Again, I may have misheard. It is important for the legislation to spell out that there will be a member of the Bar, a solicitor from the Law Society and a legal executive. That is really important in ensuring the system works, because they are the people involved in all the procedural aspects.

The amendments we supported and argued for in the other place were also supported by Mind and the Law Society. I continue to feel that including non-lawyers with experience of disability and digital exclusion would significantly reduce fears that the Bill fails to properly ensure access to justice. We tried to promote gender balance on the committee, again without success. This would be an important measure. It is no secret that power in our court system resides with a group who are highly unrepresentative of our national population. We think provisions to require gender balance would rectify some of the imbalance and be an important step towards increasing diversity in our justice system. What assessment has the Minister made of the make-up of the committee in terms of both its composition and size? The Minister and I discussed this issue yesterday on the telephone.

We also raised concerns that the Bill could lead to digitisation by default. Whether proceedings are criminal, civil, tribunal, probate or family in nature, there are good reasons to feel that making digital the default option will, in many cases, restrict or entirely remove access to justice. We believe that both sides involved in a case should be able to decide on whether online or traditional measures are used throughout the case. Again, I had an encouraging conversation with the Minister on that point yesterday, but I would like to see proper guarantees in the Bill to ensure that both litigants are provided with the choice of using traditional methods and that this option is made very clear and easily available, so that most people do not feel that they should be going down the online route or that the in-person route is in any way exceptional as opposed to the norm.

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend mentions the digitally excluded. For some people, only a face-to-face physical hearing will do. That leads to the point about insufficient weight or prominence being given to legal advice or representation, because that may well influence what decisions people make when they are faced with a choice about what to do with regard to digitisation. Does she agree that for everyone to be treated fairly and equally, not being forced down the path of digitisation is of the utmost importance?

Yasmin Qureshi: Absolutely. We can imagine a lay person being told to follow, or being pushed towards following, the online procedure. They are not going to be told that the paper procedure or turning up is just as doable and straightforward. I will come on to this point later, but ensuring that people have access to legal advice is even more important with the introduction of digitisation and there seems to be nothing in the Bill to deal with that issue.
Sadly, in many areas of the reform programme, digitisation has frequently been imposed from the top down. Clause 4 recognises the Government’s duty to “make support available for digitally excluded people” in so far as the Lord Chancellor feels it to be “appropriate and proportionate”. It is vital that support is not just there but properly funded and—importantly—sufficiently advertised. Even when there are mechanisms available to provide support, we worry that all too frequently they are poorly promoted. They work to show evidence of action, while providing little meaningful aid to those who need it. Since it was set up in February 2018, a helpline for those who need help to use video links in court has averaged less than one call a day. The Public and Commercial Services Union has questioned how widely HMCTS would advertise alternatives to digital justice and I share its concern.

Another point we are concerned about relates to clause 1(3)(d), which refers to the use of “innovative methods of resolving disputes.” Despite the probing of my counterpart in the other place, it is still unclear precisely what that means. Greater clarity on the wording would be useful. We are very concerned that the Bill does not lead to digital justice becoming an inescapable default setting across the justice system.

Access to legal aid and legal advice is very important, and it is regrettable that the Bill is pretty silent on that. The Bill should include the ability for those who go through the online procedures to at least be able to make a phone call to access legal advice. That phone call should not be a premium number or a chargeable number; it should be a free number, so that people can access proper legal advice. Many people do not have contract phones, with free mobile phone calls. A lot of people are still on pay-as-you-go, so they need a system that is free to use. It would therefore help if the Minister was able to ensure, when he responds to the debate or in Committee, that the Government deal with that point.

I emphasise that point because of my own personal experience as a practitioner. I can remember being in courts, whether civil or criminal, which were attended by unrepresented people. None of us gave legal advice as such, but lawyers and solicitors would at least provide them with some guidance, a signpost and somewhere to go. When we have online courts and people are sitting at their computers, they will not have human advice, guidance and signposting. It is therefore crucial that such people can access legal advice, even on a phone, so I ask the Government, the Ministry of Justice and the Minister to think about that.

Let me recap a few issues that really concern us, which I hope the Minister will address in his response. First, so far no rational reason has been produced as to why the committee needs to be so small. Secondly, how will he ensure that the rights of disabled people are properly represented in the committee? Thirdly, how will he ensure that there is real parliamentary oversight of potential major changes to our justice system? I would really appreciate answers to those questions.

Finally, I reiterate that fair and equal access to our justice system needs to be at the justice system’s heart. It is well known that the most stable countries in the world are those that have the best legal and judicial systems, where people feel that they will get justice in the end. Therefore, what will the Government, the Ministry of Justice and the Minister do to ensure that people are protected, that no harm comes to them and that justice is properly and fairly accessible to all those who need it?

3.21 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I welcome the thrust of the Bill, which is an important, if modest, piece of legislation. The Minister is right to say that it is an enabling Bill. It is welcomed by the judiciary and that should weigh heavily with us, because this legislation is necessary to put in place the rule committee, which, in turn, is required to set up the online procedure in a practical form.

It is worth remembering that this has been talked about and largely initiated by the judiciary from a very early stage. The Briggs report in 2016 by Sir Michael Briggs, as he was then—he is now Lord Briggs of Westbourne—was the first important step in that and largely dealt with online civil money claims. Sir Michael made it very clear to me and many others he spoke to that it was a source of frustration that that sensible and practical measure had been delayed for so long. Since then, that was expanded on by the White Paper in 2016—the joint vision that was set out on transforming our justice system. Although the Opposition have made some criticisms of the Bill, it is worth remembering precisely that that was a joint vision, endorsed by the senior judiciary in England and Wales every bit as much as by the Government. It is an unusual example in our constitution of joint ownership of a project.

The Justice Committee took evidence from the Lord Chief Justice, the Master of the Rolls and the Senior President of Tribunals only last Wednesday. We had a detailed session with them, which was a very valuable insight into this issue. It was clear that they strongly endorse and welcome the principle of the programme and that they see it as one—if it is delivered correctly—that can enhance access to justice from where we are at the moment. Our Committee was impressed with that evidence. That does not mean that questions will not need to be answered in the Public Bill Committee and, in particular, as the rules are drawn up. I understand the points from the Opposition Front Benchers and elsewhere about the technical nature of how the rule committee is to be constructed, but the overall thrust of the proposal is clearly welcome.

Vera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the diversity of the online procedure rule committee should be looked at, so that we make the courts as diverse as they can be?

Robert Neill: That certainly can be looked at as the Bill proceeds in Committee and, no doubt, when the online procedure rule committee is adopted. It is worth looking at the transcript of the evidence from the three most senior members of the judiciary—I think that was the first time that they have appeared jointly before any parliamentary Committee. There is, in fact, a far greater wealth of diversity of views and experience from our senior judiciary and the members of the judiciary who serve on these tribunals than some commentators give credit for. I think that there is a real understanding from
the judiciary, but that does not mean that it is not possible to supplement that. I would not want to think that simply because there are three members of the judiciary, as well as other members, that is not in itself enough. They are very alert to the issues that people face, but I think we can think about broadening this.

I have sympathy with the shadow Minister’s point about perhaps making it easier to expand the committee to include practitioners from more than one jurisdiction. In the past, rules committees have often dealt with discrete areas—High Court rules, county court rules and criminal procedure rules. We are dealing with a multiplicity of jurisdictions, particularly in relation to the tribunals, and it is unlikely that we will find one or two practitioners who have the breadth of practical experience in all those different types of jurisdictions.

The Law Society refers to the advisability or usefulness of including a member of the Chartered Institute of Legal Executives. That is a sensible point, because a lot of the interlocutory work—the pre-hearing work—will be done by legal executives rather than necessarily by solicitors or barristers, so I hope that the Minister will keep an open mind on that as we go forward.

My other message to the Minister is: please learn the lessons of transforming rehabilitation, which had worthy objectives and could have succeeded in joining up probation and prison in a better way, but it was rushed. It was not piloted properly and was taken at too great a speed. There is an argument that considerations of finance and expediency were allowed to weigh more heavily in the outworking of the process than questions of access to justice and outcomes, and for that reason it did not achieve either of those desired objectives.

I think that the current ministerial team have learned those lessons—the Lord Chancellor has made that very clear—and we have the opportunity to do this in a different, better way. I am confident that the Minister and his colleagues will do it differently, but it is worth bearing in mind that back in 2016, Lord Briggs said that “it would be entirely unsatisfactory...to make recourse to the [Online Court] compulsory until a proven structure of assistance has been established.”

That still holds good. Nothing in the Bill prevents that being done, but it is a question of the political will and the resource being put into it by the Government to achieve that.

Subject to that being done, it seemed to us from the evidence that we received that the House ought to support this modest measure in its current form. That does not mean that there are not broader issues that need to be looked at on the advice that people using our legal system get and the way they can access justice, not only in a nominal sense but practically, through informed decisions about how they use the system. A great deal of work is being done with the Ministry of Justice and the senior judiciary through the various judicial and practitioner working groups that have been set up, but it is really important that we stress the need to get this right, not rush and get absolutely everything nailed in place before we move on. Obviously, it is difficult to rectify injustice, which can include a potential litigant not bringing a meritorious claim, as well as people being led into bringing unmeritorious claims. It is important to get that right. Done properly, this could be a great advantage and in itself is worthwhile, but there is a good deal of devil in the detail that will come further down the track.

3.28 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure as always to follow the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), whose contribution was as ever thought provoking and valuable.

I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate. I thank the Minister for explaining the background to the Bill and for taking the time to speak yesterday on the telephone about its provisions. While the Bill will have its most significant impact in England and Wales, it is important to remind the House that it will also have significant implications for Scotland and Northern Ireland, because of its application to various reserved tribunals operating in those jurisdictions. The employment tribunal for Scotland received 24,000 cases last year, and while we do not have Scotland-specific figures for the UK-wide first and upper tier tribunals, even a simple population share would suggest a similar number again taking up social security cases and asylum and immigration cases in those institutions. In due course, further tribunal functions will be devolved, but in the meantime the Bill is important for many people seeking access to justice in Scotland.

On the Government’s broad approach, we give a cautious welcome to the Bill. Who would not want to explore every opportunity available to use technology to make access to justice easier and less expensive? If online procedures can make access easier—and there is no doubt they can if properly resourced and planned—that is good from a rule of law perspective. The Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service has its own five-year digital strategy, and the approach set out in that document gets to the heart of how we should approach technology in the law when it says:

“Digital is not an end in itself—but it is clear that well targeted development and investment in digital technology can increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the services and support we provide to the judiciary, to all those who use our services and to those who work to deliver them.”

We get what the Government are trying to achieve and support the broad aims of the Bill. It should have a Second Reading and our approach today is one of constructive criticism.

I shall briefly flag up four areas where further debate is needed. First, as already touched on, it is interesting that the Government thought the best way to proceed was to ask one single online procedure committee to look at the possibility of online rules for a huge variety of proceedings in different jurisdictions. The alternative approach would have been to task existing procedure rule committees and rule drafters with expanding online procedures and options in each discrete area of law. These existing committees clearly already have considerable expertise in their particular fields. It would be interesting to know why the Government thought it best to proceed in this way.

The single online committee will potentially be dabbling in very disparate fields of law—from tax to family and social security, and lots in between—and sometimes will be making rules applicable in completely distinct legal jurisdictions. That suggests that a wide variety of expertise might be needed and possibly a committee with a considerable number of members, as the Justice Committee Chair said, yet the committee is comparatively small for such a major undertaking.
[Stuart C. McDonald]

The Law Society argues—this was mentioned by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi)—that a committee with such significant powers to change legal processes should include at least one representative from each of the solicitor, barrister and chartered legal executive branches of the law, so that it has access to their varying professional experiences and skills. The fact that there is a solitary IT expert on the committee is also surprising, given the nature of its undertaking. We need to reconsider whether the Government have got the size and make-up of the committee right or whether these criticisms mean it should be amended—or are there other ways to ensure it taps into existing expertise, rather than trampling all over it?

There is currently no scope for representation on the committee from Scotland or Northern Ireland. This point was raised in the House of Lords. There is still a significant question about whether there should at least be the discretion to appoint suitably qualified legal practitioners or judges from those jurisdictions, especially when the committee is working on procedures that will impact directly on them. As I outlined earlier, many thousands of cases each year in Scotland and Northern Ireland could be affected. The Law Society of Scotland also argues that

“there should be capacity in the Bill to include representation from other jurisdictions if appropriate”.

There are different ways we could do that, and they could and should be explored in Committee.

We also need to carefully consider the issues of choice as against compulsion and whether the necessary support will be available to ensure that all can take advantage of new online procedures. As we have heard, there will be some who do not want or just cannot realistically use online procedures. The Minister himself acknowledged that. That might be because of infrastructure challenges. Ofcom’s “Connected Nations” reports remind us of the numbers who do not have access to good broadband or 4G. For many more people, there will be challenges around digital exclusion. There are various ways to measure that, but 10% of UK citizens—5.3 million people—have never used the internet or not used it at all in the past three months.

We must focus on the needs of vulnerable people and how online processes may impact on them and how they are protected. How do we ensure that online courts do not provide a back door for dodgy advisers and others offering dubious advice to people litigating online and that the advice being acted on is not being acted on without oversight?

We welcome the assurances that this is not about blanket compulsion and forcing online procedures on people and welcome the changes in that regard that were made in the House of Lords. In Committee, Members will be able to consider carefully whether those changes are sufficient to deal with the concerns that have been expressed.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has made a valid point about people’s interpretations of online information. People often look up medical advice online and often subject it to their own interpretations. We must be very careful about this, because many people cannot go online, and those who can may not be accustomed to, for example, certain legalistic phrases. The language must be simple as well.

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Gentleman has made a good point, and a useful comparison.

I have mentioned people who may not want to or cannot go online. The other side of the coin is that people should not have to opt out of online procedures if appropriate support would enable them to use those procedures and benefit from their advantages. The Lords introduced welcome additional measures relating to requirements for the provision of support. The Committee will be able to assess whether those measures have sufficient teeth to ensure that concerns that have been raised have been properly addressed. The availability of appropriate support is fundamental to the success of the Bill.

Barely a Bill is passed in this place without the Government’s helping themselves to broad Henry VIII-style powers and leaving too much to negative resolution procedures. That issue arises again in this Bill, and it will no doubt be tackled in Committee stage or on Report. The Law Society suggests that affirmative procedures should be required in relation to regulations under clauses 7(5) and 8(6), which would allow Parliament better scrutiny of new procedure rules as they are developed. I agree with the shadow Minister that we should look closely and positively at its suggestion.

That brings me to a final simple but important point. We must proceed cautiously, and on the basis of evidence. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst was right to say that we should not rush. As we move forward, we must make sure that we understand the impact of moving things online and respond appropriately.

As the shadow Minister said, research and testing are vital. Let me give just one example. In 2013, the Bail Observation Project found that there were significant variations in the outcomes of immigration bail hearings: 50% of people who were heard via video links were refused bail, compared to 22% of those who were heard in person. Recent research conducted by Jo Hynes of the University of Exeter suggests that that massively differential impact still exists. We need to understand why it exists, and until we understand it, we should be cautious about replacing certain types of hearing in person with video-link alternatives.

Sadly, caution was not what the Public Accounts Committee found when reviewing the Government’s programme of court and tribunal reform last year. It concluded:

“The pressure to deliver quickly and make savings is limiting HMCTS’s ability to consult meaningfully with stakeholders and risks it driving forward changes before it fully understands the impact on users and the justice system more widely.”

We must not allow the development of online systems to outpace our understanding of their impact. We therefore need to look at the role that Parliament has in scrutinising the roll-out of online procedures and consider whether we need to put tougher provisions about post-legislative scrutiny in the Bill so that we can ensure that progress is made at the right pace.

We welcome these proposals, with a degree of caution, and will seek to be constructive critics of the details. They are not a panacea that will cure some of the real
problems in accessing justice that have arisen—largely thanks to the terrible legal aid cuts in England and Wales over the past decade—but they can be part of a suite of measures that will allow legal proceedings to be simplified and made more accessible, and we want to support that goal.

3.38 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Let me begin by drawing attention to my registered interest as a member of the Bar.

As the House heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), we support the establishment of an online procedure rules committee and the goal of modernising our courts and tribunals. However, we believe that new technologies must be used in our courts only when they have been proved to improve access to justice and engagement with the courts system, and we are concerned about a number of other issues raised by the Bill.

Concerns have been expressed by my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton South East, for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) and for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and by the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), who, in his usual fashion, has been very fair in his analysis of the Bill and highlighted and accepted that we in the Opposition will have natural and genuine concerns.

There has not been as much participation in the debate on the Bill today as we might have expected so my task in summing up the debate has been made slightly easier, but none the less I shall seek to go through our main concerns. I reiterate that we support an online procedure rule committee and the goal of modernising our courts and tribunals, but we do have concerns.

First, digital exclusion has been referred to by a number of Members, and we are concerned that the measures in this Bill could without proper protections exclude those with poor digital literacy from our justice system. Vulnerable people in particular and those with English as a second language are disproportionately represented among defendants, and the Law Society has stated that insufficient weight and prominence will be given to the need for legal advice and representation. Further stoking these fears is the catastrophic failure of the MOJ IT system earlier this year, which, in the words of the Criminal Bar Association put our courts “on their knees” by locking legal practitioners out of their secure email services, leaving them unable to access wi-fi and forcing the adjournment of trials. This is an illustration of technology taking a turn for the worse and how that can impact our justice system.

We are also clear that those using the courts must be able to opt out of a digital proceeding and instead choose a traditional court procedure to prevent them from being digitally excluded, particularly in the light of the fact that there is little research into the different justice outcomes of different procedures and the Government’s record of lacking research, piloting or consultation, which has meant that many of their existing digital reforms have led to delays, a worsening experience for court users and reduced access to justice.

The make-up of the OPRC must be representative; that point was also made by a number of speakers. Its make-up must be representative in particular of the legal profession, as it has the power to dramatically alter the processes in court. It should therefore include at least one representative from each of the solicitor, barrister, legal executive and magistrate professions. Only through this can the committee access the experience of the different legal professional users; only they can see the system as professionals and through the eyes of the client to deliver the best result when creating new rules. While the Government have ceded ground on this issue in the Lords by increasing the number of representatives, which we welcome, they must not seek to reverse this position in Committee, and they must go further to ensure better legal representation on the committee.

Finally, we are concerned about the way in which the Justice Secretary as Lord Chancellor sought to exercise his powers, as the Bill entered the Lords without any real safeguards on his powers in what are now clauses 9 and 10. The Lords Constitution Committee declared its own fears that the Bill conferred broad powers on the Lord Chancellor, and while the Government were defeated and these powers were curbed, we are clear that they must not seek to roll back this progress in Committee. It is right to involve the Lord Chief Justice or Senior President of Tribunals, as the Constitution Committee also states, to ensure fair and efficient administration of the justice system for which they are responsible.

Dramatically reducing the content of my speech in the light of the debate today, I say in conclusion that, while we support the creation of an online procedure rule committee and support the goal of modernising our courts and tribunals system to bring it into the 21st century, we still have some concerns about the Bill, as I have outlined. I hope that the Minister will address those points, so we will not seek a Division today. However, we will in Committee push for amendments to ensure that hard-won rights are protected, that the OPRC is representative of the legal profession and that, in the 70th year of Labour’s landmark introduction of legal aid that made access to justice an achievable goal for everyone, the ability to access justice is not further eroded by measures in the Bill.

3.45 pm

Paul Maynard: With the leave of the House, I will do my best to respond to the points raised as speedily as I can, because I know that many are now gathering for the next debate. It is interesting that we started off the debate with a bit of a spiel about ideology and cuts. I found that intriguing, given that we are talking about the £1 billion Government investment in our Courts and Tribunals Service and its modernisation. I am grateful to the Chairman of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), for reminding everyone in the House that these proposals have the support of our senior judiciary.

A number of concerns were raised about what was termed digitisation by default. Let me make it clear that innovation is crucial to delivering modernisation, but we should never introduce more complexity or technological innovation merely because we can. We should do so because that innovation satisfies our requirements for
proportionality and accessibility within the justice system. We always need to work with the grain of human nature, as our law is essentially a human contract in and of itself. Changes should never result in less justice or in people being incentivised not to behave in their own best interests. I have said at least twice in the debate already that the alternative methods must be protected at all times. People can seek telephone advice, for example. We are also piloting face-to-face advice in at least 25 areas. At any point, people can opt out of the online procedure, and the paper-based alternative will always be available. Either side in a case can opt out of an online procedure to ensure that it does not occur online.

Concerns were also expressed about piloting. I hear the point that there is no need to rush, and we are starting by focusing on civil claims under £25,000 being conducted online. Evaluation is important, and I have made it clear that I do not want Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service to mark its own homework. There will be an independent evaluation, and the panel has already met. It will have academic input in particular to look at the outcomes in relation to access to justice and the cost to users.

The membership of the committee was raised on a number of occasions. Let me be clear that the committee needs to be sufficiently agile to deal with a changing environment in which numerous online procedures will appear from time to time. Nothing in the Bill prevents the Lord Chancellor from utilising clause 7 to expand the membership of the committee when he sees fit to do so. At the same time, the committee can at any point choose to set up sub-committees or to bring in any wider expertise that it needs to draw up the procedures that it thinks appropriate.

Robert Neill: I believe that that will be welcomed by a number of practitioners. Can the Minister ensure that, in practice, no bureaucratic impediments will be put in the way of that happening? This intervention also gives me the chance to draw Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, which I omitted to do in my speech. I apologise for that, Madam Deputy Speaker. Doing it this way is quicker than making a point of order.

Paul Maynard: That is an innovative way to facilitate that speediness.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), mentioned parliamentary scrutiny. We are keen to ensure that accountability is maintained, and I continue to believe that it is right for these powers to reside with the Lord Chancellor, who is directly accountable to Parliament, whereas the committee is not. We are not trying to shift the constitutional balance within the Bill. We are looking to maintain that balance, which is why we have sought to ensure that the Bill mirrors the long-standing arrangements for the existing rule committees.

The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), who spoke for the Scottish National party, rightly raised Scottish representation, and I am very sympathetic to the points that he made. Obviously, I am as keen as he is to devolve tribunals. Not many Ministers stand at this Dispatch Box encouraging devolution, but in this case I am in concurrence with him, to use the word of the day. I am sure that we will continue to discuss that matter, but I hear the point he made about Scottish representation. He also raised the intriguing question why we have only one committee for online procedures, and he asked why the other three committees were not given the task of setting up their own online procedure rules. Essentially, the answer to that lies in the fact that we need the procedure rules to be the same across each of the civil, family and tribunal divisions of our courts. The decision was taken, with the support of the judiciary, to go down that route.

The hon. Gentleman also rightly raised the point that not every type of case is suitable for online procedures. He cited the welfare of children, and that is a good example. We will not bring anything online without seeking the concurrence of the Lord Chief Justice and without laying an statutory instrument that will be debated in both Houses, but I hear what he says. There are many types of cases where physical hearings are the most appropriate path to go down, and I certainly agree with him on that.

On that basis, I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

COURTS AND TRIBUNALS (ONLINE PROCEDURE) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Courts and Tribunals (Online Procedure) Bill [Lords]:

Committee

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 25 July 2019.

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

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

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

Other proceedings

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

Question agreed to.

COURTS AND TRIBUNALS (ONLINE PROCEDURE) BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

Queen’s recommendation signified.

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Courts and Tribunals (Online Procedure) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Lord Chancellor.—[Matt Warman.]

Question agreed to.
Backbench Business

Early Years Family Support

3.51 pm

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House believes there is now overwhelming evidence of the importance of the first 1,001 critical days of a new baby’s life in determining his or her lifelong physical and emotional wellbeing; notes the work of the Inter-Ministerial Group led by the Rt. hon. Member for South Northamptonshire, the Thirteenth Report of the Health and Social Care Select Committee, HC 1496, on First 1,000 days of life and the Eleventh Report of the Science and Technology Committee, HC 506 on Evidence-based early years intervention; and calls on the Government to take strong and decisive action immediately to ensure that every baby gets the best start in life.

I am delighted to have the chance to speak today on a subject that is a real passion for me, and one of the reasons that I got into politics. I thank the Backbench Business Committee, particularly the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), for finding time for me to hold this important debate.

It is a great pleasure to see good friends from across the House here to support the motion this afternoon. I am looking forward to hearing some excellent speeches on an issue that, if we get it right, has the potential to be truly life-changing for so many in our society. We are here today to share the overwhelming evidence of the importance of the 1,001 critical days of a new baby’s life in determining his or her lifelong physical and emotional wellbeing, and to call on the Government to take strong and decisive action right away to ensure that every baby gets the best start in life.

I want to pay tribute to some recent work that has been undertaken in this important area by the Select Committees chaired by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) and the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). I know that the right hon. Member for North Norfolk was keen to speak today and I am sorry that his duties elsewhere mean that he cannot be with us this afternoon.

As many right hon. and hon. Members will know, until recently I was chairing a cross-Whitehall inter-ministerial group at the request of my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister, to look specifically at how the Government can best improve support in the earliest years, for families and their newborn babies. I pay tribute to the Prime Minister for her prioritisation of this key issue—I believe it can provide a vital part of her legacy.

I am told that the inter-ministerial group I chaired was the only significant piece of cross-departmental work under way, with the obvious exception of Brexit. I am so grateful to the Prime Minister for tasking me with the enormous responsibility of contributing my own experience and knowledge in this policy area to fundamentally change our society for the better. I was proud that one of the last things I did before stepping down from my role as Leader of the House was to sign off on the detailed recommendations of the group.

Before we turn to the recommendations, I want to take a few minutes to set out the science behind the importance of the 1,001 critical days. From conception to the age of two—the period that is now referred to as the 1,001 critical days—it is the existence of a secure and loving relationship with a key adult carer that literally shapes the way a baby’s brain develops. It is understood that, in the first year of life, more than 1 million new neural connections per second are being created in the brain. Secure attachment to a loving adult carer has a lifelong beneficial impact on the baby’s developing emotional health, and the developing brain will literally learn that the world is a good place and that problems can be solved.

Not only that, but secure attachment in the earliest period of life can have a positive impact on our entire social fabric. It is not about the impact on the individual; it is the positive ripple effect that secure attachment creates. It is the emotionally capable adults that those children become, able to make friends, learn, hold down a job, find a good partner and then become good parents themselves. It is the society that we could create if we fully address this issue.

Although it would be an exaggeration to claim that insecure or, worse still, disorganised attachment leads to all of life’s problems, at one level there is no doubt that it severely limits a person’s ability to cope with life’s ups and downs, and we know that in the most extreme cases a person’s earliest experiences can totally wreck their life. Negative early experiences create new generations of troubled and insecure young people and are often passed down to their babies by parents who themselves suffered insecure attachment. This is known as the cycle of deprivation. I well recall discussions with Dame Louise Casey when she was the troubled families tsar, who became convinced that intervening much earlier would be vital to prevent the later behavioural challenges that she was seeing, and the many discussions with my local police and crime commissioner, who recognises on the street every day the impact of a person’s earliest experiences on their tendency towards later criminality, addiction and violence, as well as depression and suicide.

It is clear that the science of brain development matters not just in our early years, but is a cradle-to-grave public health issue, the symptoms of which are evident in the years and decades that follow poor early experiences, which can cost the individual and society so much.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): Before the right hon. Lady moves on, let me say that I chair a multi-academy trust. We are trying, without additional expenditure, to use midwives and health visitors to work from schools, so that any feeling that they are hostile places might be lessened, and to seek funds for home visiting during the first two years, so that mothers and fathers can learn skills that are good for them and even better for their young children, as the right hon. Lady has highlighted. Does she agree that one of our pleas to Government should be to look at how they spend existing budgets, as well as to give this subject the priority it deserves?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman and I have worked together on this subject for many long years. I pay tribute to him for his amazing contribution in recognising the importance of secure early interventions and everything we can do to make people’s lives more successful and secure. I am sure that some of his ideas will be, and are being, taken forward by Government.
Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing the debate and the work that she has done. She and the Government might wish to consider the Imagination Library, an initiative that we have started in North Lincolnshire which signs up every child for a free monthly book gifting scheme from birth, so that parents and carers read with their children from an early age. Health visitors and the maternity units in our local hospitals are involved, so that when people register their child’s birth they are automatically enrolled in this incredible scheme, which is funded by North Lincolnshire Council. Over 95% of children in the North Lincolnshire part of my constituency are now signed up. The scheme is having a really impressive impact, which is following through to our literacy rates and something that the Government could consider expanding elsewhere in the country.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the so-called “Five to thrive” is cuddling up to your baby, reading with them and looking at pictures with them. That engagement, which develops the early brain of the infant, is vital, and I pay tribute to him for his work on that.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing this very important debate. It is vital that we get this right, and she has mentioned the troubled families programme. Bath and North East Somerset Council has a successful project, but I understand the funding is not secure. Does she agree that, where this has been an important part of a local authority’s intervention, it should continue and the Government should make funding available?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is right, and it is, of course, part of the upcoming comprehensive spending review. I will return to that later because, at the moment, the troubled families spending does not specifically pick out the 1,001 days, but I think it will in future.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on her work on this issue. I do not want to be negative or political, but it strikes me that, where a troubled family have an additional child, that additional child often does not develop as we would want. That happens for a variety of reasons, and it could be economic or the lack of a second parent. Has she looked at that? If so, does she have any solutions?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman tempts me to launch off in a completely different direction. He is right that, all too often, troubled families who have further children go on to have further problems, but the whole point of early intervention is that it can turn around the outcomes for all the family’s children, not just the new one. The programme is vital.

Insecure attachment in the early years has a cost to society in terms of not only human happiness but the financial cost to individuals, families and the public purse. As Professor James Heckman, a winner of the Nobel memorial prize in economics, has demonstrated, the return on every dollar invested in the 1,001 critical days delivers an exponential financial benefit in later life. Not only is early years intervention good for human happiness; it is also good for the public purse.

There are two profound areas of impact on the foetus and, then, the infant during the 1,001 critical days. The first is the level of cortisol, the stress hormone, and the second is the extent of the development of the infant’s prefrontal cortex. We know that a pregnant mother who suffers from stress produces more cortisol, which is easily transmitted via the placenta to the unborn child. The more stressed the mother, the more frequently the foetus is exposed to higher levels of cortisol.

The mother’s stress levels could be due to insecure employment, financial instability, the worry that her partner might leave her or the difficulties of being a single mum living in temporary or unsuitable housing, and so on. We know that exposure to high levels of cortisol can lead to modifications in gene expression while the foetus’s brain is still developing. Even in the womb, the potential for lifelong emotional and physical health is being determined.

We also know that maternal stress can lead to low birth weight, which can lead to all sorts of later complications, including diabetes, obesity and congenital heart disease. Once he or she is born, a baby left endlessly to cry themselves to sleep, or who is neglected or abused, will experience higher cortisol levels, which can over time lead to a lifelong higher tolerance of stress and an increased likelihood of being attracted to high-risk behaviour such as drug abuse, violence, criminality and so on.

We also know the critical role that the prefrontal cortex plays in developing the social and empathetic capacity of human beings. The prefrontal cortex is hardly present at birth, with the greatest growth spurt happening between six and 18 months, largely stimulated by the attention of a loving adult carer. Games like peekaboo, gazing into the baby’s eyes, smiling and mimicking them, and saying, “I love you. Aren’t you gorgeous?” [Interruption.] That is not directed at you, Mr Deputy Speaker. [HON. MEMBERS: “Ah.”] I take that back, as it was mean. You are gorgeous. It is just that you are not in my arms. All that, in those 1,001 critical days, acts to jump-start the growth of the prefrontal cortex and the development of that vital human empathic capability.

However, if mum or dad is depressed, or if the baby suffers adverse childhood experiences, such as witnessing domestic violence, sexual abuse or substance misuse, that can have a significantly damaging effect on the development of the prefrontal cortex and the baby’s ability to regulate their own emotions. That, extraordinarily, can affect the ability in later years to cope with life’s challenges and opportunities, to form strong relationships and even to hold down a job. At the extreme end, the impact will be disastrous for that baby’s own future life and therefore for society at large. So love—a secure early bond—is what we want for all babies, although that is far from what is happening today.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The right hon. Lady is giving a powerful speech on why early intervention is so important. One of the things I most regret from the past few years is the demise of children’s centres and of their ability to reach out into families—help educate parents about all the positive things that she is talking about. Money in the long term could well mean a small investment up front in these families, and children’s centres could be an easy way of achieving that. Does she agree with me on that?
Andrea Leadsom: Of course on one level the hon. Lady is right: having a safe place for families to meet and receive particular interventions is important. But it is not the whole picture. I will expand on that in my remarks.

Let us look briefly at some of the facts we know. First, 67% of the UK population has had at least one adverse childhood experience—one in eight people have had four or more. Secondly, this predicts certain risks for those one in eight, such as a three times greater risk of lung disease through smoking; an 11 times greater likelihood of intravenous drug use; 14 times the number of suicide attempts; and a four and a half times greater chance of developing depression. Thirdly, people with six or more adverse childhood experiences can die as much as 20 years earlier than those who have none.

Fourthly, where domestic violence is present in the home, there is an increased risk of child maltreatment. In one study, families where domestic violence takes place were shown to be 23 times more likely to abuse their under-five-year-olds than families without. Research shows that about 30% of domestic violence begins during pregnancy. Fifthly, it is understood that conduct disorder in young children leads to adult antisocial personality disorder in about 50% of cases, and is associated with a wide range of adverse long-term outcomes, particularly criminality.

Of course, we are all aware, every day, of growing levels of mental ill health among young people, as well as the self-harming and eating disorders that are blighting too many young lives. So it is pretty obvious to all those with a passion for the earliest years why this issue matters—not just to the individual, but to society as a whole. For all the good that a free education can do, for all the good that a free education can do.

I should give a “health warning” about all this. Let me say that I am in no way suggesting that insecure attachment always leads to disastrous outcomes. It is possible for a baby who was insecurely attached in infancy to grow up to lead a perfectly normal and happy life, but there is also significant evidence that a troubled early life makes that so very much harder.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is, of course, right to say that it is possible to turn around these outcomes, but the ideal time to do it is during that first, critical 1,001 days, when the baby’s brain is still developing. Although we will always seek to turn things around later on, if necessary, the best chance is during the 1,001 critical days.

As my hon. Friend says, it is possible for a baby insecurely attached in infancy to grow up to lead a perfectly normal and happy life, but there is significant evidence that a troubled early life makes that so very much harder. Sadly, disorganised attachment, in which the person one turns to for love and support is also the person who sometimes abuses or neglects one—and in some cases, terrifies one—can lead to the worst sorts of outcomes in later life, including socio-pathological behaviour and a later cycle of abuse. In short, those who go on to become abusers in 20 years’ time are all too often the vulnerable babies who are themselves being abused today.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The right hon. Lady is making a powerful point and we all appreciate her bringing this issue to the House. It all seems to stem from the cycle that we need to break. Does she agree that what we had with Sure Start centres and children’s centres was so important in enabling a change of behaviour and the breaking out of that cycle?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there is a cycle of deprivation, which I will come on to discuss, but, as I said to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), although Sure Start centres are a vital part—having that safe place—in the work that I shall come on to talk about, this is about much more than that. That is just one of many services.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Let me just help a little. The opening speech on a Back-Bench debate is meant to be 15 minutes and we are now at 20 minutes. I am worried about that. Although of course it is a very important debate and I will allow some time, Members should bear in mind that we have time limits that we try to work to. But it is too important an issue to curtail at this stage.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Those who go on to become abusers in 20 years’ time will all too often be vulnerable babies who are themselves being abused today. The question that really matters is how we even start to tackle this issue.

Having had my own brief experience of post-natal depression, I can certainly attest to how difficult it can be to cope as a new parent. Colleagues might have heard me speak before about my own memory of sitting in my kitchen with a crying baby, in the middle of winter, with snow on the ground outside, looked at through dirty windows, feeling totally unable to call a window cleaner or even just to make a cup of tea. That feeling of helplessness and hopelessness is a vivid memory—and it is now 23 years on.

This is not my sob story, though: I was lucky enough to have a great husband, a strong network of support and a job to go back to, which snapped me out of it, but, thinking back, it could have been so much worse. Many parents who are struggling to cope are dealing with that reality each and every day. I really do understand how debilitating depression is and how unexpected and horrible the feelings are.

It was when my mum, herself a trained midwife and therapist, asked me to go along and help with a charity she was working with—the Oxford Parent Infant Project—that I realised just how vital secure attachment in those first years really is. After 10 years as chairman and a trustee of OXPIP, I went on to set up NorPIP, the Northamptonshire Parent Infant Partnership, into which...
Early Years Family Support

[Andrea Leadsom]

my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) was dragged—although not kicking and screaming; she was delighted. I then set up PIPUK, the fabulous national charity that is setting up PIPs throughout the country to provide specialised parent-infant relationship support, including parent-infant psychotherapy, to families and their babies. PIPUK's aim is not only to address the immediate problems in the relationship between the baby and their parent, but to support a more positive and secure attachment for the long term.

I brought my passion for early years with me to Westminster when I was elected in 2010. I have since met so many brilliant people in the world of infant and maternal mental health, some of whom are present in the Chamber today, and many more of whom are following proceedings on TV. So many people have generously given their time and expertise. In 2011, with support from colleagues from every political party currently represented in Parliament, I launched "The 1001 Critical Days" manifesto, which called for a rethink of how we approach early years intervention at a policy level.

I particularly recognise the early commitment of the right hon. Members for North Norfolk and for Birkenhead (Frank Field), and of the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), in getting the work off the ground. I pay special tribute to the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for her dedication to the "The 1001 Critical Days" campaign. She and I promised each other years ago that we would remain committed to achieving real and long-lasting positive change. I am delighted that she is present. We can definitely achieve much through cross-party collaboration for the greater good, and this work is the perfect example of it.

"The 1001 Critical Days" campaign has received the support of more than 100 different organisations, including the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Barnardo's, Best Beginnings, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and the Royal College of Midwives, the Royal College of General Practitioners and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. There are just too many esteemed charities, royal colleges and foundations for me to list here. I also had the pleasure of working closely with Dame Tessa Jowell on work at OXPIP and PIPUK, which she mentioned a few moments ago—I have known him for the many years since we were at university together—for picking up the ball and continuing to drive these important issues forward to this day with his amazing dedication, focus and care.

Let me fast-forward through my more recent roles as Energy Minister, Environment Secretary and Leader of the House. On the face of it, there was little scope for me to continue the push on early years, but with the continued collaboration between the right hon. and hon. Members whom I have mentioned and many others, the excellent work has continued, culminating in the Prime Minister herself committing to support the early years agenda and asking me to set up the IMG in the summer of 2018.

The IMG itself comprised my hon. Friends the Members for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) and for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price). I pay real tribute to all of them for their hard work on the group, as well as to the dedicated civil servants who supported us. Our remit was to consider the individual, the family and the wider societal risk factors that affect child development in the conception-to-age-two period and the long-term impacts, as well as the issues with central and local government's approach.

The Prime Minister had asked the IMG to make recommendations to the relevant Secretaries of State that would support local areas in improving the co-ordination of early years services and in spending their current funding more effectively and more efficiently. I am so grateful to the Prime Minister for her continued support for, and interest in, the IMG, which my ministerial colleagues and I felt demonstrated the high priority being placed on that work.

I was delighted to be told that the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Mark Sedwill, has already prepared a cross-Whitehall civil service team to take our recommendations forward once signed off by the various Departments. We met as a ministerial group several times and undertook a great many visits to learn from examples of best practice right around the country. We visited Manchester children's centres, the Lambeth Early Action Partnership, a parent-baby drop-in group in Peterborough and an outreach group in Devon. We held roundtables with charities and families, including parents within the civil service. We had consultations on Mumsnet and spoke to so many passionate and dedicated people working within the sector who want to make a clear difference for parents and babies. It was a wonderful and thoroughly rewarding experience. Out of those visits, meetings and consultations, we quickly began to identify a number of common issues that clearly need attention.

First and foremost is the postcode lottery across the country of the availability of perinatal mental health and specialised parent-infant relationship support, particularly around parent-infant psychotherapy services. In some areas, the provision is fantastic, but in others it is almost entirely non-existent. We heard from parents and professionals wanting health visitors to provide greater levels of support to new parents and their babies, particularly where parents are struggling to form a secure bond, with better levels of breastfeeding support and post-partum care. We also had detailed evidence of...
the need for greater support for dads, greater support for same-sex parents, better availability for couple counselling and for targeted services for new parents, such as debt and housing advice.

One particular issue that we identified was the need for greater support for non-English-speaking parents. The incredible work of children’s centres was highlighted everywhere we visited, and there is no doubt that parents and professionals want to see family-centred spaces such as these protected. There is a great amount of need out there, and it is clear that we have the opportunity to bring about a huge step change in how we deliver early years family support right across the country, if we seize on the recommendations of the inter-ministerial group.

What did we recommend? First and most importantly, getting the 1,001 critical days right can put children on course for good social, economic and physical outcomes later in life. Getting it wrong creates inequalities and significant costs later for Government and society. Secondly, better focus on both universal and targeted services needs to be a priority in this period.

I will not go into all the key recommendations because Mr Deputy Speaker is looking impatient, but I will mention some of them. First, using the wealth of research and evidence taken by the IMG, Departments should work together to create a clear and cohesive Government vision for the 1,001 critical days. That should be published in the autumn after the spending review. Local authorities should be invited to set out their own service models that work for their local communities, and should be properly measured on that.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): The right hon. Lady has made an excellent speech and I commend her on the great work that she has done. However, she must also recognise that all the suggestions and ideas that have been put forward to deal with this situation require proper funding and new funding: new moneys for local authorities and for different groups to be able to carry out the suggestions. Is that money being promised?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Before the right hon. Lady responds, let me just say that I am not impatient—far from it. We have time on our hands. Unfortunately, I do not make the conventions of the House as soon as possible after we return, so that we may debate it further.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful for your advice, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I absolutely do understand your point. I know that you are very sympathetic, and I will hurry up.

The second key recommendation I want to mention is that Departments should work together to develop a spending review proposal for a fund that would support local authorities in rolling out best practice and innovation in the delivery of the 1,001 critical days services. Thirdly, Departments should work together to ensure that the successor to the troubled families programme has a specific focus on the 1,001 critical days.

The IMG set out many other recommendations, including investing in maternal and paternal perinatal mental health and ensuring that support is available to address issues in parent-infant relationships. We recommended that the NHS expands access to evidence-based parent-infant psychotherapeutic services within specialist service provision. We also felt that a website should be created to support parents to make informed choices and decisions at key points in their parental journey, including the information that people need about parental leave, childcare support, family-friendly policies and the 1,001 critical days.

Given that breastfeeding boosts a baby’s ability to fight illness and infection and supports emotional bonding in the early months of life, and given that the UK has one of the lowest rates of breastfeeding in Europe, we also recommended that further action must be taken to continue to focus on reforms that enable and support breastfeeding in England, including the recommendations of the “Becoming Breastfeeding Friendly” review. The IMG made many other recommendations, and I do hope that the Government pick these as soon as possible. One recommendation that I personally made very strongly is that there should be a specific ministerial responsibility for the 1,001 critical days.

As Members may know, I raised the work of the IMG with the Prime Minister during PMQs earlier this month, and I have tabled several written parliamentary questions to ask what progress has been made on addressing the IMG’s recommendations. I truly believe that we are on the threshold of something very exciting for our country—a real opportunity to deliver long-lasting and positive change in our early years family support policy that would make a huge difference to individuals and society as a whole. I call on the Minister to commit that the Government will report back before the House returns from summer recess, and I ask him to make a statement about that response on the Floor of the House as soon as possible after we return, so that we may debate it further.

4.24 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I for one, Mr Deputy Speaker, am pleased that you allowed the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) the time she needed to give such an excellent and outstanding speech about why the 1,001 critical days are so important. When she asked me to co-sponsor this debate, I did not hesitate to say yes. As she has said, she and I have worked together on this issue for many years. In fact, she was the first Government Member to approach me when I first got elected, and she asked me to get involved with her work on this important area. She sought me out and we have worked very closely ever since. As we heard in her outstanding opening speech, her personal commitment to this agenda is completely without exception. She has done a fantastic job and we really miss her drive and leadership in government on these important issues. I will say more about that later.

I will not try to emulate the right hon. Lady’s excellent speech, but, as she has said, all the evidence tells us that the most important time in the life not just of a child but of a human being is those first 1,001 critical days. The fact that we do not give enough attention to that is, in my view, immoral, because we know how important it is, yet it does not get the attention it deserves.

The science has already been outlined, but I want to highlight another aspect. Deprivation is still a really key issue for outcomes in the first 1,001 critical days and thereafter of a child’s life. We know from all the evidence...
that the single biggest indicator of how well someone will do in their GCSEs is their developmental level at the age of five. We also know that children from better-off backgrounds hear 30 million more words than those from less advantaged backgrounds. The developmental gap between the less well-off and their better-off peers is significant before a child even starts school. It can be as much as 18 months or more in some cases. The Government, services and others seem to spend a huge amount of time and money on trying to address these gaps later in life, when we could do a lot more earlier and save a lot more money in doing so.

That is why we are here today. If we spent on this issue even a fraction of the amount of resources and time that we spend on health, education, criminal justice, home affairs, the Department for Work and Pensions and all the services they support—and instead of focusing on the consequences of not getting the first 1,001 days right, focused on the root causes and those early years—not only would we save a huge amount of money for Government and the country, but we would create a much happier and better society.

We are here today because, unfortunately, the ambitious work that the right hon. Lady began and almost concluded in government has not yet come to light. Like her, I have asked questions, both written and oral, about what is happening. It would not take a huge amount. The Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), who will respond on behalf of the Government, is a fantastic Minister. He and I have worked very closely on a number of issues, and I do not doubt his commitment. I hope he will soon be in the Cabinet, and I believe that this issue needs Cabinet oversight.

What needs to happen? We have already heard some of the issues. I am going to focus on three things that I think need to happen. Some of my comments are based on my role leading on an outstanding piece of work that the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, asked me to do on school readiness across Greater Manchester.

We do not need lots of new initiatives and new programmes. We know what works, largely, and we know what we need to do. We are just not doing it as well as we should or making it reach as many babies and parents as it should. I do not want the Government to take the message from this that we want lots of whizzy new action plans. We just want to get the nuts and bolts, and the agenda and the importance of that agenda, right, because if we steer this oil tanker in the right direction, we can make great strides. It is not rocket science, and that makes it even more immoral that we are not doing some of these things, because we know what works in the early years.

The first thing we need, I am afraid, is more cash. We cannot have this conversation without discussing funding, and particularly funding for local government. As we have heard, many of the early help and intervention support services—including, critically, Sure Start children’s centres—are funded via local government, which has seen some of the biggest cuts across Government. Action for Children has published a really good report which shows the real value that Sure Start centres can provide in narrowing the attainment gap. The recent Institute for Fiscal Studies report on Sure Start children’s centres showed how much money was saved in just one area—hospitalisation of infants—for the NHS by reducing the number of unnecessary visits to hospital by parents.

We need more cash, and we need that cash to be allowed to be spent on early help and intervention. That includes the troubled families programme, which, as the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire said, should be extended to the early years. The troubled families programme is due to end soon. That would be a travesty, because it has done more to break the cycle of deprivation that we have heard so much about than many other joined-up programmes.

I want to make a small plea on funding. The Minister will know that I would not let this opportunity go without mentioning our valued maintained nursery schools, which in many cases act as hubs for children’s centres and the holistic, place-based, integrated support services that we need to change lives for the better. Their funding is at risk. The Minister has been an outstanding champion for them. He has done a great deal of work with the all-party parliamentary group on nursery schools, nursery and reception classes and others to secure funding. If he leaves office for a higher position under the new Prime Minister, which I am sure he will and which he deserves to do, I hope he will leave a firm handover note to his successor. The sector will miss him greatly if he leaves the Department for Education. He is the most popular Minister we have had in this Government.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): We’ve had quite a few.

Lucy Powell (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Indeed, and he is definitely top of the list by a long shot—I mean no disrespect to the others, but he has been very good.

The second thing we need to do is break down the barriers to joined-up services and commissioning. Key to that, as we have seen in Manchester, is the value of place-based, integrated services working together. In Greater Manchester, the early years delivery model acts as the core of the service. Every child, from pre-birth to the age of five, is seen at least eight, if not nine, times, with fully integrated service delivery, and intervention, support and advice can be put in place at any stage in the child’s upbringing. It is already paying real dividends. The innovative work we are doing with the BBC on communication and language and other work is starting to have real results, especially for the most in need. It cannot just be at a local level—it needs to be joined up with Whitehall too, but that is not the answer. It is about place-based, integrated services.

The third and final area—just to conclude, because I know lots of people want to speak—is workforce development. A real challenge in this space is to make sure we have a workforce right across the piece—from health visitors to midwives, but also outreach workers and those who work in childcare, social services, health, schools and education—who are valued and paid well for a job that is the most important job they could do and who also have the ongoing career training and development to understand the root causes of poor child development and the impacts that can have, so that the whole body of people who ever come into contact with a family and child are all working with the same agenda, vision and understanding of what needs
to happen. That is not a whizzy initiative or a press release; it is the hard yards and the real focus on developing a whole workforce around families that will really get us the step change we want. That is why we are setting up the Greater Manchester early years workforce academy, and we hope this will be a beacon for the rest of the country to look at best practice.

In conclusion, as I have said a number of times, this is not rocket science. We know what we need to do, but it needs proper funding, leadership and drive across Government through the country into places, homes and families. As insurers do when they are looking at insurance policies, we could all probably work out who the families most likely to need help are—we can get names, not just numbers attached to these issues—and there really is no excuse for us not to do it. It is immoral for us not to try to help break the cycle of deprivation and really tackle those early and important 1,001 critical days. I want to thank the Minister and particularly the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire for the leadership they have both shown, and I hope they will continue to have the opportunity to do so in government over the coming months.

4.36 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): What has marked out this debate already is Members’ great passion for and commitment to this subject. It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) and to hear more about the work she has been doing. However, the absolute tribute has to go to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who is quite simply the oracle on early years and attachment theory.

I will always remember the first time I met my right hon. Friend. I had a teach-in that most people would pay for on early years attachment theory. I think that it was in the car park of a pub, but I very much appreciated that teach-in. Actually, I do not think she realised it, but she sparked a real interest in this area for me. This conversation happened many years before we were both in Parliament together, and it really marked out a very deep interest for me. I was able to follow that up as a shadow Minister—not particularly when I had a ministerial post, but when I was a shadow Minister—in the years before 2010.

My right hon. Friend is an expert in early years and attachment theory, and I do not want to add to what she and, indeed, the hon. Member for Manchester Central has been doing. However, the absolute tribute has to go to my right hon. Friend. The Minister for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who is quite simply the oracle on early years and attachment theory.

Wera Hobhouse: The right hon. Lady is making a very powerful point about the perinatal mental health of women. NHS England and the British Medical Association are conducting a review of post-natal checks. I think that happened in the past, but it seems to have dropped out of the most recent iteration of the GP contract back in 2005 or 2006. It would be a great way to ensure that, as well as protecting mums before they give birth, we have a mental health check after they give birth. If mum’s mental health is good, attachment can be strong.

Mrs Miller: I have very strong sympathies with that. It should happen by rote for every woman, and I think that it happens haphazardly now. I can remember having that sort of conversation with my GP after the birth of my children, but it does not happen routinely. The NCT is right to pick this up. If we are to ensure that early
years family support is as good as it can be, it needs to include a mental health check for mums. All of us know individuals who have gone through post-natal depression. For the health of the mother as well as the children, it is so important that it is identified early on and action is taken.

As well as protecting mothers who are pregnant or have new babies, and as well as making sure that they get the right support from their GPs on mental health, the Government also need to reflect on a couple of other areas to make sure that our children have the best early years support possible. We heard about one of these earlier from my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), who talked about flexible working. The Government have already heard an expert dissertation from her, so I will not repeat what she said. In summary, however, the more that we can give flexibility to families, particularly when they have very small children, but not solely then—I speak as the mother of a teenager, as my youngest is now—so that they can balance work and family life, the better. This goes on for our children’s entire lives, even beyond them being children, so I hope that the Government are making sure that they take very seriously flexibility and flexible working as a default, which my hon. Friend spoke about in relation to her ten-minute rule Bill.

No Government have gone further than this one and the coalition Government in making flexible working something that we can all now request. We will take no lessons from anybody about any lack of understanding from Government Members on that, and I commend the Government for all the work that they have done, but we now need to look at going further to make sure that businesses take that flexibility for granted. The best practices are set out from my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) for securing this important debate today, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on her superb leadership of the all-party group on nursery schools, nursery and reception classes. I have been to several meetings. They happen to be held in room 14, and I am always amazed by how many people come from across the country to attend those all-important meetings to make the case for maintained nurseries, in particular.

I first came across the importance of this sector in education when I was a county councillor in Warwickshire. I realised the supreme importance of getting not only to these young people, but to young parents, who are perhaps inexperienced, first-time parents. I realised that there was such a need to help with those early weeks and months of a young child’s development and to assist young parents, who, as I said, may be a parent for the first time, to understand what has just hit them in their new lives. Having visited so many of the children’s centres, I was always struck by how important they were and what a fabulous environment they provided, which was not just safe, but very stimulating, and that was great for both infant and child. It helped them to develop their skills and provided the support for the parent, challenging what was normal and making the child think about those around them—perhaps something they did not have that home. It was a fabulous environment for them to prosper in.

It was a shame therefore to see the breaking up and closure of so many Sure Start centres and children’s centres. In Warwickshire, we have lost 25 of the 39 children’s centres we had seven years ago. That leaves our communities and society with the challenge of provision, particularly in highly deprived areas. In the time I have available, I want to focus on the work of maintained nurseries. My constituency is lucky to have some superb maintained nurseries, and I want to highlight in particular the ones in Warwick and Whitnash, both of which I have visited.

The vast majority of maintained nurseries are set up in the most deprived areas and are so important, but no matter how good they are, they are only as good as the people who run them and the funding they have to sustain themselves. That is the challenge. While many of us welcome the Government’s introduction of the free 30 hours’ provision for three and four-year-olds, it is having an impact on the viability of these nurseries and their ability to sustain themselves given the financial pressures. People working in maintained nurseries are on a real pay level of £3 or £4 an hour, which is way below the minimum wage and a long way short of a national minimum wage.

Maintained nurseries are important for stimulating and developing young infants in those early years—the 1,001 days we have been talking about. I join others in recognising the work of my constituency neighbour the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-upon-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), and the additional funding he secured. I commend him for doing that and urge him to bring certainty to these nurseries, which are under huge pressure from the funding crisis they face.
Finally, I pass on my thanks to all those who work and volunteer in these nurseries and elsewhere in our provision of early years across Warwickshire but certainly in Warwick and Leamington. I cite in particular the example of Warwick Nursery School, which will be celebrating its 60th birthday tomorrow. I thank them all for their work.

4.53 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western). I, too, worship at the altar of my right hon. Friend, the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom). She is the great authority on this subject and I pay tribute to her. I also pay limited tribute to the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), given I am no longer her favourite ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer—but then we go. [Laughter.] You can go off people.

It is interesting that at the same time as we started this debate there was a debate in Westminster Hall on children’s mental health. In the many years I have been in this place, subjects such as children’s mental health rarely got on to the Order Paper. It is a sign of huge progress that it is now much more common for us to talk about them—and with a great deal of experience and consensus. It is long overdue. We are starting to appreciate the huge strategic importance of doing much more, much better, much earlier for our children. Some of us have been banging on about that for many years in this place, and it is great to see many other headbangers joining us. It is becoming almost common parlance.

Wera Hobhouse rose—

Lucy Powell rose—

Tim Loughton: Hold on a minute. I will give way first to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and then to the hon. Member for Manchester Central.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the hon. Gentleman. Does he agree that the whole body of knowledge about adverse childhood experiences should be shared even more widely in the House, because it makes so much sense when we are discussing, for instance, the Prison Service or the probation service? Every service should be informed about trauma. Once we understand adverse childhood experiences, it all seems to make sense.

Tim Loughton: I think that the hon. Lady is my absolute favourite Member on the opposite Benches, and he will long remain so, even if I am no longer one of his.

Lucy Powell: I am completely recharged and relieved by that. The hon. Lady is my absolute favourite Member of Parliament for Manchester Central, and many things besides. But this debate is getting far too consensual, so I shall return to the points that I was trying to make.

The phrase “1,000 days”—or, for those whose glass is half full, “1,001 days”—is almost becoming common parlance as well, and it needs to. It needs to be almost a brand. People need to understand that those 1,001-ish days of life from conception to the age of two are the period that will have the most impact on a child’s future life. If we do not invest in the right support then, the cost of picking up the pieces later will be so much greater, both financially and, as I think everyone here recognises, socially.

I should declare an interest, in that I chair PIP UK—the Parent Infant Partnership—which was set up by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire. I became chairman of the trustees, and I am proud still to be so. Our most recent report is “Rare Jewels”. I pay tribute to Sally Hogg, who works for PIP and who did a great deal of research on the scarcity of parent and infant mental health specialist support. That was a false economy.

I shall now be slightly unconventional, and talk about the motion. The motion is about the inter-ministerial group, and I want to talk about some of the experiences of that group. As I found during my few years as a Minister, joined-up government is a complete myth. What the group almost uniquely did, because of the vim and force of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire, was bring together key Ministers from half a dozen key Departments to try to create joined-up solutions. A child’s mental health, and those early years affecting the child and his or her parents, are not just the preserve of the Department for Education and of children’s social care. They touch on the work of so many other Departments.

I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) is still here. She will remember that some years ago, when I was the Children’s Minister and Sarah Teather was also an Education Minister, we tried to put together the early intervention fund, which was largely intended to bring together different interests with a pooled budget so that we could work together on smarter solutions. However, that did not really fit the way in which the civil service worked.

We struggled for some months to pull together a plan that would involve various other Departments, and we were being frustrated at every turn; so we formed a pizza club, well before my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire was on the scene. My thirtieth birthday was a few weeks away. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire was out of the country, and my colleague Sarah Teather and I rang other colleagues—Housing Ministers, Health Ministers and others. I think that my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke
was then a Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions. We got together in “The Adjournment” restaurant, had a pizza, agreed what we wanted to do, and all went back to our Departments in the following days and told our civil servants what we wanted to do. The response was “Well, I’m sorry but that’s not the way we do things around here, Minister”, to which our response was “Tough, we’re now doing it.” That was the only way we could actually get through an important joined-up policy because the system just did not work. I do not think things have improved much at all.

Another innovation I set up then was the Youth Action Group. Again, there were problems and I tried to youth-proof all Government policy, which is something I still hang on about. There were many problems that transcended different Departments, and yet if there was a problem, it would go from one Department to another in a vicious triangle, as it were. So I got together six major charities led by the Prince’s Trust and Barnardo’s. I co-chaired it and, at one stage, I think we had nine Ministers from nine different Departments. Invariably most of those Ministers would turn up to those meetings and the children’s charities and youth charities would bring particular problems to us. One problem was about housing benefit for looked-after children who were care leavers, which was the responsibility of the Department for Education for care, the Department for Communities and Local Government—theever it was called in those days—for housing and the Department for Work and Pensions for benefits. We got the three Ministers together with the three lead officials and said, “Here’s the problem; can you please take it away and solve it and come back with a solution that the children and youth workers can then take away?” Alas, that group no longer exists, but we need far more of that sort of rationale and mentality in Government. The inter-ministerial group showed how it could be done, and it is so important that the work continues. I hope that the recommendations that have been made are taken up and run with.

We need a Minister for early years children and families at Cabinet level. It should not just be left to civil servants to people those committees when what we need is a co-ordinated ministerial response. This needs to be led by a high-profile Minister who has the clout, enthusiasm and drive to bring all the relevant Departments together and come up with a cross-departmental solution. I am afraid that we are still a long way from that in common practice, and that is partly what is wrong with Government and with our civil service. So that is my main plea.

On the investment equation, I am not going to repeat everything that has been said, but we know that healthy social and emotional development in the first 1,001 days means that individuals are more likely to have improved mental and physical health outcomes from cradle to grave and children will start school with the language, social and emotional skills they need to play and explore and learn. Children and young people will also be better able to understand and manage their emotions and behaviours, leading to less risky and antisocial behaviours and the costs that these bring to individuals and society, and they will have the skills they need to form trusting, healthy relationships—something we heard about in the Chamber earlier. If they had that, we would not have to spend such a lot of time teaching it to them at school because it would come naturally, and they would know what a proper quality, trusting relationship actually is. And if they know, they are much more likely to be able to hand it on and nurture their own children as they become parents in the future.

The cost of getting this wrong is huge. Some years ago—although it is still as true and important today—the Maternal Mental Health Alliance calculated the cost of getting perinatal mental health care wrong for the one in six women who will have some form of perinatal mental illness. The cost of that was £8.1 billion each and every year, and the cost of child neglect in this country is £15 billion each and every year; so £23.1 billion is the price of getting it wrong. A fraction of that spent on early intervention—well-targeted, well-timed, well-positioned by well-qualified and trained professionals—could save so much personal grief and so much financial and social grief later on.

It is not rocket science, as I constantly say; it is technically neuroscience, but it really is something we should have been doing so many years ago. The troubled families programme is the model here, and it is essential that the troubled families programme is not just retained, but expanded in the comprehensive spending review. I have always said that we need a pre-troubled families programme, because in the troubled families programme we are dealing with the symptoms of getting it wrong earlier. If we prevented those symptoms in the first place, working in those very early years, so that we have a well-balanced parent or parents with well-balanced children, they are more likely to arrive at school eager and able to learn and be contributing members of society. That is so vital. Some 28% of mothers with mental health problems report having difficulties bonding with their child. Research suggests that this initial dysfunction in the mother-baby relationship affects the child’s development by impairing the baby’s psychomotor and socio-emotional development.

Postnatal depression has also been linked with depression in fathers, and with higher rates of family breakdown. We forget the impact on fathers of not knowing how to deal with a mum—a partner—who all of a sudden has some form of postnatal mental illness. A lot of fathers are affected by this. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on fatherhood, is going to talk about this. It is essential that we look at all parents, when both parents are on the scene; and give support to the family as a whole.

Mrs Miller: I well remember working with my hon. Friend and I remember his huge commitment in this area. If there are now more debates and discussions about child mental health, a lot of that is down to him. I should like to highlight a report that the Select Committee is doing on men’s mental health. Does he agree that the NHS needs to think long and hard about the way in which men can access mental health services? We are receiving evidence that the way in which these services are delivered is almost highly feminised, making it difficult for men to access them.

Tim Loughton: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is still this myth that it is not manly to admit to having some form of mental illness. I hope that
we are getting away from the stigma of that, but we still have far to go in encouraging people. Hon. Members in this place who have come forward with their own very painful experiences have done a huge service by providing role models, as have celebrities in sport and showbusiness, and by showing that there is nothing unmanly or abnormal about coming forward when they have an illness that happens to be a mental illness, just as they would come forward if they had a physical illness. Why should there be any difference? However, we need to make it easier for men to cross that threshold in the first place. We need to ensure that they can come and talk to somebody and get checked out.

I am not going to go into the whole children’s centre argument. That is an important issue but this is not just about the bricks and mortar. However, one of my criticisms is that those places need to be much more dad-friendly, and much more imaginatively used. I have opened many children’s centres in my time, and I have seen some great ones that have football clubs on Saturday afternoons when the children’s centre is too often closed because it is a nine-to-five, Monday to Friday institution. Dads bring their kids and they play football together; then they do computers and reading with their kids afterwards. That is great bonding and co-educational time as well. Again, this is not rocket science. We need to make those places more welcoming for dads, and we need to put them in places that young fathers inhabit.

The killer statistic that I always use is that if a 15 or 16-year-old child in school has some form of depression, there is a 99% likelihood that their mother suffered from some form of mental illness during pregnancy or soon afterwards. The correlation is that close, and if we do nothing to help the mother at that early stage, we will certainly see the consequences later on. It is great that the Prime Minister has flagged up mental illness, and it is great that so much more will be happening with additional funding—not enough, but there will be additional funding—for mental health services in schools, but we need to do all this before school as well so that kids are less susceptible to mental illness problems, given all the pressures that they will face as they go through their school years. We need a much more joined-up approach.

Research by the Children’s Commissioner shows that 8,300 babies under the age of one in England currently live in a household where domestic violence, alcohol or drug dependency and severe mental illness are all present. That is a very worrying amount. That is why the Domestic Abuse Bill, which was at last introduced today, is very important, but we need to look at the impact on children as well as the impact on parents, because that trauma will be long-lasting. We tend to look at the immediate victim of domestic violence without looking at the collateral damage that it also causes. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire mentioned the all-party parliamentary group that I chair. As the IHV recently noted, England is now at risk of sleepwalking into the loss of the health visiting service as we know it, unless urgent action is taken to address the current threats it faces. There are ongoing cuts to the public health grant, a 26% reduction in NHS-employed health visitors since 2015 and an unwarranted variation in the quality of services commissioned for families based on where they live rather than the level of need. As the IHV says, investing in the earliest years saves money in the long run and ensures that every child is supported to achieve the best start in life, yet the cuts to services in England persist at a time when inequalities are widening and infant mortality is increasing.

Health visitors are the trusted face on the doorstep. Whereas social workers are often treated with scepticism and fear when they knock on the door, the health visitor is usually welcomed over the threshold, particularly by new parents. He or she is an early warning system of some deficiency in parenting, as well as for safeguarding. Health visitors are a huge resource. One of the great achievements of the Cameron Government—I was part of the discussions in the shadow Health team when we came up with the idea—was the huge expansion of the health visitor programme. Based on the research we did in the Netherlands with the Kraamzorg programme, which showed the impact that health visitors can have at an early stage when they have good, strong engagement with new mums and dads, there was a commitment in the 2010 manifesto to increase the number of health visitors to a figure of, I think, 4,200. By 2015, that figure had just about been achieved. Alias, since then, things have gone into reverse.

I pay tribute particularly to Dr Cheryll Adams CBE, head of the Institute of Health Visiting, who has had a major input into the work that my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire has already mentioned and the all-party parliamentary group that I chair. As the IHV recently noted, England is now at risk of sleepwalking into the loss of the health visiting service as we know it, unless urgent action is taken to address the current threats it faces. There are ongoing cuts to the public health grant, a 26% reduction in NHS-employed health visitors since 2015 and an unwarranted variation in the quality of services commissioned for families based on where they live rather than the level of need. As the IHV says, investing in the earliest years saves money in the long run and ensures that every child is supported to achieve the best start in life, yet the cuts to services in England persist at a time when inequalities are widening and infant mortality is increasing.

Finally, I reiterate the recommendations made in the “Building Great Britons” report that the all-party parliamentary group produced in 2015. It was about having a joined-up Government approach to the 1,001 days: about every local authority drawing up its local plan and working with all the local agencies on how to
deliver that plan for the 1,001 days, within a five-year term at least; and about having a monitoring system, which I based on the adoption scorecards that we brought in back in 2012, so that there is no place to hide and everyone has to be transparent about how they are progressing towards producing those services, compared with other parts of the country.

The solutions were in that report. We all know what needs to be done. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire led the way in bringing together the relevant parties and Departments to show how it could be done. Now we need to do it.

5.14 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I should start by apologising for the fact that I will not be here for the wind-ups, with the agreement of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) and the Minister. Both are aware that we are suffering quite a challenging family situation at home—cortisol levels are quite high—so I will dash away immediately after I have spoken, although I could not miss the opportunity to speak this afternoon.

I remember a young woman from north Oxfordshire. She had two toddlers and was trying to do a part-time job, with a husband who was busy working away from home. She had suffered the death of a baby previously, so was relatively vulnerable in her state of early motherhood. I remember her standing outside a school gate near her home when a blonde woman bore down upon her. Rather like my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), my first experience of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire involved a long discussion about brain scans, Romanian orphans and how important brain development is in the first six to 18 years of life. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke, I found that the discussion took quite a long time, but at the end of it, I too was completely converted to the cause. I went on to become a founding trustee of NorPIP, the Northamptonshire Parent Infant Partnership.

Despite my extremely challenging family circumstances this afternoon, I have to speak in this debate. I pay enormous tribute, as everybody has, to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire. She has persuaded a generation of us from across the House that this issue really matters. Despite your enormous indulgence of her, Mr Deputy Speaker, she did not have time to tell you how fabulous the work of PIP UK is—OXPIP, the Oxford Parent Infant Project, and NorPIP were the pioneers in those days, along with a few other areas—or how its targeted work with vulnerable women who need careful, considered, medical, evidence-based treatment transforms the lives of their families, babies and the following generation's babies, who will be brought up by those families, which is something that we perhaps have not said enough about. We need to look at this in the very broadest sense; this is about parenting.

I pay tribute to everybody who has spoken this afternoon. We have obviously all been got at in the same way by my right hon. Friend. We have read our briefs and have learned how critical the first 1,001 days are. We have learned to say things in words that have been carefully chosen: things about parenting, about brain development and—I am going to say it, because my right hon. Friend did not—about “two is too late”, an early slogan of PIP UK that is not comfortable to say or think. Of course, two is not always too late, but it is a blimmin’ sight easier to intervene before two. That should be the message that goes out loud and clear this afternoon.

Everybody else who has spoken is an expert in this field, so I will restrict myself to two constituency examples, as I want to add something in a small way to this debate. The first concerns a breakdown in parenting, which is something that one of my senior headteachers has been talking to me about for around 18 months. He has noticed that children arriving at the nursery in his school are not potty trained and have much lower levels of communication than in previous years, and he is really worried about that. He set up a fantastic organisation called Safeguarding Children in Banbury, which I am pleased to say the Minister came to visit not so long ago, with 19 other schools in my area. The organisation aims to help schools to deal with traumatised, not school-ready children.

I will not go into the examples that that headteacher has given me in any detail because it would probably be possible to identify the families, but it is fair to say that seven families cause him most of the concerns in his one school. Those seven families have 34 children, who have been or are currently in his care. These are complex cases that involve drug abuse, other forms of abuse and, it has to be said, neglect. He has asked me some profound questions, which he also shared with the Minister, about the role that we expect schools to play today.

Do we expect schools to educate our children as well as they possibly can through really good teaching, or do we also expect them to be a frontline safeguarding service that addresses concerns over which they have no control? Children arrive at school aged three or four, and we expect the schools to deal with earlier neglect and abuse. The headteacher whom I mentioned spends a lot of his time filling in education, health and care plans, which he does not feel is the best use of his time. He is concerned that we do not have the right balance or the right role for schools, which are on the frontline of this battle.

My second constituency example is of Adoption UK, which I am proud to say is based in my area. There is, of course, an enormous link between early years support and successful adoption. My family have had successful adoptions over the years, but it is important to remember that, for my generation, the average age of adoption was three months. My cousin has recently adopted; the average age for a child being adopted now is three years. The first 1,001 days are critical, and we can all work out the importance of getting to these particularly vulnerable children at the earliest possible stage.

I said earlier that two is too late, and we know that two is the optimum age by which we have formed good attachments and the bonds we need to form good relationships in later life, but there is a plasticity in early adolescence, when it may be possible to help children who did not have the best start in life to recover as best they can.

I urge the Minister to do all he can to safeguard the adoption support fund, as it has been repeatedly shown that this brilliant innovation targets help at the families
and children who need it, some 90% of whom say it has helped them a lot—children’s parlance—with their mental health issues. These are children who, by definition, have difficulties with attachment and who have suffered in the past. It is important that we do that as a minimum.

In the early adolescent years it is possible to help children who have had a bad start in life and, by default, we should help them by offering all the counselling and extra services they may need. It should almost be that an adopted child has to opt out if they do not need it. If it is possible to help with attachment during that early adolescent period, it is important that we do everything we can to do so.

We have had some brilliant solutions, not least from my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). I would also like to plug Home-Start UK, which has a great organisation in my constituency—I am sure other Members share my love for Home-Start. I learned in my early years at NorPIP that peer-reviewing and evidence is key to people taking this sector seriously, and I am interested in Cardiff University’s study, which shows high levels of improvement in the mental health of children who have been helped by Home-Start.

We have heard about the importance of universal services, not least from the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell). This is not all about deprivation, and other families do need to be picked up—my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke suggested that six-week checks are critical—but targeted services are important, too. The families in Banbury identified by this headteacher are known to all sorts of services. We need to take a joined-up, targeted approach and get in there before the baby is born.

I very much hope that the IMG report and all its recommendations will be considered in enormous detail by the Minister—and by whoever takes over from him if he does move on. When I worked as a Parliamentary Private Secretary to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire, I was fortunate enough to sit in at some of the IMG’s meetings; I do not think I am breaking too many confidences by saying that after those meetings several—in fact more than several—of the Ministers present sidled up to me in the Lobby or in the Tea Room and said, “Golly, I didn’t know all that about early brain development. Do you think I got it right with my own children?”

I had that conversation again and again, and I assure my right hon. Friend has it daily with colleagues and everyone else she comes across. It is true that we can all be better parents, at all levels of parenting. Investing in early years really is spending to save.

5.25 pm

**Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a great pleasure to contribute to this important debate. I, too, want to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) for her role in bringing this important issue and report before us.

I have the huge pleasure and joy of being the father of two boys. I feel somewhat old now, because the older one is due to be 29 shortly and my youngest one got married two weeks ago—it was a great day. So it was some time ago that I had that joy of being a new dad, but it is as a dad and as the co-chair of the all-party group on fatherhood that I want to talk a little about the role of fathers in this important matter.

I feel a little left out, because I did not meet my right hon. Friend until 2015, when I had been elected, and so did not have the benefit of her input on this matter before becoming an MP, but I know from my own experience of being a dad, and from various roles that I played before coming to this House, the importance of those early years, both before birth and immediately after. I know just how important that time is for getting that connection to the parents right.

The report is such a good thing—but if I were to have one concern, it would be that we could do more to recognise the importance of the role that dads play at this time in a child’s development. I encourage the Minister to consider and take note of the Centre for Social Justice report “Testing Times: Supporting fathers during the perinatal period and early parenthood”, which was written, in part, to support this review.

It is right we consider the role of fathers, who, according to the Office for National Statistics, are almost always present during this period; 95% of babies are born to couples, with 85% living under the same roof. Fathers are present, but despite that they often feel much overlooked at this important time in respect of their important role in supporting new families. Positive engagement and a strong emotional connection to a father has beneficial impacts—not just for the baby, but for the new mother, ranging from better physical and mental health outcomes to supporting emotional and cognitive development in young children.

It is a mistake to overlook the role of fathers, yet so often we do. In an analysis of inspection frameworks around maternity services, health visiting and children’s centres, we find that the word “father” is hardly ever used; the role of fathers is literally written out of public services during this important period. Fathers are increasingly being written out of everyday language, being referred to through vague generic terms such as “birthing partner”. The intention of such phrasing might be to avoid causing offence, but it denies the reality of the pregnancy process and the early days of parenting that fathers are almost always around.

Health services will never have enough workers or resources to be the round-the-clock support network for new mums. When new mothers are asked about support, almost two thirds identify their partner as being their primary source—that is almost three times as much as the next option, which is their own mother. Only 5% say that healthcare professionals are the most valuable support. It is not surprising that fathers feel badly undervalued, with seven out of 10 new fathers saying that they are made to feel like a spare part during the pregnancy period.

The Centre for Social Justice and others have called for Ministers to introduce into inspection frameworks a “dad test”, which would mean writing into inspection frameworks for maternity services, health visiting and children’s centres a series of expectations around engaging fathers and helping them to help mother and child. There is so much more that we can do in this important policy area. Overlooking the role of fathers is misjudged. I hope that the Minister will look again at the report and ask what more can be done to ensure that new dads...
are given the support that they need, so that they can provide the help and support that the mother and child need at such a critical time.

5.30 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate in support of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who has such passion for and knowledge about this issue. I too feel a bit left out, because I have never been accosted in that way. I am a little bit upset, but perhaps we can do that later. I echo what my Cornish colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), said about fathers. I will touch on it a little later, but I am one of those who felt left out throughout that process.

I am a huge advocate of cross-departmental working, if joined-up government is even possible. As with many issues, collaboration in early years work is incredibly important if we want to improve the effectiveness of services, both in Government and out there in service delivery at a local level. The working group chaired by the former Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire, was a positive step in bringing together all those Departments that need to be involved to find a rounded answer to the many complex issues relating to children's services. I hope that that group drew some genuine conclusions that can be carried forward under a new Government, and it is positive to hear that my right hon. Friend expects that to be the case.

I wish to acknowledge the progress the Government have made on early years. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) spoke about flexible working and shared leave. I am proud of the fact that more than 850,000 disadvantaged two-year-olds have benefited from free early education places since these were introduced. We spend £3.5 billion a year—that is more than ever—on early years entitlement, targeting those children who are less likely to access formal early education than their more affluent peers and helping to close the unfair gaps that exist from birth. As has been touched on, though, sometimes by the time those children reach two the challenges they have already been set in place. It is then much more difficult to overcome them.

We need to do more to support children in disadvantaged areas, including Mansfield and Warsop in my constituency. On average, by the time a child from a disadvantaged background reaches the age of five, they are four months behind more affluent children in their overall development. The figures for children who start primary school are given the support that they need, so that they can provide the help and support that the mother and child need at such a critical time.

I support the point made by my colleague on the Education Committee, the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell): we do not need more whizzy initiatives. In fact, the Select Committee has looked at lots of whizzy initiatives in recent weeks and I have been highly unimpressed by several of them. We need to spend that money on the high-quality delivery of the basic services that we know work out there in local settings.

I support Action for Children's call for the Government to set a clear direction for children's centres, to introduce an outcome framework to address the current funding challenges, and to use the next spending review to allocate additional funding to local authorities for children's services. Children's centres provide support to families so that they can overcome challenges and help to provide a safe environment for children, but without adequate funding for children's services, children's centres have struggled. So many local authorities are in deficit in respect of children's services that it can be a huge challenge to look at moving to a more preventive, proactive approach, when they cannot fund the crisis services they are being asked to put in place.

We often argue in this place about Sure Start versus family hubs and other models. I advocate bringing some of those services into a primary school setting, because primary schools are trusted institutions that people might be happier to visit and to access. One way or another, a joined-up approach to proactive service delivery, accessible to those who need it, is necessary.

In those early weeks and months, we need to support the health visitors in their role of helping parents, babies and families across the country. I am happy to see that the Government will implement continuity of carers, which means that mothers will receive care from the same midwife throughout pregnancy, birth and into the postnatal period to better guard perinatal mental health. More support for young mothers and families can only be a good thing. I have mentioned my own experience as a new father, watching my wife cry as she fed our newborn baby, feeling very left out and totally helpless in that situation. Obviously, our family was a huge support, but so too were the health visitors. The advice that they gave us at that time was vital.

There are opportunities to access funding through other Departments. Obviously, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has some funding challenges. Health visitors used to come under the Department of Health. Their role is still very clearly a huge support, but so too were the health visitors. The advice that they gave us at that time was vital.

I am also pleased that the Home Secretary has recognised that the Government need to tackle the adverse childhood experiences that my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire mentioned in her speech. The experience of drug abuse or domestic violence poses huge challenges throughout the lives of young people. Steps have been taken towards better cross-departmental working on this issue, identifying people who are at risk, but there is so much more to be done. When we compare people with four or more adverse childhood experiences with those who have none, we see that they are more likely to go to prison, more likely to develop
heart disease, type 2 diabetes, or mental illness, more likely to commit crime and more likely to undertake other health-harming behaviours such as drinking, smoking and drug use. Many of those issues are far too prevalent in my constituency. If we look at the statistics, we see that places such as Mansfield often feature at the top of the wrong kind of tables, which puts children at particular risk. These adults often go on to have children of their own who experience the same issues in their childhood, creating a downward spiral that crosses many generations. If we do not intervene early, it will affect many families and individuals and create challenges for schools and adult services across the board. It is a prime example of how investing in early intervention services saves not only lives but money further down the line.

What is clear even from this short speech in this debate today is that the issues cross countless Departments, many different Ministers in Westminster, and a variety of local service providers from local government to health, education, police and many more. After decades of erecting barriers between these services, each with its own pot of funding and its own agenda, we now must find a way of bringing those barriers down and building on the evidence of successful schemes that require genuine collaboration—working and funding things together. We need to do that locally and nationally, which is why my right hon. Friend’s working group is still so important. It is why the troubled families programme is an example to follow. It is why we should be seeking out, rewarding and sharing best practice in this area.

Last week, I met the bigger charities in this sector, including Action for Children, Barnardo’s, and the Children’s Society. We discussed the collaborative approach that needs to be taken by those kinds of third sector organisations to make a convincing case to the Government and to the Treasury for proactive and preventive children’s services. A financial case for shifting that investment upstream also needs to be made, making it obvious that value for money as well as the social value of that kind of support are key aspects as well.

Ultimately, it is only cross-departmental working and properly funding early intervention services that will break the cycle and improve the lives of children in areas such as Mansfield. It too often seems to be children who fall through the cracks between Departments —whether it is children’s services across the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Education, the Department for Work and Pensions and all the other services that come into that, all the way through the age range to youth provision, which has similar challenges across different Departments. We have to bring that back together. I certainly support the idea of Cabinet-level responsibility for these things all together.

I urge the new Government to commit to additional funding for children’s services and to properly prioritise early intervention in the first 1,001 days, building on the work that has been done by my right hon. Friend and others. I am encouraged to hear that the IMG’s work continues and will be taken forward under that new Government, as there is an awful lot to do in this area if we are to make sure that our children have the very best start in life. We need to deal with all those issues in the first two years, when it is vital that we find and support those young people.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) and the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on their work, and I agree with much of what has been said this afternoon.

It will not surprise those who know my background as a former school teacher that I want to focus a little bit on education and the literacy programme that I mentioned when I intervened on my right hon. Friend. I started teaching secondary school in Hull, sadly more years ago now than I would care to remember. When I went into that job I thought to myself, “Actually, I can really change lives in this role.” To some extent, that is true. But teaching 11 to 16-year-olds, I very quickly learned that so much of how my pupils’ lives were going to work out had already been set for them, mostly by the age of 11 and certainly by the age of 16.

When I left secondary school teaching, I became a primary school teacher and I went to teach year 1. Going from teaching 11 to 16-year-olds to teaching five-year-olds was probably the biggest shock of my life. I thought that that age would be the point at which a teacher really has a huge, life-changing impact on children; and, of course, they absolutely do. But I very quickly realised again that, by five years old, the life chances of so many of the children I was teaching had already been set for them because of their pre-school experiences, family situations, social deprivation and all the rest of it. It was incredibly sad. There were instances when a new child would be starting at the school and we would already have had pupils from that family through the school already. Sadly, we would already know the challenges we were going to face with that new child, whose name we only knew from the register, because of the situations that had already been determined for them even before they started school.

As a primary school teacher, it became clear to me that literacy was absolutely fundamental to how well a child would perform throughout their school career. Where they started in school at four or five years old very much determined where they would end up with their GCSE results at the age of 16. Those children who had a history and heritage of sitting at home and reading with their parents, carers and grandparents came to school with much better literacy rates. Their speech was also better, and they were so much further ahead than other children in their ability to communicate and interact with adults and children. For very many of them, that start set how they would perform not just in the first few years at school, but throughout their entire school career.

Not long after I was elected, I got in touch with Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library. As the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) will know very well, Dolly Parton set the library up because of her own childhood experiences with illiteracy. We met representatives of the Imagination Library and both my local councils—North Lincolnshire Council and the East Riding of Yorkshire Council—and we tried to set up a local scheme to support some of the poorest children into membership. It is a very cheap scheme, costing about £28 or £30 per child per year. For those who do not know about the Imagination Library, it sends children an age-appropriate book in the post every single month.
from birth through to five years old. This provides a really special time for families and it is a real event when the book arrives.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Percy: Of course; the hon. Lady’s town in particular knows about this scheme.

Sarah Champion: The Imagination Library had a transformative effect on children in Rotherham, not least because they felt so special receiving their books. Each book became something that was treasured, brought out and shown to other children. The scheme empowered a whole community, so I fully support the hon. Gentleman in trying to bring it to his constituency.

Andrew Percy: I thank the hon. Lady for her support. It might sound funny, but it is a real event when the book arrives in the post every month. The expectation of is a thing in itself. Then there is the process of the child opening the book, talking about it with their parent, carer or whomsoever, and spending time sitting down and bonding, which, as we know from the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire, is so important in those early years. This has such a transformative effect.

I am very proud to say that there are two schemes running in my area. I run a very small scheme in Goole—the Goole and Snaith Imagination Library—which I provide all the funding for myself. I am always asking anybody local who could help to sponsor more children to cough up some dosh and put it in the pot. It is a very small scheme. Unfortunately, I could not get the local authority to pay for it, but there are 110 children in Goole on that self-funded scheme, which I run through my office and fund myself and through other donations.

In North Lincolnshire, however—this is not a political point, because my party runs both councils—in 2013 we secured funding to roll out the scheme to every single child in the area, thanks to the leadership of Councillor Rob Waltham, who is now the council leader but who previously held the portfolio for young people. Since 2013 we have delivered through the letter boxes of North Lincolnshire almost 500,000 books to local children.

The take-up rate in my constituency is about 95%, and across the whole of the borough it is about 90%. At present, 8,100 children from birth to five in North Lincolnshire are signed up to the scheme. The buy-in has been incredible. As I mentioned in an intervention, when someone has a child at the local NHS maternity unit at Scunthorpe General Hospital, the first thing that happens is they are signed up and given a basket that includes information about the Imagination Library. When the birth is registered, they are checked again to see whether they have registered for the Imagination Library. Children’s centres, health visitors and every local public service are signed up to the Imagination Library.

The council has done that without any additional funding from anywhere, in very difficult times. I am very proud of what we have done in North Lincolnshire to ensure that this is universal. Some people said at the start, “Some parents can afford this and should perhaps pay for it themselves,” but, to be frank, we took a political decision and said, “No, it doesn’t matter. Every child should be signed up, regardless of whether or not they can pay, because the benefit is beyond doubt.”

The results are reflected in our primary school figures. For example, in 2018 we were the most improved authority in the country for literacy and writing, and I think our phonics screening results were the seventh best in the country—they were certainly well above average. We have the data and it is manifesting itself in improved standards at primary school. Regardless of whether their parents can afford to buy a book every month, every child in North Lincolnshire gets a book through the post every month for five years, throughout reception and before they start school.

It is sad that the scheme drops off and ends at the age of five. A number of people write to me saying, “This is a brilliant scheme, but it’s such a shame that it stops at five.” As I have said, we have all the data and statistics showing the impact that the scheme has had. The most important data for me, however, is the testimony of local parents. When we set up the scheme, we focused it on the most challenged part of Goole, and a mother in Goole wrote to me saying, “I just want you to know that this scheme has been incredible for me and my child. I was not a confident reader, but sitting there every month with my child has improved my own literacy.”

When I was a schoolteacher, the reason that some parents did not spend time reading and writing with their children and teaching them the ABCs and 123s was they lacked confidence in their own literacy or numeracy abilities. That then manifested itself in what might have appeared to be neglectful behaviour, but they were actually embarrassed that they did not have the confidence to pass those skills on to their children. I found that sad. A lot of work has been done across our local authority to address that. It was not always a matter of neglect.

I do not want to say anything further, other than that I hope the Minister will look at the example of the North Lincolnshire Imagination Library. As I have said, almost 500,000 books have been delivered to local children through their letter boxes, and that is having a very clear impact on primary school results. It is not necessarily cheap, but we have decided locally that it is more worthwhile to do this because the benefit is beyond doubt. Whether they are small schemes, of which a number are running across the country, or big schemes, these programmes can really make a difference to children’s lives, including the 110 children in Goole who are benefiting and the 8,000-plus who are benefiting across North Lincolnshire.

5.50 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to respond to the debate on behalf of my party. I would like to thank the Backbench Business Committee and its Chair, my hon. Friend the Member
for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), for making time for this important debate, as well as the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) and my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) talked about maintained nurseries. My good friend the Member for Manchester Central has shown great support and commitment to early years and always comes up with fantastic solutions to problems. Her Manchester example is exemplary. I thank her for her work on maintained nurseries—she has put fantastic pressure on the Minister—and the early years workforce academy.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) focused on health visitors. She does brilliant work with the Women and Equalities Committee on shared parental leave, pregnancy discrimination and maternity discrimination. I will take this opportunity to make a plug for my “selfie leave” ten-minute rule Bill for the self-employed. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) has years of experience, and I was humbled by his contribution. He focused on adverse childhood experiences and called for joined-up solutions, which is exactly what we want. The scheme described by the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) was extraordinary, and I will definitely take it back to Batley and Spen. The numbers speak for themselves.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) talked about local examples and adoption support. As we heard from the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), fathers are often missed out. I am doing work on trying to get men into early years settings, so that fathers feel more comfortable taking their children into those settings and discussing parenting and so on. I apologise if I have missed any Member out.

We have had a fantastic debate. The contribution from the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire was exceptional. Her personal experience was very moving. I am sure that lots of people outside this building will find the fact that post-natal depression can happen to anyone very relevant, and I hope that it will encourage them to seek support. Today’s speeches show the determination and imagination that exists in this House to get the first 1,001 days of a baby’s life right, and we have heard about the extraordinary speed at which babies’ brains develop.

I would like to speak to the two Select Committee reports cited in the motion and then move on to explore some of the options available to us. The first is the report of the Science and Technology Committee called “Evidence-based early years intervention”. I was very interested in the report at the time of its release, and it was a privilege and pleasure to enjoy a thorough debate on the report in Westminster Hall in March. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) spoke with a great deal of wisdom in that debate. He had hoped to speak today, and his contribution is missed.

It is clear that there is cross-party consensus on the need for a data and outcomes-driven national strategy for early intervention. No matter how good the work that has been done, the report makes clear that best practice should be spread across our country, and with technology, that should be easier than ever before. I share the disappointment that this key recommendation has not been accepted by the Government.

From reading the report, it is clear to me how important it is to share information. The fact that there has never been a tragedy in early life because too much information was shared speaks for itself. Unfortunately, we have seen how dangerous not sharing information can be. Much of this is because different agencies use different computer systems and different data handlers. We need a far better understanding of the principle of the Caldicott rules, sharing information when it is in someone’s best interests.

I now turn to the Health and Social Care Committee report on the “First 1000 days of life”, which is truly a fantastic report. It comes at a pivotal time for children, when, according to Action for Children and YouGov, two thirds of parents and grandparents believe, for the first time ever, that their children and grandchildren will have a worse life than they have had. There are children—so many—who are just not getting the best start in life. At the age of two, there is a six-month developmental gap between higher and lower-income families, with one in 18 two to four-year-olds experiencing mental health issues. When I read this report, not only did I think some of the recommendations were absolutely excellent, but it highlighted for me how many gaps there are in what we currently provide.

First and foremost, I pay tribute to the recommendations in the report, including that the Government should consider the needs of vulnerable families in all policies. This is an absolutely brilliant step forward if we can make that work. It is important for children and health, and it will also send a strong message about social mobility and social justice. I was really encouraged to see the work of the Better Start projects. I have been lucky enough to get to know the work of Better Start in Bradford and the way it works across the local area, with a focus on health and education, which is really encouraging. In fact, I was really lucky to join it for Baby Week last November. That weeklong celebration of babies was informative and enjoyable; I got to squeeze lots of babies, which is always a good bit of my job. I would like to applaud the National Lottery Community Fund for its vision in creating this programme.

As a last point on this report, I want to touch on health visits. The report recommends five mandated visits and an additional visit when the child is aged between three and three and a half. Visits are so important for the health of a child, but they also help professionals understand the home environment of the child so that they can identify children at risk and respond to their complex needs.

If we discuss the first 1,001 days of a child’s life, we must discuss Sure Starts and children’s centres. A number of interventions have pointed to the loss of Sure Starts and how they made a difference. We know these centres can be transformative when parents need them—but, more than that, they support parents in building a loving and nurturing environment for their children, as well as in building...
attachment and an opportunity for the caring and safe home that is so integral to much of what we are speaking about today.

Let me say, very briefly, that I was lucky to visit Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Centre in Newham, where the focus is very much on the attachment theory. It has one worker who stays with a child, goes to their home and supports them throughout their experience in the nursery. I was told, statistically, about the children who will not settle. At the end of the first term, 1% of children leave maintained nurseries. However, there is not the focus on attachment in private nurseries, and often 12% of children leave those settings after the end of the first term because they have not settled. Attachment works, and we certainly see good practice in maintained nurseries.

Centres help with supporting children to become school-ready—whether through direct learning in the centre, or via the centre supporting parents to read to and to teach their children. This work is needed now more than ever, as just 57% of children from poorer backgrounds are school-ready by the age of five, by comparison to 74% of their wealthier peers. This just does not feel good enough, especially when we considered the frightening rate at which Sure Starts and children's centres have disappeared from our communities.

As we have spoken about data, it is important to say that although the Government's own figures show that hundreds of Sure Starts have gone, analysis I would call precise puts at roughly 1,200 the number of them closed since 2010, and certainly services have been hollowed out in the Sure Starts that are still standing.

Putting the number of centres aside for the time being, analysis provided by Action for Children shows a worrying trend in the usage of children's centres. It says that local authority spending fell by £327 million between 2014-15 and 2017-18, which coincides with a decrease in the number of children using the centres. That figure fell by 400,000, or about 18%. There has been no reduction in demand for support or in the need for support, so there is clearly a gap between the centres and the ability of families to access them. If anything, the rise in the number of children growing up in poverty can only impact on the pressure on those services. I am sure that concerns us all across the House. If we discuss an inter-ministerial working group or seek consensus on the early years of life, we must accept the reality of the situation for children's centres. It is often grave because of a lack of funding, and we must try to work towards a national strategy that ends the postcode lottery of provision.

One policy I want to talk about is the 15 hours of free childcare available to disadvantaged two-year-olds. The policy is there to help those children with their development and support them on their education path. We must applaud the direction of this policy, but I must ask the Minister—perhaps he will have an opportunity to answer when summing up—why it is that three in 10 of these children are still not accessing the care they are entitled to. Is he assured that the Department is using everything in its toolbox to make sure that eligible children are identified and that their parents made aware of the entitlement and encouraged to take up the place? We know the difference it makes. We have heard about that from Members across the House today.

It is worth noting that the Social Mobility Commission recommends extending the offer of 30 hours of free childcare to cover households where one parent is working eight hours a week, rather than the current system where they must work for at least 16 hours a week. In the interests of social justice, I would prefer for the policy to be universally available, but I hope that the Government look closely at that recommendation. Social mobility has remained “virtually stagnant” since 2014 and inequality exists “from birth to work”. Those are not my words, but the words of the Social Mobility Commission. I know we can do more to reach out to vulnerable children and their families.

In conclusion, of course we all want every single baby to have the best start in life and we accept that the challenges are great, but there is good work and innovation happening across our country. We have heard about it from many Members across the House. With initiatives such as Sure Start and children's centres, the advanced knowledge we have about health outcomes and the support of Parliament, we should be able to work for our society to achieve every best. It will require determination and significant resource, but if the next Prime Minister wants to build a legacy, I hope that he pays attention to today's debate and puts the first 1,001 days of a baby's life at the heart of his agenda from day one in office. As we have discussed in many previous debates, if billions can be given to businesses and wealthy individuals then I know that every single Member who has spoken in this debate will want assurances that money will be set aside to rebuild services for our most vulnerable children.
trailblazers in Manchester for the joined-up, place-based, integrated early years delivery model. She also talked about workforce development, which I will return to later.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) made the point incredibly well about flexibility in working, which I hope a future Government looks at very closely. She also talked about shared parental leave. The hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) again referred to maintained nurseries, and his two maintained nurseries in Warwick and Whitnash, and I thank him for that.

It is almost impossible to compliment my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on this—he has heard me say before that he is a fountain of knowledge on this area. He reminded the House that the strategic importance of children's mental health has come to the forefront in this place. He is right to highlight the number of debates and the number of colleagues who are now engaged in this agenda. I hope that he will continue his passionate backing for the troubled families programme and all the other issues that he rightly reminded us need support in a future Administration.

With my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), I visited Safeguarding Children in Banbury, which is for children who have been traumatised, and the work there is remarkable. She also mentioned the adoption support fund. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) is not in her place today, but we had a fantastic gathering yesterday for the report on the adoption support fund, which my hon. Friend cited. Ninety per cent. of children said that this helped them a lot in terms of the additional support that they needed.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who co-chairs the all-party group on fatherhood, rightly reminded us of the key role that fathers play and the fact that they are role models. I think of the work that I have seen, and we want to develop further the focus on not just mothers, but fathers. As a Manchester United supporter, it pains me a bit to say that Manchester City is doing remarkable work in early years outreach—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Manchester Central says “Four clubs” and she is quite right—I know. We will move on swiftly to my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), who rightly reminded the House that children's services are challenged, and we need to look at that very closely when it comes to the spending review.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) talked about the Imagination Library, and I will certainly take a look at that. It is extraordinary, and it is testament to his incredible entrepreneurial—I think that word has been used a lot over the last few weeks—abilities to be able to identify it and bring it to Brigg and Goole and North Lincolnshire Council. It is remarkable that 95% of children are now signed up.

I am grateful for this opportunity to set out the Government's approach to the first 1,001 days. The evidence is clear that the first 1,001 days of a baby's life can have an impact on their social, economic and physical outcomes in later life. We all know this is a period of significant physical change for the mother and baby and a critical period of development, cognitively and emotionally, for babies.

The early years family support ministerial group has considered carefully how the Government can improve the co-ordination and cost-effectiveness of family support for children under the age of two and identify the gaps in available provision. It has now made its recommendations to the Secretaries of State, and they are considering them. It is important that the next Government continue that work and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire pointed out, report to the House in due course.

From the point of conception, we have the opportunity to ensure that all children get the best start in life. We start building our health asset as a baby in the womb. The transition to parenthood is a key opportunity to provide good information and support to adults on the importance of the child's first months and early years. There are clear benefits from early investment and support through pregnancy and the early years, and supporting early intervention means starting with good pre-conception care. The Government are committed to improving maternity services for vulnerable groups, and an enhanced and targeted continuity of care model will be implemented to help improve outcomes for the most vulnerable mothers and babies.

Positive adult-child relationships are key protective factors against adversity and trauma. The Government are committed to improving perinatal mental health services. The NHS long-term plan will increase access to evidence-based care for women with moderate to severe perinatal mental health difficulties and I hope benefit an additional 24,000 women per year by 2023-24. This is in addition to the extra 30,000 women getting specialist help by next year and the year after. We will be meeting care provided by specialist perinatal mental health services available from pre-conception to 24 months after birth, in line with the cross-Government ambition for women and children, focusing on the critical first 1,001 days of a child's life.

We are also expanding access to evidence-based psychological therapies within specialist perinatal mental health services so that they also include parent-infant, couple, co-parenting and family interventions. As part of that, we will be offering fathers and partners of women accessing specialist perinatal mental health services and maternity outreach clinics evidence-based assessments of their mental health and signposting to support as required. This will contribute to helping to care for the 5% to 10% of fathers who experience mental health difficulties during the perinatal period.

We are increasing access to evidence-based psychological support and therapy, including digital options, in a maternity setting. Maternity outreach clinics will integrate maternity, reproductive health and psychological therapy for women experiencing mental health difficulties directly arising from, or related to, the maternity experience. In addition, over the current spending review period, we are giving local authorities more than £16 billion for public health for all of the health functions they commission, including health visitors. The Prime Minister announced our commitment to modernise the healthy child programme to reflect the latest evidence on the importance of the first 1,001 days, including how health visitors and other professionals can support perinatal mental health.

Beyond the perinatal period, the first few years of a child's life are fundamentally important in achieving long-lasting outcomes. I am grateful to the shadow
Minister for mentioning the 15 hours of free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds. It has reached 800,000 two-year-olds since its launch in 2013. I will certainly look at her points about targeting and take-up. We are spending £3.5 billion on our early education entitlements this year alone, which is more than any previous Government have spent. We are also supporting parents to improve the quality and quantity of adult-child interactions to support early language development in the home.

Following our successful home learning environment summit in November, we have continued to work with businesses and other partners. We have just launched the Hungry Little Minds campaign, a three-year campaign to encourage parents to engage in activities that support their children’s early learning and help to set them up for school and beyond.

Looking beyond parents, we know that a skilled early years workforce is also key. That was one of the three points made by the hon. Member for Manchester Central. Children and families come into contact with a great many professionals in the early years. This is a huge opportunity, but it is not easy to get it right, particularly for the families who are the hardest to reach. We want to engage everyone, from frontline professionals to local system leaders, in our efforts to improve early language and literacy outcomes. Alongside our training for health visitors, we are investing £20 million in our early years professional development fund, which will offer training to practitioners in disadvantaged areas to improve, in particular, early language, literacy and numeracy outcomes.

Local areas have a key role to play in commissioning and delivering effective early-intervention services to meet complex and specific needs, and the Government are supporting them in that task. The Department’s early years local government programme, in which we have invested £8.5 million, focuses on improving the way in which local services work together across health, education and early years to improve the outcomes of children aged five. As part of that work, multidisciplinary peer reviews will help councils to identify necessary reforms, and our early outcomes fund will provide an additional £6.5 million of grants for local authority partnerships to improve the delivery of services. I have commissioned the Early Intervention Foundation—this is an issue that has arisen repeatedly during the debate—to look into how children’s centres and other delivery models can help to improve outcomes for the most disadvantaged children and spread good practice across the sector. When we have the data, we shall be able to focus on where we should spread that good practice. We also remain strongly committed to the What Works initiative, embodied in our three What Works centres.

Part of the Government’s funding for the Early Intervention Foundation is being used to establish an early years transformation academy. The academy will provide a framework for the sharing of learning, including events and online material for leaders, commissioners and other stakeholders. The start of more intensive academy work began in June, and will provide further opportunities to pool learning.

Let me again thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire for securing the debate. We know that getting it right in the early years is key to ensuring that all children have the best start in life. That is reflected in the excellent work that is already being undertaken across England at local and national levels, but we can certainly do much more. My right hon. Friend’s legacy should be the IMG’s continued delivery of what we agreed should be delivered.

6.17 pm

Andrea Leadsom: It is fantastic to see you in your place for the final bit of the debate, Mr Speaker. I can paraphrase what it has been about as “all you need is love”, and I know that you would subscribe to that yourself. It has been an incredibly positive and optimistic debate.

The hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and I have worked on this for years. Members throughout the House are determined to see every baby get the best possible start in life, and ultimately that is all about love. It is about attachment, about good early years services, and about the Government working in a joined-up way. My hon. Friend the Minister has made huge strides in showing his personal commitment to progress in that regard, but I urge him, and the Government, to demonstrate that final commitment to getting the excellent work done by the inter-ministerial group over the line, so that we really do give every baby the best possible start in life.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House believes there is now overwhelming evidence of the importance of the first 1001 critical days of a new baby’s life in determining his or her lifelong physical and emotional wellbeing; notes the work of the Inter-Ministerial Group led by the Rt. hon. Member for South Northamptonshire; the Thirteenth Report of the Health and Social Care Select Committee, HC 1496, on First 1000 days of life and the Eleventh Report of the Science and Technology Committee, HC 506 on Evidence-based early years intervention; and calls on the Government to take strong and decisive action immediately to ensure that every baby gets the best start in life.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, I propose to take motions 7 to 9 together.

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

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

That the draft International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (Selective Capital Increase) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 27 June, be approved.

That the draft International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (General Capital Increase) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 27 June, be approved.

That the draft International Finance Corporation (General Capital Increase) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 27 June, be approved.—[Mike Freer.]
6.19 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I rise to present a petition of residents of the Rotherham constituency regarding the opening of Droppingwell tip. The tip was closed in the mid-1990s following a determined campaign by local residents and the site has now been returned to its natural state. A new permit to resume tipping operations at the site was issued by the Environment Agency in 2016. The agency did not consult local residents, nor did it even notify the council that an application had been made before reaching its decision. Planning permission for the site was originally issued in the 1950s and remains in force. As a consequence, no consideration has been made of the major changes that have happened to the area in the decades since the tip closed, let alone the objections of residents and local businesses at the site.

It must be wrong that the site can be permitted to reopen without even the most cursory consultation and in the face of unanimous opposition from local residents, and that Droppingwell Tip has been issued a permit by the Environment Agency to resume landfill operations, despite having been closed for many years; further that, as historic planning permission remains in force, no consideration of the objections of residents and local businesses at the resumption of operations has been given.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to intercede and ensure that the landfill permit is rescinded by the Environment Agency.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[Declares that the petitioners are deeply disappointed that Droppingwell Tip has been issued a permit by the Environment Agency to resume landfill operations, despite having been closed for many years; further that, as historic planning permission remains in force, no consideration of the objections of residents and local businesses at the resumption of operations has been given.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to intercede and ensure that the landfill permit is rescinded by the Environment Agency.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]
Batten Disease: Access to Drugs

[Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg]

gives. That means that the drug is thought to provide 30 extra years of life of good quality. That is a stunning achievement for any drug, and it has been given the highest rating and the highest amount of funding, but unfortunately that amount of funding is not enough. The pricing cannot be agreed between NHS England, NICE and BioMarin, the manufacturer.

BioMarin is a drug company that needs to make a return on the amount of money it has spent. To be fair to the company, it spent $696 million last year on research and development and made a pre-tax loss of $142 million, so it is not an enormously profitable, rapacious company that is being difficult. One might think, however, that having lost $142 million, it might quite welcome a little bit of income from the national health service. If I were one of its shareholders, I might suggest that it would be a good idea to do something with the national health service so that the company could get some income back on its $696 million of research and development expenditure in 2018. Without an agreement between the buyers and sellers, Max will not receive the drug and his standard of life will decline month by month.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): My hon. Friend will know about my constituent, Michal Luc, who is in exactly the same situation. We talk to parents who see their children degenerating and dying before their eyes. Does he agree that they cannot understand how we can argue over money when their children’s lives are disappearing before their very eyes?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I completely agree with my hon. Friend.

Generally, I recognise the need for public expenditure constraint. Money always has to come from somewhere; it has to be either taxed or borrowed. However, in a country that spends over £800 billion a year, and £120 billion or whatever it is a year on the national health service, can we not find just over £6 million a year for this small number of children who have a terrible disease that can be held at bay?

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I very much commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this hugely important and timely debate. Does he share my concern that we seem to be witnessing a bit of a blame game between NHS England, NICE and BioMarin? Does he agree that they just need to get round the table and resolve this issue one way or another, even if it requires the Minister to bring them together and knock some heads together to get them to come to a resolution? The rapid-acting nature of Batten disease means that my constituents Nicole and Jessica Rich and the other children who are affected just do not have the time for this wrangling to carry on.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady puts it so well—and it is not just the family, but the community. On Saturday, the village of East Harptree, a small village in North East Somerset, came together for its annual village fête. All the funds raised were to try and help Max. He is at the local primary school, East Harptree Primary School. The week before, they had the school races. All the children had gone back a few yards so that Max could win, for the first and only time in his life, the race at his school. That is such a wonderful example of community. If communities can do that, surely the Government can do something similar. If communities can do that, surely the Government can do something similar.

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Gentleman gives a really powerful example. The whole of the community in Newcastle knows about Nicole and Jessica Rich and

There are questions to be asked about the structure of policy on rare diseases, and about the Government’s response and what powers they have. As I said at the beginning, accountability through this House is of fundamental importance. By law, the Secretary of State still maintains overall responsibility for the provision of healthcare in this country. It is the Secretary of State who is accountable. We cannot make NICE accountable; it has not been structured to be accountable. It does not appear in the Chamber to tell us what it is doing—that is done by second degree, through Ministers. We really need to know what, if any, reserve powers Ministers may have to be able to do something about the situation.

Can something be done? Can a budget exception be provided, so that funds may be made available for these rare diseases? Can something be done, as has been done for cancer treatments, to provide money where exceptionality can be seen? Of course these drugs are expensive: they affect so few people, and the drugs companies will not develop them if they cannot at least make their money back. Can something be done as in other areas, particularly cancer, to ensure that the drugs can be provided? Can the rule changes in 2017 that made it harder to fund rare disease drugs be reviewed and possibly reversed? Since 2017, the financial aspect has become much more significant than it was before.

Although I accept, of course, that there is a need to look at costs, when we are talking about eight-year-old children, we are not talking about a cost for people who only have weeks or months to live, but about a child who could have years of a high quality of life ahead of him. That must be where most of us as taxpayers think it is right to spend money and where we think that the moral case for spending money is extraordinarily strong.

Catherine McKinnell: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that the impact of rare conditions such as Batten disease is not just felt in the child’s physical health, but in their mental health and the mental health of their wider family? The system for judging what is value for money and how our NHS should spend its money needs to take a much broader approach when calculating the value of these medicines in those circumstances. It needs to get it right.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady puts it so well—and it is not just the family, but the community. On Saturday, the village of East Harptree, a small village in North East Somerset, came together for its annual village fête. All the funds raised were to try and help Max. He is at the local primary school, East Harptree Primary School. The week before, they had the school races. All the children had gone back a few yards so that Max could win, for the first and only time in his life, the race at his school. That is such a wonderful example of community. If communities can do that, surely the Government can help too, because it is not just Max and not just his wonderful family who are trying so hard to do the right thing for him. A whole community would be pleased, and would feel it was being taken notice of, if Max were helped—all his schoolfriends and schoolteachers and the whole community in East Harptree.

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Gentleman gives a really powerful example. The whole of the community in Newcastle knows about Nicole and Jessica Rich and
is doing everything it can to support them in this journey. This not only affects those two beautiful children; it also affects their family in a huge way, and the whole community.

For that reason, I beg the Minister today to recognise that this is not only about reaching the right decision, but about doing it with urgency. Every day, there is an impact on their deteriorating health, and there is also the impact on the parents of supporting those children with a debilitating condition and living with the agony of not knowing what future lies ahead—whether the medicine that will save their children’s lives will be funded or not.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I so agree with the hon. Lady. I am of course primarily talking about Max, my constituent, but to take the drug away from children who are already getting it would be unconscionable. I simply do not believe that any reasonable person—any politician or any administrator—would think that the right thing to do. It is bad enough not to give the drug to a child who could benefit; to withdraw it would be so utterly wrong that I cannot believe that that could happen.

When something can be done, it is hard for it not to be done and for us to allow it not to be done. It is frustrating that it is so hard to change and that there seems to be nobody who can decide it. Everyone one talks to says it is not up to them. NICE is bound by its guidelines, NHS England is bound by NICE, and the Secretary of State is bound by the legal interpretation of what the Health and Social Care Act 2012 provides, but none of that is good enough. We need action. Ultimately, it is Ministers, through Parliament, who are able to act.

Let me finish with what Max’s father, Simon Sewart, who has been doing so much to look after his son, wrote:

“I have always understood that life is no fairy tale with a happy ending, but when you learn that your beautiful child has a disease, as Max has Batten Disease, your world changes forever and your heart is broken.

NICE announced, just 24 hours after Max’s diagnosis, that the first ever treatment for CLN2 Batten Disease will not be funded.

At a time when you should be taking care of your child, your other children, and enjoying precious time together as a family, you instead find yourself spending all of your time writing emails and letters, speaking to journalists and TV news programmes, instead of walking with them, on talking with them, on looking around at the world with them; on all these things. With them.

This double-whammy is almost too much to bear. Reverse your decision NICE and let my family be.”

Andrew Griffiths: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This important debate is about whether this drug is going to be available for these young children, and you will share my concern that we are not going to get the answers we want because it is supposedly prevented by a judicial review. Can you rule on whether we should be able to have the information we seek in this debate for the parents who are watching?

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He anticipates me, because his discernment is such that he will have observed me in conversation with the Clerk at the Table. Let me say, for the avoidance of doubt, that the content of the Minister’s reply is, of course, a matter for her, and it is not something with which I would seek to interfere. That is not for me.

However, for the purposes of clarification, I want to make this point. I am not aware that this matter is sub judice, as I have not received prior notification that it is. I am not aware that it is, I have not been informed that it is, and the Clerks have not been informed that it is. If it is not sub judice, nothing whatsoever precludes the Minister from commenting on this case. If it is sub judice, as colleagues will know, it is within the competence of the Chair to waive the sub judice rule, which it would most certainly be my instinct to do.
What the Minister says is a matter for the Minister, but it would not be right, as far as I can tell, to say that it is not possible, in a legal sense, for the Minister to comment on this matter. The Minister is the Minister, and the Minister’s answer on the specifics is sought. If the Minister wishes to proffer that answer, she can do so.

Caroline Dinenage: Thank you, Mr Speaker. You have made my position even more difficult. I am very grateful for your advice.

The advice I have been given by the legal team within the Department of Health and Social Care is that anything I say could potentially influence the outcome of judicial proceedings that may be ongoing.

Mr Speaker: The Minister is nothing but solicitous and courteous. I have found her unfailingly courteous in her dealings with me over many years, and I certainly do not seek to make life difficult for her, but my concern is with the rights of Members of this House and of the people they are here to represent.

Frankly, if lawyers within the Department of Health and Social Care are of that view, it would have been courteous to consult the officials of the House. As far as I am aware, the officials of the House have not been consulted, and I have not been consulted about this matter. I am simply saying that if the Minister wishes to respond to the specifics, which manifestly the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) was going to raise—that is the rationale for the debate—it is perfectly open to her to do so.

If the hon. Member for North East Somerset is not able to secure satisfaction on this occasion—the Minister must judge what she wants to say in response—and if he wishes to pursue the matter further in another Adjournment debate, during the course of waiting for which further time will unfortunately have been lost, that debate will be available to him. I am determined that this matter will be effectively raised in the Chamber of the House of Commons by the hon. Gentleman and by other Members.

Caroline Dinenage: Thank you for clarifying that, Mr Speaker. I very much share the passion that I detect my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) feels about this issue, which I know is shared by Members on both sides of the House.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): On the basis of what Mr Speaker has said, surely if those who are taking this issue to the courts withdrew their challenge, or if the Minister gave them a satisfactory answer to help the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), it would not be sub judice. The Minister has the power to do that.

Caroline Dinenage: I am very tempted to do so, but I would like to try to make progress on some of the things I can say, and then we can maybe move on to a more satisfactory conclusion.

Andrew Griffiths: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Of course the Minister should have the opportunity to do so, but I think it is only right that I hear the point of order, if it is a genuine point of order.

Andrew Griffiths: Could you explain the rules to me, Mr Speaker? If it is proved that today’s Adjournment debate is not sub judice and that the information could have been proffered to the House in a way that would have satisfied both my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and you, would it be in order for the responsible Minister to come to this place to make a statement before the recess, so that those valuable days are not lost? Do you think it would be sensible for the Minister to make that commitment now?

Mr Speaker: It is certainly open to the Minister to do so, and I think that it would, without question, be to the advantage of the House if such an oral statement were proffered before the House goes into recess. What I should say to the hon. Gentleman and to other colleagues is that, to my knowledge—forgive me, but I am dealing with this matter literally on my feet—the case has not been set down; it is not listed for court consideration. There are no current proceedings dated. Therefore, to the extent that we understand it—my advisers and I—it cannot be said to be sub judice. Sometimes a judgment might be made about the possibility of prejudicing a case—that is a wider consideration—but the real issue is: is it sub judice? Our answer, on the best information available, is that it is not, and so I think a statement would be helpful. Alternatively, if Members wish to exercise their ingenuity in raising important and of course legitimate points of order, and the Minister wishes in the meantime to consult her officials so that a full and detailed response on the specifics can be provided, that is open to her. I recognise that that might be challenging at such short notice and she may not wish to do that, but it would certainly be helpful to have a substantive response, preferably this evening, and a full oral statement before we go into recess. I would say to the House that I am giving the ruling that I am giving both on the basis of a decade’s experience as the occupant of the Chair and on the strength of top-quality procedural advice.

Caroline Dinenage: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am very grateful—

Mr Rees-Mogg: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. My point of order follows on from what you said and I hope it may be helpful to the Minister in giving her a moment to reflect on what you have just said. I would express a broader concern on this sub judice question, because, as you rightly said, it is always the prerogative of this House to discuss what it wishes to discuss, regardless of what is going on in any court. The sub judice rule has only ever been a self-denying ordinance of this House, to feel that it should not trample on things that were immediately before another court, rather than something that can be enforced upon us. In that respect, we are different from any other place in the country—other than of course their lordships’ House—which would be subject to sub judice as a matter of law. We are subject to it only in so far as we feel that it is wise to be cautious and prudent, and not to interrupt another of the separated powers within our judicial system. Therefore, it seems to me that whenever Ministries
decide to cite sub judice rules, it would be wise to have consulted Mr Speaker or one of the Clerks in advance, in order to have some clarity before the debate begins.

Mr Speaker: Yes, it is a matter of prudence on the part of the House of Commons; it is not a cloak behind which the Executive branch should seek to hide. I know that the Minister would not attempt to do so, but any advice that might be thought to be intended to allow that to happen would be ill viewed by right hon. and hon. Members, and most certainly by their constituents.

Caroline Dinenage: I take on board all the comments that you have made, Mr Speaker, and indeed that hon. Members have made. I need to go away and reflect on this. I would like to make some progress with what I feel confident to be able to talk about today, and then, if inspiration does not approach me from anywhere else in this Chamber in the next few moments, I will commit to coming back with a fuller response if that is possible before we break for recess, if that would be acceptable to you, Mr Speaker.

Catherine McKinnell: Thank you for your guidance on this issue, Mr Speaker. I wonder whether the Minister would accept that the legal action that is being discussed would be unnecessary if NHS England, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and BioMarin got around the table and resolved this issue. On the broader point, on 21 May I and a number of colleagues, including the hon. Member for North East Somerset, met the Secretary of State to discuss this issue. He has since written to me to say that he is “doing all he can within the legal constraints to resolve this” situation. I was therefore hoping that the Minister could clarify what exactly that means, and what progress is being made as a result of that meeting and the representations we have made today.

Caroline Dinenage: I know that the Secretary of State met the hon. Lady and other Members recently, and this is something that he cares about passionately. We are doing everything we can in the Department of Health and Social Care to try to move the position forward. The hon. Lady is right to say that had this issue been satisfactorily resolved, we would not be having this discussion at all, we would not be talking about legal proceedings and the situation would hopefully be a lot easier to resolve.

I have only a short amount of time left to be able to give some sort of response to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset.

Mr Rees-Mogg: We have 40 minutes left, Mr Speaker, so we are not short of time.

Mr Speaker: No, we have plenty of time. We can continue until 7.30. [Interruption.] Oh yes, we have plenty of time. And of course, there will be an opportunity for either a ministerial statement or an urgent question between now and Thursday, so we have, if I may say so, bucket-loads of time to deliberate on this important matter. I know that that message will be extremely well received by the Minister.

Caroline Dinenage: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The legal position, as I understand it, is that NHS England and NHS Improvement have been in discussions with the manufacturer BioMarin for some time to try to seek a deal that would enable NICE to recommend the drug for use on the NHS, but so far an agreement has unfortunately not been possible. As hon. Members know, and as I said at the beginning of my speech, NICE’s assessment is currently subject to an ongoing legal procedure. NICE has published its draft recommendation and was unfortunately unable to recommend the use of the drug, despite its meeting the criteria for consideration under the highest cost-effectiveness threshold. NICE has not yet re-published its final word on this issue, and that may provide more clarity. In the meantime, it is of course open to the company to enter into an agreement with NHS England that would make the drug cost-effective and would make the legal procedure unnecessary.

Mr Jim Cunningham: If NHS England got a satisfactory agreement with the drug manufacturer, would that have any bearing on the decision of the Secretary of State or on NICE?

Caroline Dinenage: I do not think it would contravene any legal recommendations if I were to say that if the manufacturer, NHS England and NICE were to get around a table and agree a satisfactory price, there would be no need for the legal challenge. In actual fact, the desperately poorly children we have heard about today would therefore be able to get the treatments that they desperately need.

Catherine McKinnell: Does the Minister share my concern that one reason why NICE turned down Brineura is that there is not enough long-term evidence about the drug’s effectiveness? That does prompt the question, which I am sure people at home would wonder about: how can we secure that long-term evidence when the treatment is so new—yet so effective, in my view—but is not even available on the NHS in this country? How do we ever find enough evidence to match the criteria that NICE is looking for?

Caroline Dinenage: That is a really good question, and I think that is one reason why NICE is looking again at its systems. It must be possible, because around 80% of new drugs are recommended for NICE approval and approved by NICE. It is clearly possible for new drugs to make it through even when they have not been around for a long enough period to see the very long-term consequences of their impact. It is really important in cases such as this, in which the opportunity—

Andrew Griffiths: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your advice, because we have a precedent for a situation that can arise on numerous occasions. In the nine years I have been in the House, I have heard of many debates in which right hon. and hon. Members have brought forward demands for treatments for rare diseases. We call the Minister to the Dispatch Box to answer—to be accountable. If we have a situation, going forward, where the Minister can claim sub judice, on advice from officials—it is not the Minister; she is taking advice from her Department—and be allowed to hide behind that cloak of anonymity and prevent the House from doing its job, which is to establish the facts and find out the truth behind the matter, that clearly prevents the House from being able to do its job.
You would share my concern, Mr Speaker, that that would prevent Members in this House from serving their constituents in a way that they would be expected to do. Therefore, can you ensure that you will go away today and look at this situation and make sure that, if this procedure has gone wrong, Departments are told very clearly that they cannot hide behind sub judice and that they must be candid with this House, regardless of the advice they have been given by officials.

**Mr Speaker:** That is a most helpful point of order from the hon. Gentleman, to which, essentially, the answer is a simple yes. I will happily go away and reflect on how Departments might usefully be advised to proceed in these matters. Beyond that, there are two points. First, as I have been advised, the matter is not sub judice. It has been suggested to me by a very constructive member of the Treasury Bench that advice to the effect that the case might be sub judice was proffered, though not to the particular Clerk whom I have been consulting, but that advice was not judged to be correct. Put simply, as far as we can see, the matter is not sub judice.

Secondly, however, and this is an extremely important point in the context of the specific debate that the hon. Member for North East Somerset has pointed out, is that of ministerial intervention. The advice that I have been given is that I have to be very careful on the legal procedure because of the fact that it is not a legal procedure between individuals and the Department, but between individuals and NICE. I do not want anything that we say potentially to negatively impact on a family’s opportunity to get these very important drugs for their children.

**Mr Speaker:** Very important decisions are subcontracted to NICE, but policy responsibility, as the hon. Member for North East Somerset has pointed out, is that of the Government. We do not have Government in the case of health policy through the Department of Health and Social Care.

**Caroline Dinenage:** I give way.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I understand that discussions have been rapidly going on while we have had points of order and various other things happening in this Chamber. I am not sure whether this is orderly, Mr Speaker, but I happened to notice that there has been a return to the officials’ box of advisers. I wonder whether inspiration might now be forthcoming and heading in the direction of the Minister and whether I am now giving time for such advice to be passed through, or whether the telephone calls that I heard were taking place have not been as fruitful as I might have hoped.

**Mr Speaker:** I am not in a position to know that immediately for the simple reason that the Speaker does not possess eyes in the back of his head, and I have been focusing on the hon. Gentleman, the Minister and other colleagues, rather than on the occupants of the officials’ box. I have seen a note that has been circulating and a Minister is attempting to assist one of my advisers. I assume the Minister is attempting to do so on the basis of information provided. Whether there is something that is so valuable that the Minister in question is about to furnish the answering Minister with it, I do not know, but I am allowing a suitable opportunity for that missive to be passed to the Minister for Care, who is, of course, entitled to digest and reflect upon its contents and to decide in the light thereof how she wishes to continue, but I repeat that there is no shortage of time. I am very grateful to the Minister for her characteristic courtesy.

**Caroline Dinenage:** We are in a difficult position because the advice that has been forthcoming from the Department of Health and Social Care is not the same as the advice being given by the brilliant Clerks here. That puts me in a very difficult position, which is why I would like to commit to returning to the House with a statement once I have been able to pursue this matter a little bit further.

The Government want patients, including patients with rare diseases such as Batten disease, to be able to benefit from effective new treatments. It is in the interests of all NHS patients that we have a system in place for making evidence-based decisions on whether new medicines should be made routinely available to patients. That is why we have NICE, which makes independent, evidence-based recommendations for the NHS.
As I said to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), NICE has recommended around 80% of products it has assessed. Through its important work, many thousands of patients, including patients with rare diseases, have benefited from access to effective new treatments.

It is right that NICE’s processes continue to evolve with developments in science, healthcare and the life sciences sector. That is why it keeps its methods and processes updated through periodic review that includes extensive engagement with stakeholders, including patient representatives, drug manufacturers and clinicians. In this spirit of continuous development, through the 2019 voluntary scheme for branded medicines pricing and access, which was published in December, the Government announced that NICE would be undertaking a review of its methods and processes in 2019-20 for both its technology appraisal and the highly specialised technologies programme.

Andrew Griffiths: I thank the Minister for the honourable way in which she has played a straight bat in what is a very sticky wicket; I am grateful to her for that. She mentioned that she was prepared to come back and make a statement to the House, for which I think we are all grateful. Would she just confirm whether she intends to make that statement before the House rises for the summer recess?

Caroline Dinenage: Yes, I will come back and make that statement before the House rises for the summer recess, with the correct legal recommendations.

The NICE review of its methods and processes has now begun. That will be quite helpful for some hon. Members who are questioning whether those processes are as they should be. Although I do not think it would not be appropriate for me to pre-empt the review by commenting in detail on its scope, I can assure hon. Members that it will be wide-ranging and will be carried out with full consultation with stakeholders.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset spoke about access to the new drug Brineura for his constituent Max. NICE is currently developing recommendations for the NHS on the use of Brineura through its highly specialised technologies programme for the evaluation of drugs for the treatment of patients with very rare diseases. It has not yet published that final guidance. I understand that NHS England and NHS Improvement have been in discussions with the manufacturer of Brineura, BioMarin, for some time to seek a deal that would enable NICE to recommend the drug for use on the NHS, but an agreement has unfortunately not been possible so far. As I said at the beginning, NICE’s assessment of Brineura is potentially going to be subject to legal proceedings.

Let me move on to individual funding requests. Where a treatment is not routinely available on the NHS, including where NICE has not yet made a recommendation on its use, NHS clinicians are able to apply for funding through an individual funding request. This can be done when a clinician believes that their patient is clearly different from other patients with the same condition, or where their patient might benefit from the treatment in a different way from other patients.

In the absence of NICE’s final recommendations on Brineura, I am aware that NHS England and NHS Improvement have recently considered an individual funding request for my hon. Friend’s constituent Max that it has unfortunately been unable to support, because he would not be regarded as an exceptional case to existing policy. I understand how devastating that decision will be for Max, his parents and all those involved. However, if my hon. Friend’s constituents and their clinicians think that the process has not been followed correctly, they can ask for a review of the decision within 28 days. If a patient’s situation changes or more clinical evidence becomes available about the effectiveness of a treatment, they may also submit additional information to be considered and discussed.

Catherine McKinnell: Does the Minister understand how deeply hurtful the situation is to those families who are receiving this treatment on compassionate grounds from the drug company and how difficult it must be for them to listen to this debate? Not only are the Government seeking to hide behind sub judice rules when in fact they should be giving the answers that those families deserve; they are also sending families round and round, suggesting that they make applications based on individual circumstances and that they appeal decisions. When they just want to care for their very sick children. Is there nothing more that the Minister can offer those families who are listening to this debate?

Caroline Dinenage: I completely understand what the hon. Lady says, and I completely agree with her. I would love to be able to solve this problem straightaway and give these children the lifeline they need. Unfortunately, that is not the case today. I have committed to make a statement before the House finishes for recess at the end of next week, so I will come back shortly with all the information I am allowed to give. I really do not want her to think that this in any way suggests that I do not understand how the families must be feeling. I can only begin to imagine how desperate it must be to have such a poorly child.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I do not want to be difficult for the Minister, because she is doing a very difficult job, but could she clarify something? I got the impression from something she said a minute or two back that if NICE and NHS England concluded negotiations and agreed a price with the drug manufacturer, that would be acceptable to the Government.

Caroline Dinenage: My understanding is that if the manufacturer of this vital drug gets around the table with NICE and suggests a price within a reasonable scale, NICE would be very open to listening. That is my understanding. Certainly, I understand calls from Members across the House for NHS England, NICE and the manufacturer to get around the table to try to find a solution. That seems to me to be the most sensible way forward.

Andrew Griffiths: I thank the Minister for giving way again. The language she is using is the same as that we hear in a lot of these debates. She has said that many of these families and young children are receiving the drug on compassionate grounds from the drug company. For a parent whose child is not getting that drug to be told that somebody else’s son or daughter is getting compassion but theirs is not—the Minister is a mother herself, so she will understand this—is like a dagger through the
heart. Will she do all she can to ensure that that compassion is extended to all those mums and dads who are looking on tonight?

Caroline Dinenage: Of course I will commit to doing everything I can to making sure that all the very valid and easy-to-understand sentiments that have been expressed by Members across the House are sent to all the parties involved in this discussion. I completely share Members’ desire to find a resolution to this and ensure that families get the answers they need. In the meantime, I thank all Members for the part they have played in today’s debate, the questions they have asked and the great interest they have shown in this issue. As I say, I will come back to the House shortly with fuller answers to some of those questions.

Mr Speaker: Ordinarily, the proceedings would now conclude, and they will do so shortly. However, I think it important that our proceedings should be intelligible not only to right hon. and hon. Members but others who are interested in our proceedings but are not Members of this House. To try to achieve that objective, I want to add, by way of conclusion, the following.

I am advised by my officials that the Department of Health and Social Care claims that this matter—the subject of the debate—is sub judice because an application for a judicial review has been made. In the light of that, let me explain. Under the sub judice resolution of this House, “Civil proceedings are active when arrangements for the hearing, such as setting down a case for trial, have been made”. The Department has not supplied evidence that this test is met. Therefore, I stand by what I said earlier on advice.

By way of conclusion, I say to the Minister—echoing, I think, the sentiments of colleagues—that her commitment made in the circumstances, at very short notice, to return to the House before the summer recess to make an oral statement is appreciated, and we look forward to that statement taking place either tomorrow or on Thursday. Policy is a matter for the Government and not the Chair, but the hon. Member for North East Somerset and other colleagues who are similarly interested may rest assured that, for so long as this matter is not resolved to their satisfaction and they wish to bring it to the House for questioning, interrogation and debate again, as far as the occupant of the Chair is concerned, there will be multiple opportunities for them to do so. The matter will not go away.

I thank the Minister once again for her courtesy and consideration in difficult circumstances, and I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate not on their own accounts but in the interests of their constituents, very anxious parents and families, and sympathetic people right across the country.

Question put and agreed to.

7.12 pm

House adjourned.
The Secretary of State was asked—

Climate Change

1. Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What support his Department provides to help developing countries manage the effects of climate change.

2. Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to prioritise (a) tackling the effects of climate change and (b) protecting the environment in developing countries.

3. Rory Stewart: The Department for International Development has partnered the Government of Bangladesh for many years, particularly because of the very severe impacts of flooding. We should pay tribute to the improvements in Bangladesh. In floods in the 1970s, more than 100,000 people could be killed in a single event; a similar event today would kill only a few hundreds. That is a huge tribute to Bangladesh’s improvement in resilience and also in emergency management.

4. Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I have worked with flood victims in refugee camps around the world; the despair is palpable and tragic, and it is simply inhumane that these same people will be hit the hardest by further extreme weather conditions. This House declared a climate change emergency; will the Government today outline how they will financially support the world’s most vulnerable and plan for dealing with future tragedies?

5. Alex Chalk: On that precise issue, what is being done to improve resilience in water security, to ensure that that does not become a source of conflict, or indeed disease, in future?

Rory Stewart: The question of water security is absolutely central. It poses the danger of conflict, for example in the Indus valley and along the headwaters of the rivers that flow into Egypt on the Nile. It is also an area where technology can help, however. We have become much better at preventing water waste. In many developing countries, 50% of the water is wasted; technology is part of the answer to this problem.

Rachel Maclean: My right hon. Friend has made it clear that some of the poorest countries in the world will be the most affected by climate change. I hope to visit Bangladesh in September as part of a delegation; what will his Department be doing to help countries such as Bangladesh mitigate the effects of severe weather, including the monsoon season?

Neil Gray: I thank the International Development Secretary for his answer and appreciate his focus on the importance of tackling climate change, but does he accept that it needs to be in addition to traditional development support? To that end, will he examine the Scottish Government’s climate justice fund, which seeks to support those who have done the least to cause climate change but who are to be hit first and hardest by its effects?

Rory Stewart: It is clearly true that many of the people who are suffering most are from some of the poorest countries in the world that emit very little carbon, which is why a great deal of our emphasis is on the question of resilience. I have just returned from Kenya, for example, where we are working with pastoralists whose grassland is being eliminated and with people in Lamu who are losing mangrove swamps. Such countries are not emitting carbon but are suffering from its effects.

The Scottish Government’s climate justice fund, which seeks to support those who have done the least to cause climate change but who are to be hit first and hardest by its effects?

Rory Stewart: We will be doubling the overseas development fund, which will be spent particularly on climate resilience, and Britain will be co-hosting with Egypt the UN summit on climate resilience in September. That was the focus of my discussions with the UN Secretary-General yesterday, and indeed at the Abu Dhabi summit two weeks ago.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State agree that if we are truly to tackle climate change, we need to ensure that the money that we give—the vital money that we give—goes to the right place where it matters? Will he look at innovations such as digital currencies, especially blockchain, which enables the money to be tracked to make sure that it does not go into a dictator’s slush fund or to train Spice Girls in Nigeria?
Rory Stewart: Blockchain technology has very interesting potential. I recently saw in World Food Programme distribution in camps in Jordan how blockchain is dropping the price by tens of millions of dollars a year. However, there are still some risks attached to such technology.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is perhaps the most diligent and committed Secretary of State for International Development that I and my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), who is still in New York with the Select Committee, have had the opportunity to question at the Dispatch Box. What steps is the right hon. Gentleman taking to solidify and embed the new priority of climate change in his Department? Will he commission a Green Paper or a White Paper to keep the Department moving in that direction, irrespective of what happens under a new Prime Minister in the coming weeks?

Rory Stewart: There are three things that we hope will embed the priority. First, this is a whole of Government approach. The Prime Minister announced at Osaka that we would be the first major international development agency to be fully Paris-compliant. Secondly, we have now announced from this Dispatch Box and inserted into our planning that we will double our spend on climate and the environment. The third thing is to ensure that we have the experts on the ground. In Kenya, for example, the focus is on environmental experts, and in Ethiopia it is on forestry experts. It will be funding, Government strategy and staffing that will make the difference.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that agricultural practice and land use are key to mitigating the effects of climate change? Will he say something about the training programmes that DFID pays for and that are doing such good work in helping people to understand the way forward?

Rory Stewart: DFID is doing an increasing amount of work on that issue. For example, its agricultural extension work is helping farmers to work out how to produce crops without depleting the soil or using excessive water. Perhaps the biggest challenge in agriculture is the relationship between pastoralists, particularly people herding cattle and oxen, and sedentary communities right the way across Africa, where climate change and agricultural practices are leading to conflict from Nigeria to South Sudan.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): The UK is the largest contributor to the World Bank’s climate investment funds, yet civil society groups say that, compared with UN funds, those funds are undemocratic, opaque and dominated by donor countries. The Secretary of State has committed to doubling DFID’s climate spending, but does he think that the World Bank’s climate investment funds are fit for purpose?

Rory Stewart: The shadow Secretary of State is absolutely right to say that there have been significant issues around some of the climate funds. We feel that a lot of progress is being made, and the most important thing is to find real investable projects on the ground. A lot of that relates to issues of governance.

Dan Carden: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that answer, but the truth is that the World Bank knows that it was supposed to phase out its climate investment funds once the United Nations green climate fund was up and running. Labour is clear: we believe in climate justice and we are committed to withdrawing the UK’s support for the World Bank’s climate investment funds and to redirecting climate finance to the UN green climate fund, in which developing countries get a real say. Will the Government now do the same?

Rory Stewart: No, we will not. The reason is that there are issues of capacity in both the World Bank and the UN. The key point here is not the ideological choice of the channel through which we pass the money but the capacity to manage these projects responsibly.

Malnutrition

2. Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help to achieve sustainable development goal 2.2 on ending all forms of malnutrition.

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): The UK Government are working closely with the Government of Japan to ensure that next year’s summit secures meaningful and transformational commitments from Governments. We have invested £2.6 billion in this area since the last summit, and we are considering what offer the UK Government will make to next year’s summit.

Greg Hands: Last year, I travelled with Results UK to Zambia, where 40% of under-fives are stunted. That has an astonishing lifelong impact on their social and economic development. Will the Minister go into a little more detail about next year’s summit and about how we will show our commitment to really tackling deficiencies in nutrition on a worldwide scale?

Harriett Baldwin: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight this important issue. I am pleased to be able to tell him that, since his visit, the work we have been doing in Zambia specifically, which has reached more than 1 million people, has reduced the level of stunting to 35%, but clearly that still leaves a lot more to be done.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): We will meet the malnutrition targets only through a strong partnership with the aid community—the voluntary community. Will the Minister update us on what progress she has made on reforms within that community, in the light of the exposés of the past 18 months?

Harriett Baldwin: I think that the hon. Gentleman is referring to the safeguarding issues. He will be aware of the leadership that the UK has shown in this area and the rigorous way in which we have scrutinised all our suppliers. With regard to the most recent story in the media, we have confirmed that no DFID funding was involved.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): The new UN food security report says that global hunger has risen for the third year running, but when the UK should be setting an example by reporting on our own SDG process, the Government’s voluntary national review
report to the UN was found by the International Development Committee yesterday to be “gravely flawed”—food banks ignored, inadequate stakeholder engagement, cherry-picked data. The Government were allowed to mark their own homework, but they could not even do that properly. What are Ministers doing to ensure that their colleagues in other Departments start taking the SDGs seriously?

Harriett Baldwin: The UK was very proud to present its voluntary national review at the UN yesterday—[Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”] It is a strong document and was warmly received. It clearly outlines where we have made enormous amounts of progress and where there is more progress to be made, including further cross-governmental working.

Yemen
3. Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the humanitarian situation in Yemen. [911988]

4. Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What recent assessment his Department has made of the effect of restricted humanitarian space on the work of NGOs in Yemen. [911990]

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison): Yemen remains the world’s largest humanitarian crisis, with 80% of the population requiring humanitarian assistance, which is not helped by the fact that the operating environment for humanitarian organisations is exceptionally difficult. We call on both parties to the conflict to comply with UN Security Council resolution 2451 by facilitating safe, rapid and unhindered humanitarian access.

Clive Lewis: Last month’s ruling by the Court of Appeal that the Government’s continued licensing of the exporting of military equipment to Saudi Arabia is unlawful offers real hope to the people of Yemen—despite the Government’s hypocrisy in calling for peace while selling arms to the Saudis to bomb and to kill, hampering the work of aid agencies on the ground. What representations will the Secretary of State make in Cabinet finally to end that shameful conduct?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to be concerned about those who have disappeared. Along with multilateral organisations, the United Kingdom is at the forefront of mechanisms geared towards ensuring that we know where crimes are potentially being committed and, in the fullness of time, that we are able to follow up on that. I hope that she will approve of the level of support that this country is giving as the penholder and as a major financial contributor to the humanitarian situation in Yemen.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What action is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that humanitarian aid actually reaches the people who need it and is not being held back by the warring factions in Yemen?

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend will probably be aware that we have had discussions on that with the World Food Programme, which is a major operator in the situation in Yemen. We support the intent of the World Food Programme, in particular its director David Beasley, to ensure that aid gets to where it is supposed to go, rather than into the pockets of Houthis and others. That process is in its early stages, but it looks like it is being successful and will restore the full effect of the World Food Programme to Sana’a and other areas as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: The House wishes to hear the Minister’s mellifluous tones, so if he could face the House, that would be excellent.

Public Services: Developing Countries
6. Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What plans his Department has to help develop public services in developing countries. [911992]

11. Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What plans his Department has to help develop public services in developing countries. [911997]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): The UK is committed to supporting countries to achieve the global goals, including through the development of strong public services. We are working with low-income countries to raise and manage public revenues and to invest in education and health systems to provide essential public services for all.

Alex Cunningham: I am grateful for that answer. Building strong public services is crucial to achieving the UN’s sustainable development goals, but countries in the global south are losing out on billions of pounds of revenue each year due to tax avoidance—money that could be spent on building up those services, which are needed by their citizens. What practical steps is the Minister taking to ensure that countries in the global south are supported to ensure that multinational corporations and others who should be paying taxes actually do so?

Harriett Baldwin: I am very pleased to say that we have taken probably the most powerful practical step of all by setting up a specialist tax department—the hon. Gentleman rightly highlights the issue—within the
Department for International Development. We are spending £47 million to help low-income countries increase their tax revenues, and every £1 we put in has raised revenues by £100.

Chris Elmore: Shockingly, 16 million girls aged 15 to 19 give birth each year in developing regions. Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are a leading cause of death in this age group globally. Therefore, what urgent steps is the Minister taking to ensure that developing countries have better reproductive healthcare services for girls and young women to improve their rights, chances and opportunities internationally?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this important issue, and we continue to work in countries where we can help with some of the sexual and reproductive health interventions he describes. In addition, he will be aware that the Girls’ Education Challenge is helping 1.5 million adolescent girls, who have often had children at a very young age, to stay in education and get the education that will help to improve their lifetime earnings.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Children’s health is also a key issue, and I thank the Department for International Development for its work to fight polio across the world. Will the Minister rise to the challenge set by members of the Chelmsford rotary club, and by rotary clubs across the UK, and confirm that this Government remain committed to ending polio forever?

Harriett Baldwin: I always welcome the opportunity to thank rotary clubs not only here in the UK but around the world for their fundraising. We are nearly there. We have nearly eradicated polio from this planet, and we should thank every Rotarian for their contribution.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Good public services need an effective civil service to supervise them. What discussions has the Minister had with the Cabinet Office and my noble Friend Lord Maude about the provision of an effective civil service in developing countries?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend will be aware that the UK has long-standing partnerships with a range of developing countries. Indeed, it forms part of our work when we award Chevening scholarships, for example, through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; scholars have to commit to going back and helping to deliver services in their country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) is such a happy and uncomplaining fellow that the temptation to call him is irresistible.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Minister accept that one of the best ways to support public services, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, is to support the non-governmental organisations that provide clean drinking water in many of the townships across that part of Africa?

Harriett Baldwin: I am glad the hon. Gentleman got to ask his question because, of course, clean drinking water is crucial. We take it so much for granted, and I am pleased that, working with NGOs, DFID has supported over 51 million poor people in Africa and Asia to have access to drinking water supplies or toilets for the first time.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Public services in all countries benefit from the quality of governance and, above all, from democracy, which is why the Westminster Foundation for Democracy is keen for a democracy fund to be established. Following the very useful meeting with the Minister, does she agree it is important that it is taken forward in time for the autumn spending review?

Harriett Baldwin: I welcome my hon. Friend’s bid, and I can commit to him that these are exactly the sorts of issues that will be discussed in the future spending review.

Topical Questions

T1. [912001] Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Rory Stewart): The central challenge in international development going forward will be the quality, expertise and number of our permanent staff on the ground. As international development becomes more complex, with conflict and climate, as we have to work more closely with other Departments and, above all, in a world in which developing countries are looking not for money, but for expertise, over the next 15 years we will have to increase the expertise, the quality and, above all, the number of civil servants, moving away from short-term consultants to having British experts on the ground.

Stephen Doughty: I am sure the Secretary of State will be aware that Birmingham this week joined Cardiff, Sheffield and Tower Hamlets in calling for the recognition of Somaliland. Does he agree that diaspora communities here in the UK play a crucial role, not only in Somaliland, but in many other contexts, in providing not only direct assistance, but the type of trading, business and expert links that can help development in so many countries?

Rory Stewart: We are immensely fortunate in the UK with our diaspora communities because they provide both powerful advocacy, for example, with Somaliland on female genital mutilation, and expertise—linguistic, deep country expertise—to ensure that our programmes on the ground are of the requisite quality.

T2. [912002] James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Mindful of recent Ebola outbreaks, what lessons have been learnt to help countries become more resistant to Ebola, particularly in the health sector?

Rory Stewart: I am lucky enough to have just returned from the Congo, where I was looking at Ebola in Beni and Butembo. The situation of Ebola in the Congo is serious; we now have—[Interruption.]
Mr Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State is a cerebral and intellectual fellow, of prodigious brain power, and he deserves a more respectful audience than he is being accorded. Let us hear the words, digest them and learn from them.

Rory Stewart: What needs to be heard is not my cerebral power, but the issue of Ebola in the Congo. The House needs to be serious about that. There is an Ebola outbreak now in the Congo, which has already crossed the border into Uganda. On Sunday, we had an outbreak in Goma, a city of 2 million people. If we do not get this under control, this Ebola outbreak, which is already the second biggest in history, will cause devastating problems for the region. We must invest much more in the World Health Organisation, in developing the public health services in the neighbouring countries. Above all, we must step up to the challenge and be serious as a nation about this deadly disease.

T3. [912003] David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): One in 10 of the world’s population still do not have access to clean, decent water supplies. I know the Government are trying hard to rectify that, but will the Secretary of State look at the article today by the chief executive of WaterAid calling for greater support in this area?

Rory Stewart: The provision of water and sanitation is central. It is vital for health. It is also vital in schools, for ensuring that girls remain in school, and it is vital for tackling any kind of water-borne disease. So good investment in water, which DFID priorities, needs to be one of the three fundamental pillars of development, along with education and health.

T4. [912004] Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What assistance is being provided to the Turks and Caicos Islands, which are seeking to cope with Haitian migrants making a hazardous sea crossing and settling in that British overseas territory?

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Dr Andrew Murrison): My hon. Friend is right to highlight this, and I am pleased to say that the conflict, stability and security fund has been used to help the Turks and Caicos repair its radar, so that it is able to detect boats that may be carrying people trying to access the islands. He may be aware that early in 2018 the Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessel Mounts Bay was also deployed in order to provide a deterrent to those who wish to make that perilous crossing. We will consider other ways of using the CSSF in this region in the future.

T5. [912005] Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The recommendations in the report by the Bishop of Truro that was launched this week—the Foreign Secretary requested the review of Foreign and Commonwealth Office support for persecuted Christians worldwide—will be implemented effectively only with cross-departmental engagement and support. Will DFID provide that support?

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): I am pleased to add my voice of welcome for the report commissioned by the Foreign Secretary. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight some of the important points made in the report. She will be aware that, in addition to freedom of religion and belief, the UK is, as we heard from the Secretary of State, helping communities with their adaptation to some of the other drivers of conflict highlighted in the excellent report.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [912009] Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 17 July.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure Members will want to congratulate all those who took part in what was a great weekend of sport. In particular, we congratulate Lewis Hamilton on his record sixth win in the British grand prix. On Monday, I was able to welcome England’s cricket team to Downing Street, following their brilliant performance in winning the cricket world cup. As I said to them, they are a team that reflects the very best of modern Britain and a team that plays like no other in the world.

I am sure the House will want to join me in wishing all the best to the home nations taking part in the netball world cup in Liverpool.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Lilian Greenwood: I join the Prime Minister in offering our congratulations, particularly to the England team that won the cricket world cup. We were proud to host some of the games at Trent Bridge in Nottingham. I also extend our best wishes to the netball team.

Notts County, the world’s oldest professional football club, is facing the very real threat of extinction. Under chairman Alan Hardy, the club has reached a financial
crisis and could be liquidated before the start of the coming season. Players and staff have not been paid in weeks, and the club is set to make its fourth appearance in the High Court later this month to face a winding-up petition. Will the Prime Minister and the whole House join me in calling on the Football Association, the Football League and the National League to investigate the current situation and help to secure the future of this truly historic club?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue. Football clubs up and down the country are obviously of great importance to their local communities. Overall, the financial state of football clubs is better now than at any time, but the Government are certainly not complacent. The hon. Lady referred to various football authorities; we will continue to hold the football authorities to account for ensuring that there is transparency around the ownership of clubs, that sufficient inquiries into the suitability of owners are made; and that financially clubs continue to live within their means. I am sure the whole House will join the hon. Lady in hoping that, as the world’s oldest professional football club, Notts County resolves its situation soon.

Q3. [912011] Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister and her chief of staff Gavin Barwell for all that they have done, with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, on residential leasehold reform; there is now a prospect of ending unfairness and exploitation.

In respect of another legacy, may I refer the Prime Minister to the book “Legacy” by Michael Gillard on the legacy of the Olympics? It is about Gillard’s investigation into the criminals involved. I am not suggesting that she reads it before next week, but those who do look at it will see how the Directorate of Professional Standards in the Met overturned the police officer who was investigating the criminals.

When doing that, they should also look at “Behind The Blue Line” by Gurpal Virdi, which is about how he was investigated when the DPS did not interview the officers who were known to have been involved in the arrests of the complainant, and charged him with an offence with a weapon that was not available until eight years after the alleged offence.

The Prime Minister: I recognise the way in which my hon. Friend has championed a number of cases—he has referenced one of them—over the years in this House. Indeed, I had a number of meetings with him when I was Home Secretary in relation to that case. It is important that our police are able to operate to the highest professional standards. They have operational independence as to who they investigate and how they conduct those investigations, but I am sure the whole House would want to say that we expect our police to conduct those investigations properly and fairly, and to ensure that, when a crime is committed, they are investigating that crime.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I agree with the Prime Minister’s congratulations to Lewis Hamilton on winning on Sunday and to the fantastic cricket team, which ended up winning the world cup. I also thank New Zealand—what a brilliant final it was, and what a great advertisement for the wonderful game of cricket.

“Time is running out” on climate change—that is what the Environment Secretary said yesterday. Why did the all-party Environmental Audit Committee accuse the Government of “coasting” on climate change?

The Prime Minister: The Government have a fine record on climate change, including our recent legislation on net zero emissions, but there is an issue that needs to be addressed in this House. Before the right hon. Gentleman stands up and parades himself as the champion of climate change, the champion of the people or the defender of equality and fairness, he needs to apologise for his failure to deal with racism in the Labour party.

Just today, 60 distinguished members of the Labour party have written in the newspapers:

“The Labour party welcomes everyone*…(*except, it seems, Jews). This is your legacy Mr Corbyn…You still haven’t opened your eyes…You still haven’t told the whole truth…You still haven’t accepted your responsibility…You have failed…the test of leadership.”

Apologise now.

Jeremy Corbyn rose.—(Interruption.)

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman will be heard. Attempts to shout him down are downmarket, low grade, regarded with contempt by the public and, above all, will not work. Be quiet.

Jeremy Corbyn: This party was the first to introduce anti-racist legislation into law in Britain. This party totally opposes racism in any form whatsoever. Antisemitism has no place in our society, no place in any of our parties and no place in any of our dialogues. Neither does any other form of racism.

Some 60% of Tory party members think Islam is a threat to western civilisation. The Prime Minister has said that she will act on Islamophobia within her own party. I hope she does. I look forward to seeing that being dealt with, as we will deal with any racism that occurs within our own party as well.

Last week, the Committee on Climate Change published its annual report, which described the Government’s efforts on climate change not a bit like what the Prime Minister just said; it described them as being run like “Dad’s Army”. The Government’s target is to reduce carbon emissions by 57% by 2030. Can the Prime Minister tell us how much progress has been made on that?

The Prime Minister: On the climate change issue, the chairman of that committee said:

“The UK is the first major economy to set a net-zero emissions target and intends to host the world’s leaders at next year’s landmark climate conference (COP26). These are historic steps forward and position the UK at the forefront of the global low-carbon transition.”

The right hon. Gentleman, I note, did not apologise in response to my first questions. We deal with Islamophobia in the Conservative party. Any allegations of Islamophobia are dealt with, unlike his way in the Labour party where he is failing to deal with antisemitism. He can stand up and say all he likes about the Labour party introducing anti-racism legislation. Just last week, Trevor Phillips, the former chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, said the following:

“Labour today presents like a textbook case of institutional racism.”
Jeremy Corbyn: This party opposes racism in any form whatsoever in our society. And coming from a Prime Minister who encouraged the hostile environment, sent “go home” vans around London, and deported British citizens, which she has now had to compensate them for, I think that she might look to her own party and her own Government's record as well.

The issue of climate change is obviously crucial, and we support the zero emissions target. The latest figures, however, released in April show that the Government are going to miss that target by 10%—the gap is widening. At the current rate, they will not meet their 2050 target until 2099, and, at that point, it will be too late for our planet and our children. Clean energy investment has fallen three years in a row. Why does the Prime Minister think that that is the case?

The Prime Minister: Still no apology, I note, from the right hon. Gentleman.

We have outperformed in our first and second carbon budgets, and we are on track to meet the third. We have taken the historic step of legislating for net zero emissions by 2050. We have yet to see all the policies and proposals in our clean growth strategy coming into play and having an effect on our target. This is a party that is acting on climate change; this is a party that is delivering for the people of this country; this is a party that is dealing with the issues that matter to people day to day. The right hon. Gentleman needs to start dealing with the issues that matter to the members of his Labour party, as shown in the newspapers this morning.

Jeremy Corbyn: It was a Labour Government who introduced the Climate Change Act 2008. It is the Labour party that is committed to dealing with the issues of climate change. Let me give the Prime Minister a few suggestions on why renewable investment is falling: her Government scrapped the feed-in tariff; they failed to invest in the Swansea tidal lagoon; and they slashed investment in onshore wind. If we are serious about tackling this climate emergency, we need to fully acknowledge the scale of the problem. Labour is committed to measuring total UK emissions—not just what we make here, but what we buy from abroad also—so that we have an accurate figure of what the emissions really are by consumption in this country. Will the Prime Minister match that commitment?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman knows that we measure our targets according to the international definitions of those targets, and that is exactly the right thing for us to do. He talks about renewables. Let us just look at the record on renewables: last year, renewables generated a record amount of electricity in this country—33% and over the past year, we have generated record levels of solar and offshore wind energy. He talks about what the Labour Government did, but 99% of solar power deployed in the UK has been deployed under Conservative Governments.

Jeremy Corbyn: I think that we are actually hiding the scale of the problem by passing the buck to other countries as well. If all emissions are counted, the figures would actually be 69% higher in this country.

Every year, air pollution kills 40,000 in this country. In 2017, the Conservative manifesto promised to take action against poor air quality in urban areas. What actions have been taken?

The Prime Minister: Air pollution has reduced significantly since 2010 under the Conservatives in government. Our clean air strategy is the most ambitious air quality strategy in a generation, described by the World Health Organisation as “an example for the rest of the world to follow.”

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Those are wonderful words, they truly are. The only problem is, air pollution levels breach legal limits in 37 of 43 areas of this country. Two thirds of our children are growing up in an area where pollution breaches legal limits. This crisis is literally suffocating our children and damaging their health. Once again, this Government are dodging their responsibility while Labour leads the way. For example, the Mayor of London is leading the way on better air quality in the capital city.

The Tories promised the greenest Government ever. They have failed on carbon emissions. They have failed on air pollution. They have failed on solar. The Prime Minister says that she wants action, but she supports fracking and has effectively banned onshore wind. The climate emergency simply cannot be left to the market. We all need to take responsibility to secure our common future. Labour led the call to declare a climate emergency and has pledged a green industrial revolution with new jobs. When will this Conservative Government face up to the situation, get a grip on this crisis and deal with it?

The Prime Minister: We have already seen over 400,000 new jobs in the area of renewables and clean growth, and we expect to see up to 2 million more. I am not going to take any lectures from the Labour party on this issue, when the last Labour Government ignored advice that diesel fumes would damage our environment and incentivised diesel cars through the tax system.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about dodging responsibility. The person who has been dodging his responsibility during this PMQs is the right hon. Gentleman. The real disgrace is his handling of racism in the Labour part. Activists protesting, MPs leaving and staff resigning—what would his great heroes Attlee, Bevan and Benn think? Look what he has done to their party. We will never let him do it to our country.

Q6. [91204] Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): The Prime Minister has repeatedly made animal welfare a priority during her time in office. Britain leads the World Animal Protection animal protection index. I thank her and the Secretary of State for supporting Finn’s law—the Animal Welfare (Service Animals) Act 2019—and for bringing forward the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill, which is a key measure for a nation such as ours that loves animals. That legislation will increase the maximum sentence for animal cruelty to five years’ imprisonment. Will the Prime Minister do whatever more she can to secure its speedy passage?

The Prime Minister: I know my right hon. and learned Friend has also been working on this issue for some time, and I thank him for highlighting the work that has been done. There is no place for animal cruelty in this country. When the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill, to which he alludes, is passed, those who mistreat or abuse animals, or are involved in animal fighting, will rightly
Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): This week the Prime Minister finally did the right thing. When Donald Trump told women that they should “go home”, she called it out as unacceptable. Let me be clear that Donald Trump’s actions are textbook racism; they are repugnant and diplomatic politeness should never stop us saying so. Will the Prime Minister now, on reflection, also take the opportunity to call out and condemn the racism of the “Go Home” vans that she created in the coalition Government with the Liberal Democrats?

The Prime Minister: I said at the time that that was too blunt an instrument. There is an important issue, which is that the public expect us to have a fair immigration system that deals with those who are here illegally. That is what we need to do. The right hon. Gentleman referred to the comments made by President Trump. As he alluded to, I have strongly condemned those comments.

Ian Blackford: When the Prime Minister implemented the hostile environment policy, her party stayed silent. When she delivered the racist “Go Home” vans, the Tories remained silent. When asylum seekers are deported to places where their lives are at risk, the Tories stay silent, and when faced with the racist columns written by the former Foreign Secretary, they stay silent. Is the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb) not correct when he warns that the Tories are “appealing to the type of nationalism that has seen UKIP grow”? While the Tory party shares more with the extremes of Donald Trump and Nigel Farage, is it any wonder that Scotland looks on in horror?

The Prime Minister: The Conservative party is a party for the whole of the United Kingdom, and the only party in this House that is appealing to blatant nationalism is the party that wants to take Scotland out of the UK.

Q2. [912010] Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I often disagree with the Prime Minister, but I respect the fact that many of her intentions are honest and decent. When she raised the hopes of millions of carers by promising them statutory leave entitlement, they were thrilled. So far, we have had reference to a committee. Is that a failed promise, or does the fact that it is a manifesto pledge mean she is assured that the honest and decent thing for her successor to do is deliver it?

The Prime Minister: The issue of carer’s leave is one on which we have been consulting. That is in the system, and I have every expectation that whoever succeeds me will take that forward.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): It has been remarked upon that my right hon. Friend is one of only three Prime Ministers upon whose watch a world cup has been brought home. She and her husband were fortunate enough to be present to watch that wonderful team effort. In the final week of her premiership, will she allow herself the luxury of considering that history is likely to treat her captaincy rather more kindly than it will treat those who have campaigned against her?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for those comments and for the support he has shown me and the Government in our work. I was very pleased to be there for the whole world cup final on Sunday. It was nerve-racking and nail-biting, but our team brought it home, and many congratulations once again to them.

Q4. [912012] Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): When the Prime Minister made her first speech in Downing Street, she said she would fight against the burning injustices of inequality. Three years on, nothing has changed. As schools wind down for the summer holidays, many children will be excited about the fun and the joy to come, but thousands of families whose children receive free school meals will be worried about how they are even going to feed their children, let alone take them on holiday. If she wants a meaningful, lasting legacy, will she extend the holiday activity funding to ensure that all children who receive a free school meal during term time are fed in the holidays?

The Prime Minister: We had a successful £2 million programme in the summer of 2018, and this year we are more than quadrupling this funding. About 50,000 disadvantaged children in 11 local authority areas will be offered free meals and activities over the summer holidays. That is going to be funded by £9 million from the Department for Education. We had a good programme last year, and we are expanding that programme this year because we want to help children, wherever they are, receive the right support in school and out.
Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): In the week when we celebrate the anniversary of man first walking on the moon, may I draw the Prime Minister’s attention to the amazing space cluster that exists at Harwell in my constituency, with amazing companies such as Open Cosmos and Oxford Space Systems? In the last week of her premiership, could she have a conversation with the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy? If we can accelerate the decommissioning of the land at Harwell, we can really accelerate the success of this cluster? I will personally invite her back to inaugurate Theresa May Way, when this is done.

Mr Speaker: I am sure the Prime Minister is just beyond excited.

The Prime Minister: I was going to say, Mr Speaker, such temptation has been dangled before me, and I thank my right hon. Friend for it.

First, we are very pleased with the cluster in my right hon. Friend’s constituency and the important role that that plays in our economy, in our research and our science development. The Business Secretary is in the Chamber and has heard the points my right hon. Friend has made about accelerating this process, and I am sure that the Business Department will look carefully at his request.

Q5. [912013] Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Passengers across the north of England are wondering which has been delayed the longest—the northern powerhouse, or their next train. Will the Prime Minister and her legendary Transport Secretary use their last few days in office to justify our endless waits for relic Pacer trains, while the “Northern Fail” franchise rewards incompetent bosses with £2 million pay packets, or will she finally agree with our plans to renationalise the railways and run them for the public good?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady talks about the northern powerhouse. The northern powerhouse is there: we are operating, we are putting in development and we are putting in funding to the northern powerhouse, including record levels of funding for transport across the north of England. That is the commitment this Government have made. We are not just using words; we are actually putting the money in. We are seeing a difference, and we are making a difference.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating Ian Jukes and all those who have been responsible for raising the money for—as I understand it—Rory the Robot. I am sitting two steps away from the International Development Secretary, but I gather the reference my hon. Friend has made is to medical equipment. Obviously, I will look carefully at the point she has raised about the business case.

Q7. [912015] Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): For the entirety of the Prime Minister’s term of office, the UK has held to its 0.7% international aid commitment. Is the Prime Minister proud of this record, and will she use her powers and influence to ensure that the next Government hold not just to the letter but to the spirit of this commitment?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. I am indeed proud of the development aid the United Kingdom spends across the world and the role we play not just in helping some of the most vulnerable and poorest people around the world, but in dealing with issues as they arise, such as the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The 0.7% of gross national income target is now in legislation and there was a commitment in the Conservative election manifesto to maintain it, so I am sure it will continue and that it will continue to be an important sign of what the Conservative party believes we should be doing: helping some of the most vulnerable and poorest people around the world.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): On Saturday, I met a group of residents in Harlow, many of them on Government Help to Buy schemes, who moved into homes built by Persimmon Homes that are shoddily built with severe damp and crumbling walls. In the eyes of my residents, Persimmon are crooks, cowboys and con artists. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister hold the company to account, ensure that residents receive proper compensation, and urge the chief executive to come to Harlow to meet the families who have suffered so much? Persimmon Homes should not behave in this way.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises a very important issue. As we increase the housing supply, it is important that the quality of new build homes continues to improve. We set out in our housing White Paper an ambition and a target of a housing market that works for everyone. We expect developers to deliver good-quality housing. We have already announced our intention for a new homes ombudsman to protect the rights of homebuyers and to hold developers to account. We expect all developers to build their homes to a good quality standard. These are homes that people will be living in for many years. They deserve those standards.

Q8. [912016] John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): All the major European industrial nations insist that ships for their navies are built in their own yards. As part of the Prime Minister’s legacy, may I urge her to be a good European and follow their example, and instruct the Ministry of Defence to build its new support vessels in British yards, securing British jobs and using British steel?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, this Government brought forward our shipbuilding strategy to ensure that we support and encourage shipbuilding around the United Kingdom. On the Royal Navy, I understand that the issue he raises relates to support ships. The MOD is looking at future provision and the building of those support ships. We maintain our position on building the ships of the Royal Navy.
George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): This weekend our sporting heroes, winners and losers, inspired a new generation. Science can also inspire. Sixty years ago, JFK electrified the world and united a divided and fearful nation with the inspiring Apollo moonshot programme, which also helped to defeat the Soviet Union and laid the foundations for US technology leadership. Will my right hon. Friend join me in saluting our pioneering scientist astronauts, Helen Sharman and Tim Peake, and agree with me that Brexit can and must be a moonshot moment for British science innovation to tackle global challenges?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I am very happy to congratulate and salute our pioneering UK astronauts, Helen Sharman and Tim Peake. One of the first receptions I held in No. 10 Downing Street when I became Prime Minister was for Tim Peake, and it was inspiring to see how what he had done in space had encouraged young people in particular to develop an interest in space and science. We are global leader in science and innovation, and that will continue once we leave the European Union. Leaving the EU will open up opportunities for UK science and innovation to tackle global challenges.

Q9. [91207] Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Tonight, campaigners will be meeting in Govan to discuss direct action against the Home Office contractor Serco, which intends to make 300 vulnerable asylum seekers homeless through its lock-change eviction programme. Many of those asylum seekers have outstanding claims and, as the Prime Minister will know, the Home Office can take 37 days to process section 4 support. Will she intervene, stop the evictions, prevent a homelessness crisis in Glasgow and respect live legal proceedings, so that the law can be clarified in this regard?

The Prime Minister: We are committed to providing asylum accommodation that is safe and secure. We take the wellbeing of asylum seekers and the local communities in which they live very seriously. Asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute are provided with free, fully furnished accommodation while their applications are considered. We cover utility costs and provide a cash allowance to cover other essential living needs, but once a person’s asylum claim is fully determined, their entitlement to that support will end. What I understand has been happening is that Serco has been providing accommodation at its own expense to over 300 people who are no longer eligible for such accommodation, either because they have been refused asylum or because they have been granted leave to remain and should move on to mainstream benefits and housing.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Last week, I had the honour of visiting the world’s best transformer factory in Stafford, run by General Electric. It was constructing the first of 72 transformers to go to Iraq, and it is only able to do that through the support of UK Export Finance. Will my right hon. Friend congratulate me—[Hon. Members: “Hear, hear!”]—on the fact that the last thing she should do is that, but will she congratulate UK Export Finance on backing British business?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to congratulate my hon. Friend on all the work that he has done for his constituency and more widely. He is absolutely right: UK Export Finance is an essential part of the Government support that can be provided to exporters. I am very pleased that the Department for International Trade has changed the rules to enable UK Export Finance to provide support for some smaller exporters, which has encouraged them. UKEF provides a vital role in our economy and our exporting around the world, and I am happy to congratulate it on the work that it does.

Mr Speaker: I am always happy to congratulate the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), as others will, for one very good reason that the public should know: he invariably plays the ball rather than the man or the woman. He sticks to the arguments, and that is why he is respected not only by his constituents, but across the House.

11. [91209] Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On 26 June, this House agreed a Scottish National party resolution regretting that the Prime Minister’s legacy will be the hostile environment. Yesterday, the all-party groups on Africa and Malawi published a report showing that structural failures in the visa system are continuing to perpetuate that hostile environment. How can her Government spend millions of pounds on a global marketing campaign saying that Britain is great when, for so many academics, artists and traders from Africa, Britain is closed?

The Prime Minister: Entry clearance officers consider applications for visitor visas with the utmost rigour, because our visas are an important way of securing our border and an effective tool for us in reducing illegal immigration, tackling organised crime and protecting national security. The hon. Gentleman references visas for people coming from the countries of Africa. The percentage of African nationals who saw their application granted is up by 4% on what it was 10 years ago and is only slightly below the average rate of the past 10 years. Visa applications from African nationals are at their highest level since 2013.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Three weeks ago, I was in New York for WorldPride—a celebration of equality and love, with 150,000 people marching down Fifth Avenue, cheered on by millions of people. Then we had Pride in London, and we will have lots of other prides in towns and cities throughout the UK and Europe, but it is such a different story in so many other countries, where millions of people live in fear of prosecution and persecution. Commonwealth countries blame British legacy legislation. What message does the Prime Minister have for them to say that they can change their laws progressively and that everybody in their countries can live in equality, harmony and love?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. People will have seen a wonderful Pride parade here in London. I am only sorry that I was not able to be present at the Pride reception in No. 10 Downing Street, but I was pleased that people were hosted in No. 10 once again this year. He raises an important issue. It is one that I raised at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting last year, when I made it clear to countries in the Commonwealth that we want to see them introducing those progressive laws and changes in their legislation and, more than that, that we are willing to help them, provide support to them and
show them the legislation that we have used, so that they can adopt it and people can indeed live in true equality.

12. [912021] Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The Prime Minister claims to care about people whose lives have been destroyed by modern slavery, and she claims that her work in this area will be part of her legacy. It is a legacy to be ashamed of, as BuzzFeed News has uncovered Home Office data showing that only 16 of 326 child victims of modern slavery had their discretionary leave visas approved in the 20 months to December 2018—refusing child trafficking victims safety. This cruel and callous hostile environment is the Prime Minister's legacy. Will she apologise or hang her head in shame?

The Prime Minister: We constantly look at how we can improve our response to modern slavery. I am very pleased that I had a meeting only a few days ago where I met many people involved in organisations that support victims of modern slavery; I met people involved in the prosecution of perpetrators of modern slavery; and I met parliamentarians who have been involved in the independent review of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. We are going to take on board most of the recommendations from that review. I make no apology for introducing the Modern Slavery Act. It was a Conservative Government who dealt with this issue, and the specific case that the hon. Gentleman raises. The recommendations from that review will be taken forward. Is that an apology?

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): As a distinctly average cricketer who is fully aware of his limitations, I grew up dreaming of an England side lifting the cricket world cup in a Lord’s final in front of a home crowd. How does my right hon. Friend believe we can maximise the opportunity of Sunday’s incredible success to encourage the next generation to get involved and pick up a bat and ball?

The Prime Minister: So many people around the country have been engaged by and taken inspiration from the England cricket team’s success. Crucially, a very significant number of children have also been introduced to the basics of cricket through the work on cricket in the streets. I want to cite a figure that I heard from the Prime Minister about some day-to-day post-Brexit issues? Scotland’s seafood industry fears that transport delays, new tariffs and taxes will put it on an uneven playing field in relation to its European counterparts. Can the Prime Minister tell us how the UK Government will support and protect this high-value industry when it faces product loss, owing to delays that will certainly lead to soaring insurance premiums and thresholds?

The Prime Minister: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we take industry throughout the United Kingdom very seriously. He has referred to the issue of Brexit and leaving the European Union. A deal was negotiated that would have protected jobs and industry across the UK, but, sadly, he and others in the House chose not to support it. I continue to believe that the best way forward for industries in his constituency and throughout the UK is for us to leave the European Union, and to do so with a good deal.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Figures published yesterday show that wages are rising faster than inflation, which means that there is more money in the pockets of hard-working people in Stoke-on-Trent. May I thank my right hon. Friend for the actions that her Government have been taking to help families with the cost of living—reducing taxes on income, increasing the national living wage and extending the fuel duty freeze?

The Prime Minister: That is indeed good news. Yesterday’s employment figures were also good news, showing that more people are in work than ever before. I am pleased that we have been able to help working people with their
finances. We have done that through the national living wage; we have done it by cutting taxes; and we have done it by freezing fuel duty. For the lowest paid, the national living wage and the cuts in taxes mean that they take home £4,500 more than they did under the last Labour Government.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): At Prime Minister’s Questions on 26 June, I was pleased to hear the Prime Minister express sympathy for my 18-year-old constituent Jake Ogborne, who has spinal muscular atrophy. In May, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence posted a press release saying that the drug Spinraza would be made available to SMA patients—the clear implication was that it would be made available to them all—only for Jake to have his hopes cruelly dashed when he was told that he was just outside the hitherto unmentioned eligibility criteria. This is a young man whose future is at stake. The Prime Minister said on that occasion that she would follow up the case. May I ask her if she has yet managed to do so?

The Prime Minister: I do not have a response to the specific case that the hon. Lady has raised again today, but I will ensure that she receives a response before I leave office.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Points of order come after urgent questions, of which there are three.
Police Surveillance of Journalists

12.48 pm

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department to make a statement on the Home Office’s policy on police surveillance of journalists.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It cannot be said often enough that the Government are committed to protecting the free press and freedom of expression in this country. The Government agree—indeed, they forcefully advocate—that confidential journalistic material and journalists’ interaction with their sources must be protected. However, that does not mean that journalists should receive blanket protection from legitimate investigation simply because of their chosen profession. Our security and intelligence and law enforcement agencies will, in very limited circumstances, have a legitimate need to investigate a journalist or that journalist’s source, but there need to be protections in that regard.

We believe that the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 provides strong protections in relation to the use of investigatory powers for the purpose of identifying or confirming a journalistic source and for the obtaining of confidential journalistic information. This ensures that protections are applied where they are required and that those who commit a crime or pose a threat to national security can be investigated regardless of their chosen profession, and it does so in a way that is compatible with all our ECHR obligations.

For example, where a targeted communications data authorisation under part 3 of the Act is made with the purpose of identifying or confirming a source of journalistic information, section 77 of the Act requires that, other than in threat-to-life situations, the authorisation must be approved by a judicial commissioner before it can take effect. In deciding whether to approve such an authorisation the judicial commissioner must have regard to the public interest in protecting the sources of journalistic information and the need for there to be another overriding public interest before a relevant public authority seeks to identify a source.

The codes of practice under the Act provide detailed and extensive guidance to public authorities when applying the powers in the Act, including extensive guidance on when those safeguards should be applied.

Mr Davis: One of the worst things a Government can do to damage democracy is to undermine the freedom of the press. In the past week, there have been numerous press reports of the police using “the full force of the state” to pin down the source of the recent leak of diplomatic telegrams. According to the reports this includes analysing mobile phone data in journalists’ phones, including location data showing everywhere they had been in the previous weeks. If true, this would be an astonishing intrusion on press freedom, because it puts at risk every confidential source they have, not just the one the police might be looking for.

Since the successful court case brought by the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) and myself against the Government, the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act 2014 has been tightened up. Journalists get particular protection under it, and there are only two ways such intrusive surveillance could be legally carried out. One is for the police to have obtained a warrant on national security grounds, in effect. Given the fact that the Government did not even use the DA, or defence advisory notice, procedure to stop publication of the telegram—they did not even use the procedure available to them—it is very unlikely that such a warrant would have been granted or such an agreement have been given by a commissioner. The other way is for one of the state agencies—the secret agencies—to have obtained the data. Given that the leak was embarrassing, but not a threat to national security, this also seems unlikely.

So can the Minister reassure the House that these intrusive surveillance techniques were not used against journalists in this case and that they would never be used unless there was either a serious crime or a real and serious threat to national security?

Mr Hurd: My right hon. Friend is a long-standing champion of civil liberties and press freedom; in fact, there is probably no greater one in this House, and I am grateful to him for the UQ and the opportunity to place on record again—because, as I said, this cannot be said often enough—the Government’s absolute commitment to protect the freedom of the press. That is a cornerstone of our democratic processes, and he has heard that from the Prime Minister, the two men who want to be the next Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and anyone else at a microphone; that is entirely sincere.

My right hon. Friend is quite right to point out that the Investigatory Powers Act has been subject to a tightening-up process, in large part stimulated by the promptings of himself and colleagues. The point I was trying to stress in my remarks is that we do believe—although this is being challenged and will continue to be challenged by people who take a different view—that the safeguards and protections in place and what our security, intelligence and law enforcement agencies are required to go through in terms of, for example, seeking a targeted communications data authorisation are extremely stringent.

As my right hon. Friend said, authorisations in this case need to be approved by a judicial commissioner. A Government of any colour need to be subject to scrutiny and challenge on the robustness of these approaches. I am not going to comment on the specific case; I am here simply to set out the process in relation to the protections that my right hon. Friend and others quite rightly seek to be reassured by, and I hope that I have done so.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Press freedom is an integral part of democracy. We do not have too much freedom of the press in this country; we have too little. Can it be right that the press is threatened for publishing material that is in the public interest? The illegality in leaking the British ambassador to Washington’s thoughts may be tested in the courts, so I shall be cautious about any remarks on that, but surely it cannot be illegal to publish those remarks simply because they are the cause of embarrassment to the Government. Surely, it cannot be right that scanning technology is being used against journalists to investigate the leak. Is it open to the Home Secretary to issue guidance to
In no doubt about this House’s commitment to the end of this UQ, we and the watching public will be debates do not take place—and that is a symbol and have debates about pushing back the powers of our law have safeguards and checks and balances are robust. We operate in a vibrant democracy, and we in this place always in my experience have vigorous debates about these balances and the need for safeguards. We have debates about pushing back the powers of our law enforcement agencies—whereas in other countries these debates do not take place—and that is a symbol and sign of the health of our democracy. I am sure that at the end of this UQ, we and the watching public will be in no doubt about this House’s commitment to the freedom of the press.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I commend the Government on the organisation of last week’s excellent global media freedom conference, but does the Minister agree that the UK needs to do a lot more to improve on our present ranking of 33 in the world press freedom index? Does he also recognise that the concerns expressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) make that harder to achieve? Is there not a risk being exploited by other countries who do not protect media freedom and are only too keen to lock up journalists?

Mr Hurd: I accept all that, coming from the authority of a highly distinguished former Secretary of State. I am entirely sincere, as are my colleagues, in taking this opportunity to reassert the importance of the freedom of the press and the protection of media freedoms, but we cannot in that process allow any sense that there is a blanket protection for legitimate investigation simply because of someone’s chosen profession. The processes need to be robust and open to criticism and debate, but the primacy of the free press and freedom of expression in this country is absolutely central to our democratic processes.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) on securing this question. It is indeed ironic that we are discussing these matters the week after the British Government hosted the first global conference on media freedom. The Foreign Secretary has spoken about convening a panel of experts to advise countries on how to strengthen the legal protection of journalists. On the evidence of some of the statements made over the past few days, the convener of that panel might be best advised to start close to home.

The Scottish National party has made it clear that we deplore diplomatic leaks as unacceptable and that they should be investigated. However, in times of crisis we need to remember that we must uphold human rights, and particularly press freedom. I wonder whether there were any official secrets in the ambassador’s leaked comments. After all, it is hardly a secret that Donald Trump is inept, and the police really ought to understand that the Official Secrets Act 1989 is not there to protect the Government from embarrassment. I am sure that they do understand that, but if they do not, I am sure that they will be reminded by those who give them legal advice. Will the Minister tell the House who escalated these investigations to the police, and why? Was it Downing Street, as some newspapers have reported? If an offence has been committed and the police are to be involved, would they not be better employed catching the leaker rather than shooting the messenger?

Mr Hurd: The hon. and learned Lady is right to echo what my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden said earlier, and it is something to be proud of that a British Foreign Secretary has chosen the championing of media freedom as one of his core campaigns and chosen to take that message around the world. The Official Secrets Act is not there to protect the Government from embarrassment; it is there for all the reasons that we know. My desire is for the police to be able to get on with their job and identify the leaker. That is their primary objective.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): May I add a little more to the point that has just been made? Why were the police brought in? As a former journalist of some 17 years, I know that journalists rely on sources to give the news to the public. Let us face it, there have been leaks before and there will be leaks in the future, and this leak was embarrassing but it was nothing to do with the defence of our country. If the police are to be called in every time there is a leak, every journalist in the country is going to fear that their newsroom will be full of officers in blue every time a story with the potential to hurt someone in power is published.

Mr Hurd: I understand the point my hon. Friend is making, and I understand that the comments from the Met have generated ripples, but this was a serious leak
and it is entirely appropriate that the police should look at it seriously. I hope he will support me in wishing them every success in doing their job, which is to find the leaker. I do not interpret what has been said as anything other than a clarification of the law as it stands, and I hope that he will join me in my determination to identify the source of this damaging leak.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): There is a big difference between the targeted collection of evidence in the pursuit of serious criminal offences and a fishing expedition in which Government embarrassment is a factor. This seems rather too near to the second of those. Never mind journalists—the general public are concerned about the way in which the state and other agencies are now able to collect data on them. Should we not be on the public’s side? Should not the Government be publishing information, in readable and accessible form, on people’s rights to privacy and on the right of the state to intrude on them?

Mr Hurd: I am all for more transparency, and I hope we are all on the side of upholding the law. What I have been trying to set out, in what I hope is a reassuring way, is that there are robust safeguards in place for when our law enforcement agencies seek specific powers. The guidance and the codes around that are explicit and extensive in regard to protecting journalists.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the answers he has given thus far. The balance between the duties of the police and the freedom of the press is clearly vital, but can he reassure the House that the police are not interpreting their role in a widespread manner and therefore snooping on journalists who have nothing whatsoever to do with the investigation of this particular leak?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour for his question. I have absolutely no evidence to suggest that what he fears is the case. I wholly endorse the very focused police effort in this specific investigation to identify the leaker.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I was on the Investigatory Powers Bill Committee, and one of the most contentious areas of debate in that period was public interest. When the Judicial Commissioner makes a judgment based on public interest, what do the Minister and his Department do to ensure that that interpretation is the correct one and that it is appropriate to the time and accountable to this House?

Mr Hurd: There is a great deal of guidance around this subject, but the hon. Gentleman is right and I thank him for his work on that scrutiny. I am happy to repeat the point that, in deciding whether to approve an authorisation—for example, a targeted communications data authorisation—the Judicial Commissioner must have regard to

“the public interest in protecting a source of journalistic information, and...the need for there to be another overriding public interest before a relevant public authority seeks to identify or confirm a source of journalistic information.”

That is explicit.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Minister must surely agree that part of the problem is the application of technology, particularly automation, to police powers without appropriate protections or even public debate. We might understand the need for a particular warrant for specific documents in the case of criminal activity, but the automated blanket trawling of all emails, locations and conversations for all journalists is clearly inappropriate. It is not only journalists who could be targeted; the rest of us also deserve protection from digital surveillance, video and voice recognition. Does the Minister agree that we need a charter of digital rights for all of us, as Labour is advocating?

Mr Hurd: If the hon. Lady is talking specifically about the examination of data under a bulk acquisition warrant, I would again point to the whole set of codes, guidance, processes and safeguards that relate to that. If she is talking about the broader issue around the application of technology and artificial intelligence to the working of our law enforcement agencies, she is entirely right to suggest that, as we stand on the brink of a revolution in what technology can enable our law enforcement agencies to do, we as citizens need to feel comfortable and confident with that, and that we need to have the appropriate legal and regulatory environment for it, which is what we believe we have.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Mr Newlands, I thought you were seeking to take part in the debate.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I would be delighted to take part, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: You are on my list as someone who was interested in doing so, but perhaps you were resting your knee muscles.

Gavin Newlands: I certainly was, Mr Speaker, but I was going to bob up again in a second. I am grateful for your observation.

I was also on the Investigatory Powers Bill Committee. During the progress of that Bill, the then Solicitor General, the hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland), said:

“We are absolutely committed to the preservation and protection of a free press and freedom of expression in our democratic society. That includes the ability of sources to provide anonymous information to journalists, which is absolutely vital if we are to have throughput of important information that needs to be in the public domain.”—[Official Report, Investigatory Powers Public Bill Committee, 12 April 2016; c. 193.]

Given the events of recent days, can the Minister tell me what has changed in Government policy?

Mr Hurd: I hope the hon. Gentleman’s knees are all right.

I honestly do not think that there has been a change in policy, and I have set out the processes around the Investigatory Powers Act, which he and other colleagues helped to shape and toughen. He will know better than me that those processes are now robust, and the police are complying with them.
Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) for bringing this vital matter to the House’s attention. The Minister has said on more than one occasion that, while he values press freedom, an individual should not have protection from legitimate inquiry simply because of the profession they chose. However, the very purpose of the journalistic profession is to scrutinise Government and to ensure that human rights are adhered to and that Government procedures are followed. Does the Minister therefore accept that we need something from the Government to ensure that, given advances in scanning and tracking technology, journalists are protected when providing that valuable public service?

Mr Hurd: Journalists provide an incredibly important service in our democracy, and I have been entirely sincere in everything that I have said. I am sure that the hon. Lady is not suggesting that someone should be above the law or receive blanket protection from legitimate investigation in limited circumstances simply because they are a journalist. The right processes, safeguards and checks and balances need to be in place. Frankly, we need the right challenge on law enforcement agencies when they seek authorisations to pursue investigations. I have set out what is in the Investigatory Powers Act, which I believe is a robust process.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The problem is that the police and security services were given these powers to allow them to prevent and detect serious crime, but there is absolutely no suggestion that those now being put under random widespread surveillance committed a crime. If a crime has been committed, it was committed either by a civil servant or a Member of Parliament. We obviously cannot know for certain whether the reports referred to by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) have any accuracy to them, but if they do, they point to the police using their powers not to prevent serious crime, but to intimidate and harass journalists, whose job it is to hold the police and us to account. Will the Minister undertake to carry out a review, reporting in Privy Council terms if necessary, into the Met Police’s actions, so that this Parliament can be the final arbiter of whether the powers that we agreed to give to the police are being abused?

Mr Hurd: It is wrong for the House, and certainly for Ministers, to speculate on the outcome of this particular investigation. We need to let the police get on with their work, but they and others will have heard clearly the House’s messages of concern. I return to the fact that this Parliament has set up a robust process of checks and balances on the police.

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe

1.12 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to provide an update on the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe.

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison): Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s family have told us that she was admitted to a psychiatric ward in the Imam Khomeini public hospital on Monday. Her family have yet to be allowed to visit her or to make a phone call. We are lobbying the Iranian authorities to ensure that her family are able to visit as soon as possible, as well as continuing to lobby for consular access, so that we can check on her care as a matter of urgency. We remain in close contact with her family in Tehran and with Richard Ratcliffe in London.

The Foreign Secretary spoke to the Iranian Foreign Minister on Saturday 13 July and raised Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s case and those of other dual nationals detained in Iran. The Foreign Secretary made it clear, as he has in public, that innocent people in prison must not be used as diplomatic leverage and called for their release. I also raised the case on a recent visit to Iran. The Foreign Secretary exercised diplomatic protection in March 2019, and we will continue to do all we can to reunite Nazanin and her family. The Government lobby strongly on the behalf of all our dual national cases, including Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe, at the highest levels. The welfare of British nationals in detention is a high priority for us. We have made it clear that Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe must be treated humanely and in line with international standards and norms.

If I can say something on a personal note as a parent, this case has rightly gripped the hearts of the British people. I hope that this development is the first step towards a brighter future for Nazanin and her family. I hope that Iran will be generous and humane in their approach to this family, who have been separated for far too long, that we can rely on elements within Iran that we know are decent and civilised, that they will apply international norms and behaviours in respect of this sad case, and that Nazanin and her family can be brought together as soon as possible.

Tulip Siddiq: Mr Speaker, thank you for granting this urgent question and for taking the time to visit Richard Ratcliffe, Nazanin’s husband, while he was on hunger strike outside the Iranian embassy two weeks ago. Indeed, I thank the more than 100 Members of this House who visited Richard, sending a strong message to Iran that while it may continue to abuse Nazanin’s human rights, we will be listening and protecting her. I am pleased to say that Richard is in the Gallery today.

I sought this urgent question because my constituent’s plight is urgent and desperate. On Monday, handcuffed and shackled at the ankles, Nazanin was taken from her cell in Evin prison to a psychiatric ward in the Imam Khomeini hospital in Tehran. The reason for the move has not been made clear to her family or her lawyers. She has not been allowed to update her family by phone or by visit, and we have no idea how she is being treated. Her family have been shut out, her ward sealed off, and
Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe

the Iranian Revolutionary Guards are not allowing any human contact. The family fear that she is being drugged or tortured and may be forced to sign a confession to unnamed crimes.

Nazanin is a young mother from West Hampstead. She was on holiday in Iran when she was abducted and illegally imprisoned, spending many months in solitary confinement before her family was allowed to visit. She has lost three years of her life to this hell, and with her sentence having been increased due to extra charges brought against her, her future seems bleak.

With all that in mind, what urgent steps are the Government taking to establish what treatment Nazanin is receiving? What protests have the Government made regarding the fact that Nazanin was shackled like a caged animal on her way to receiving urgent medical care? The Government have offered Nazanin diplomatic protection—the first such case in 100 years—and have escalated her case to a country-to-country dispute, for which we and her family are grateful. What further steps have the Government taken to secure Nazanin's freedom?

Finally, a week ago, the Royal Marines impounded the Iranian tanker Grace 1 off the coast of Gibraltar. What is the Minister's assessment of the Iranian Supreme Leader comments that Iran's "committed forces will not leave this evil without a response"?

Does he share my concern that that retribution may be targeted at Nazanin? I ask those questions not because I doubt the current Foreign Secretary's sincerity when he says that he cares about my constituent's freedom—I know that he has made time to meet Nazanin's husband and family and has spoken to me as well—but because the time for sentiment is over. This situation has gone on for too long, and we need decisive action right now.

Dr Murrison: The hon. Lady's question and the way in which she has put her remarks today do her great credit, and the work she does for her constituent is admirable.

We are, of course, seeking consular access. We have sought consular access from the beginning of this case. We believe that, as circumstances have changed, consular access now needs to be granted urgently. More importantly, we want to ensure that Nazanin gets access to her family. The hon. Lady will be in contact with the family, as are we, and it is the best way we have of determining Nazanin's status right now. Indeed, it would be cruel to deny this lady, in a psychiatric ward of a public hospital, access to her family, which must happen immediately.

I deplore the maltreatment of prisoners, wherever it occurs. The hon. Lady's description is completely unacceptable, and it is completely contrary to any international norms. She will understand that the Iranian system is multifarious, and we are concerned about exactly who is controlling the situation as far as Nazanin is concerned. I appeal to the better nature of people in Tehran to do what is right for Nazanin—that is vital.

The hon. Lady touches on Grace 1, and she will anticipate my answer, which is that this is primarily a matter for the Gibraltar authorities, who are exercising a matter of law under EU sanctions. I do not believe the two cases are directly linked. However, we certainly need to ensure there is de-escalation in relation to our interaction with Iran, in Gibraltar and in the Gulf.

When I visited Tehran recently, de-escalation was absolutely my message. Were we to approach something that looks like normality in relation to our access to this particular piece, all sorts of things would be possible.

I sincerely urge our interlocutors in Tehran to approach this on the basis of decency and humanity so that Nazanin can be given the treatment that she undoubtedly requires, but in a proper setting and using proper norms and practices.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Two weeks ago I was humbled to host a conference on human rights in Iran, and Richard Ratcliffe was one of the speakers. He said that all he wanted was for his wife to be returned so they can be a family again. We also heard from the UN rapporteur on human rights in Iran, who talked about the widespread human rights abuses in Iran. This weekend I was at a conference where I heard at first hand the human rights abuses that many people have suffered in Iran.

Can my right hon. Friend therefore outline the action we can take, as a country, to restore Nazanin to her family? The reality is that the Iranians only understand one thing, which is firmness, and we are currently seen not to be taking a firm enough stance.

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend will understand that the tools in our toolbox are somewhat limited. Iran is an independent and proud nation that has its own view of its place in the world, and it requires us to show some respect, but we need to de-escalate the things it is doing in respect of the victims of human rights abuses, which are particular acute in Iran.

The UK Government clearly use every opportunity to impress upon Iran how unsatisfactory we regard its approach to human rights to be. However, we also need to ensure that Nazanin comes home, which is our principal priority in this matter. I appeal to Iran, not least because its reputation in this country is being severely damaged, to do the decent thing.

Iran must look at this in a sympathetic light and do what is right, proper and humane in respect of Nazanin, particularly as she has now been moved to the Imam Khomeini Hospital, where she is being treated. We want to know how she is being treated, and whether she is being given the right treatment and in what context. Above all, she must have access to her family, but she must also have consular access, through which we will be able to make a better judgment on where we are.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I not only congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on securing it, but join the Minister in applauding and thanking her on behalf of the whole House for the outstanding passion and persistence she has brought to the fight for Nazanin's freedom—she is an outstanding Back Bencher.

For all of us who have taken part in this fight, and for all of us who visited Richard Ratcliffe during his recent hunger strike outside the Iranian embassy, the developments we have seen over the past 24 hours are deeply troubling. The fact that Nazanin is back under the control of the Revolutionary Guard, being held in isolation and denied
access to consular staff and to her father, has rightly raised concern that she may be being pressed to sign a false confession.

We all know that the hard-line theocrats around Khamenei who have been responsible for Nazanin’s arrest and detention, and her appalling treatment in custody, do not care about the truth of Nazanin’s case, the reality of her innocence or the mental and physical cruelty that has been inflicted on her. They care only about exploiting her and lying about her to support their doctrine of embattlement and isolationism, and to undermine the Rouhani Government’s strategy of engagement. They are the same individuals who have revelled in the collapse of the Iranian nuclear deal, and who are wilfully risking conflict with their actions in the Strait of Hormuz. On a practical level, can the Minister tell us today what is being done to engage with the figures around Khamenei, not just the Rouhani Government, on Nazanin’s case?

Finally, on a wider level, does the Minister agree with the veteran BBC correspondent John Simpson, a man with better insight than most of us put together on matters of diplomacy and foreign policy, that there are two villains in this terrible situation? As John tweeted this morning, Nazanin is both “the victim of a campaign by political extremists in Iran, and of the carelessness of @BorisJohnson as foreign secretary.”

Does the Minister agree with that verdict, and will he condemn the former Foreign Secretary—our next Prime Minister—for handing Iran’s hard-liners their biggest excuse, their biggest piece of propaganda, to justify this horrific injustice to one of our own citizens?

**Dr Murrison:** The right hon. Lady has elegantly dissected the Iranian state in a very few minutes, and she probably puts her finger on it. Of course, anybody with any experience of Iran will know that there are many Iranis, as I touched on in my opening remarks.

We are, of course, concerned by any access that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has to this particular case. I would say, though, that the IRGC does care about its reputation. It certainly cares about its country’s reputation, and so does the supreme leader. That reputation hangs in the balance.

The generosity and humanity with which Iran has historically been associated would be amply demonstrated if Iran were to do the right thing in respect of Nazanin. I urge it to do that, if not on Nazanin’s behalf, on behalf of Iran’s reputation, which is rightly important to it.

The right hon. Lady asks how close we are to the supreme leader and, again, she well knows, because she is a student of these things, that access to the supreme leader is exceptionally difficult. We have spoken to President Rouhani, and we routinely engage with our ministerial interlocutors, Minister Zarif and, in my case, Minister Araghchi, and we will continue to do so.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Iran, of course, is somewhat separate from the IRGC, and it is important to reiterate that we are ensuring the IRGC gets the message that the eyes of the world are on Iran in respect of this case and, if it continues to behave in this way, it will trample all over the good opinion that international observers might have, even now, of Iran—it will do Iran and its people no good at all.

**Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP):** I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn on securing the urgent question and you on granting it, Mr Speaker. She and the family will know that they have the full support and solidarity of Scottish National party Members. It was indeed a privilege when I met Richard when he was campaigning outside the Iranian embassy, as did many of my colleagues, including our leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford).

This move into hospital is a worrying turn of events, which raises serious questions about Nazanin’s wellbeing and a particular concern about the risk of her being forced into signing some kind of false confession. So, as other Members are asking, are the UK Government satisfied that they are exhausting every possible avenue to rectify this situation? What is the point of diplomatic protection if it cannot prevent this kind of development? Will the Minister unequivocally assert that the UK Government’s commitment to freeing Nazanin goes beyond any particular set of personnel or Ministers, and that freeing Nazanin must be a top priority for the next Prime Minister, whoever that might be?

**Dr Murrison:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. Nazanin has been transferred to a public hospital. Nazanin certainly does need medical treatment, and we have been calling for that for a very long time. If she does not get the treatment she requires, if she is abused in hospital or if the purpose of transferring her to hospital is to abuse her further than has been the case already, that would be a cause for utter condemnation, as would any forced confession. We have flagged that up pretty well today. In the event that a confession is obtained from Nazanin, the international community is perfectly entitled to question it, to put it mildly.

The hon. Gentleman asked me to establish the top priorities of the incoming Prime Minister. He can be sure that, one way or the other, Nazanin will be at the forefront of the mind of whoever is successful in this contest next week.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Further exchanges will unfold, but at this point I would like to say that all Members who visited you, Richard, when you were outside the Iranian embassy on your hunger strike will have regarded it as a great personal privilege and honour to have done so. Although people tend courteously to say, “It is good of this Member or that Member to find the time in a busy schedule”, I do not think we view it in those terms. As I say, we saw it as an honour to visit you. I am going to say to you very publicly what I have said to others and what I said to you: I was struck by your extraordinary stoicism and forbearance, a standard to which, in such circumstances, any of us could aspire but, I suspect, none of us would attain. It really was a very humbling experience. In my case, of course, I had the pleasure of not only meeting and engaging with you for the first time, but meeting your sister and your mum to boot. I want you and all of your family, and your precious daughter, to know that you will never be forgotten. The Minister has treated of these matters already in the most sensitive terms, as have other colleagues. For as long as it is necessary for this matter to be raised, as it
has been by the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn, with persistence and passion, it will be raised. This matter, the Iranians need to know, will not go away until mother and daughter, mother and wife and husband, are reconciled so that they can live as one.

I also want to mention what I have just been told by the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees), which is that 13 of her constituents, 13 wonderful women, who, it is said, wholly implausibly to me, are of an average age of 80—I cannot see any such people in the Gallery—have made a special visit to the House today to observe our proceedings. They, together with everybody else, should be warmly welcomed. I hope you are witnessing the House at its best, treating of an extremely serious matter, on a cross-party basis, because it is not about party politics; it is about humanity and the requirement for the display of humanity in the conduct of public affairs.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn on securing this urgent question and on the powerful way in which she has been an advocate for Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, her constituent. I thank the Minister for his efforts and those of the current Foreign Secretary in trying to secure Nazanin’s release. We can only imagine the anguish caused by the way in which this mother is separated from her daughter, and we hope this can be swiftly resolved so that the family can be reunited. What can the Minister do to bring that about? I also want to ask him about the wider issue of the disturbing trend of Iran arresting people on trumped up charges, with them asking him about the wider issue of the disturbing trend of Iran arresting people on trumped up charges, with them asking him about the wider issue of the disturbing trend of Iran arresting people on trumped up charges. Of course, other issues prey on the minds of those in the UN right now in respect of Iran, and its behaviour and destabilising actions in the wider Gulf region, and I rather suspect that in further questioning this morning we might return to those.

Dr Murrison: We have made it very clear that this is not acceptable, to put it mildly. I do not think the international community can be left in any doubt as to the importance we place on this and the views of like-minded countries in respect of it. I appeal to Iran just to consider what this is doing to its reputation. Nazanin has been wrongly imprisoned. She has been maltreated in an extremely serious way, as have her family. The right thing to do now is to reunite her with her family, as a minimum, to ensure that they have immediate access to Nazanin and that they are able to make phone calls to her, so that we can try to get to the bottom of exactly what is happening and whether she is getting the treatment we have long been calling for. Of course, other issues prey on the minds of those in the UN right now in respect of Iran, and its behaviour and destabilising actions in the wider Gulf region, and I rather suspect that in further questioning this morning we might return to those.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I thank the Minister in advance of tomorrow’s meeting with me on behalf of a constituent who is in a similar position to Nazanin. On the wider implications question, is there any movement on the issue of the deal and the notion that the European Union could help with the INSTEX—Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges—in trying to provide some kind of method of solving some of this frustration, so that there is a way for Iran to fix some of its economic problems and therefore have more of a dialogue with countries such as the UK?

Dr Murrison: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and I look forward to meeting her tomorrow. I hope that the JCPOA—Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—is capable of being advanced; I hope that we are not seeing the end of it. It is a credible mechanism for encouraging Iran to trade properly with the west, and a lot falls from that. She will know that the special purpose vehicle, INSTEX, created by the E3, which was discussed by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary with our interlocutors at the Foreign Affairs Council on Monday, is about to go live. I discussed it when I was in Tehran recently with my interlocutors. They have a sense of frustration in respect of this needing to be up and running, so that we can start doing business through it and they can get some of what they want, based around the necessities of daily life, which people in Iran at the moment are being deprived of because of sanctions. I am hopeful that this will work and that in the next few days and very few weeks INSTEX will be up and running. Iran will therefore see that good behaviour can be rewarded and in the fullness of time this can be used to perhaps reintroduce, in a small way, Iran to a proper international discourse and dialogue, which at the moment I am afraid is severely bruised.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I think you, Mr Speaker, spoke for many of us, if not all, who visited Richard Ratcliffe during his hunger strike and met possibly even more of his family than you did—I think his brother was there on the day I was there. I thank the Minister for the tone he has adopted in tackling this issue, and I obviously congratulate Nazanin’s Member of Parliament, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn, with persistence and passion, it will be raised.

Surely the difficulty is that this case is wrapped up in a complicated scenario that involves so many different things that have nothing to do with the particular issues that Mrs Ratcliffe’s case involves. My right hon. Friend the Minister will of course know that she is not the only British prisoner currently in Iran, nor are there only British prisoners in Iranian jails. Will he confirm that, in respect of the widest possible issue, the way in which some elements in Iran appear to be damaging that country’s reputation—not just with us but with other countries—by using hostages as a sort of political weapon is very sadly letting down Iran’s reputation around the world?

Dr Murrison: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. He refers to other dual nationals whom we are concerned about; we have to be a little careful, because not all the families of those dual nationals seek to advance cases publicly, and we must be led by them and their desires in how we approach this issue. It is a sensitive and individual matter, and we need to ensure that our approach to each of those cases is bespoke. That is what we will continue to do.

On Iran’s overall reputation not only in this country but in other countries, because this will involve other countries, too, I would say that now is the time to take a different approach to this particular case. It is very
high-profile—much more so than the other cases we are currently dealing with—and if Iran can make progress with this case in the way I have described, its reputation, which is sadly not great among the international community at the moment, will improve significantly. It can do itself a whole lot of good by adopting a far more positive and humane approach to this particular case, and I urge it to do so.

**Tracy Brabin** (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Occasionally, people say, “What do MPs actually do for the money we spend on them?” May I say that this is exactly what MPs should be doing? I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on continually raising this case. I, too, had the privilege of spending time with Richard and his mum and sister. After speaking to them, I can only understand that every hour that goes by when your child is separated from you, undergoing who knows what, must feel like a week.

The Minister has given a reasoned and determined reply to the urgent question. Will he reassure us that the changes at the very top—in respect of the Prime Minister—will not affect his Department’s determination? Will he reassure us that, with the long recess approaching, work will not affect his Department’s determination? Will he reassure us that the money we spend on them? May I say that this is a travesty of faith and a travesty of justice?

**Dr Murrison**: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. I do not anticipate moving—touch wood—and she can be absolutely sure that this issue is right at the top of my list of priorities. Like the Vicar of Bray, come what may I hope very much that I will be here ensuring that this remains absolutely top priority, along with other dual national cases. For the reasons I have described, this case has particular poignancy, and the hon. Lady can be sure that I will continue to do what I can with my Iranian interlocutors to bring it to a satisfactory conclusion.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I am not sure that the Vicar of Bray is the right person to cite, because he changed his religion whenever the regime changed, as I remember it, and the Minister has proved himself so far to be remarkably measured and sensible in everything he has said today.

Despite all the human rights abuses in Iran, the truth is that Islam at its best can be a religion of phenomenal humanity, generosity and magnanimity, and I think that is what we are hoping for at the moment, is it not? I just wonder whether there are not other envoys that we might send from this country—perhaps from the Church or on an interfaith basis—who might be able to speak of that humanity, compassion and magnanimity and be able to bring about the result that we all earnestly hope for.

**Dr Murrison**: The hon. Gentleman is far better qualified to talk about the Vicar of Bray than I am—

**Chris Bryant**: I’m sure that’s a compliment.

**Dr Murrison**: Believe me, it is a compliment; I am paying the hon. Gentleman a compliment, noting his previous occupation. He makes a serious suggestion that is worth considering by all involved in this case. We have lost no opportunity to raise these dual national cases with those to whom we have been given access, at ministerial level and other levels, over the course of this sorry saga, and we will continue to do so. Of course, people need to articulate their concerns, and that is not confined to Ministers. National leaders of various sorts have commented on this case, and if they used any influence they can with their contacts in Tehran, that would be a very positive thing. I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister might not know that I am a man of faith—I have personal faith, and in days gone by I have been the parliamentary churchwarden, a lay canon at Wakefield cathedral and an active member of Christians in Parliament. I do not want to say anything that would give Nazanin any more problems than she has. I snuck into the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) the other day, and I just stood, as a silent vigil, outside the Iranian embassy. I found that useful for me, but I would like other Members of Parliament to join me and go back to do that regularly, in a quiet, respectful way, just to keep it going after the hunger strike has finished.

We must appeal to the Iranians in terms of faith. Why do we not persuade the Archbishop of Canterbury to lead an all-faith group to Iran, to appeal to the better natures of very religious people to see that this is a travesty of faith and a travesty of justice?

**Dr Murrison**: I hope very much that the Archbishop of Canterbury is listening to the hon. Gentleman, and that perhaps he might consider whether he or other faith leaders have a role to play in this matter. I am not sure whether the established Church is the best vehicle, but it is universally recognised as being positive and capable of talking to people of all faiths and none. My view on this matter is that dialogue is necessary, notwithstanding the nature of the individuals who we know are intimately connected with this case in Tehran and who have not in the past shown themselves to be the masters of dialogue.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for securing this urgent question and for the way she champions her constituent’s case.

My hon. Friends the Members for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) both made a really important point about looking at other ways of trying to put pressure on the Iranian authorities. The Minister is a very good Minister, but what more can the Foreign and Commonwealth Office do to co-ordinate not just the diplomatic pressure that needs to be applied, but the wider pressure that can come from society, the Churches and other faiths? Why is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office not doing that? From the answer that the Minister just gave, it sounded like that co-ordination was not under way.

**Dr Murrison**: I am always open to suggestion; however, having considered the matter in respect of the Church of England in the few minutes I have had to do so, I think we need to be a little bit careful, because Iran is
inherently suspicious of this country. If the hon. Lady
doubts that, perhaps she might like to refer to Jack
Straw’s excellent book that has just been published: I
commend it to all right hon. and hon. Members who
take an interest in these matters. There is a long-standing
suspicion of this country in Tehran, and there will be a
suspicion of any initiative that is prompted or engineered
by the UK Government. It would certainly be open to
organisations that are held in some esteem in Tehran to
speak to any interlocutors they are able to identify and
have access to in Iran, in order to put pressure on where
they can and to bring their good counsel to bear in
respect of this case and other cases relating to dual
nationals.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This
case is clearly of deep concern to the whole country,
particularly the developments we have heard about in
the last 24 hours. It is particularly heartbreaking for
Richard Ratcliffe and his family. I can describe Richard
only as a very gracious individual after meeting him. I
ask the Minister not just what his office is doing, but
how the Prime Minister’s office is responding. She has
just one week left in office. Will she mobilise all the
forces of her office, including, if necessary and if possible,
making a diplomatic visit to Iran in the time that she
has left, and make it her priority to see the release of
this mother and wife?

Dr Murrison: I am confident that the issue has been a
high priority for the Prime Minister. She has spoken to
President Rouhani about it. It is a high priority for my
right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, who is frequently
in touch with his interlocutors in the matter. It is also,
and will continue to be, a high priority for me, as I have
explained.

Often, the issue with Iran is getting access. It cannot
be taken for granted that access will be automatically
welcomed, or indeed provided. I very much hope, however,
that we will continue to be able to press the case with
have a number of constituents who are Iranian nationals
regularly about the issue, to Nazanin and her family. I
speak to any interlocutors they are able to identify and
have access to in Iran, in order to put pressure on where
they can and to bring their good counsel to bear in
respect of this case and other cases relating to dual
nationals.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I send my
solidarity, and that of my constituents, who contact me
regularly about the issue, to Nazanin and her family. I
have a number of constituents who are Iranian nationals
awaiting decisions from the Home Office on asylum
and other issues. I ask whether the Foreign and
Commonwealth Office has given any updated advice to
the Minister’s colleagues in the Home Office about how
those cases should be treated, in the light of the serious
situation emerging in Iran. I would not want any of my
constituents to be returned to Iran by the Home Office
to face a situation similar to the one that Nazanin and
others have faced. If he has not, I ask him to speak to
his colleagues in the Home Office to make sure that
something is in place to protect everybody in those
circumstances.

Dr Murrison: As the hon. Lady will know, each
asylum case is treated on its own merits in the light of
prevailing circumstances, so I obviously cannot comment,
because I do not know the individual cases to which she
refers. I do know, however, that each one is treated
individually by the Home Office and that a determination
is made according to the perceived risk that they face,
which will clearly alter with time.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I, too, thank the
Minister for his tone this afternoon, but may I press
him to agree, no ifs or buts, that when the incoming
Prime Minister joins us, he must make Nazanin’s release
an absolute priority? I ask, gently and genuinely, should
that Prime Minister be the right hon. Member for
Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), how we
can ensure that he is appropriately briefed on Nazanin’s
situation. I hope the Minister agrees that it is imperative
that we avoid any repeat of earlier blunders.

Dr Murrison: I know that my right hon. Friends the
Members for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson)
and for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt) are greatly exercised
by this case. I assure the hon. Lady that they are
extremely well read into it now. I am absolutely confident
that, whatever the outcome next week, the Prime
Minister will treat the case with the priority that I think it
deserves. I reassure her, however, that I shall be there,
insshallah, prompting them to ensure that the matter has
the highest priority.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I, too, stand in
solidarity with Richard and his family, and all hon.
Members in the House today, to say that we need
Nazanin home now.

When Nazanin’s father rushed to see his daughter in
her hospital bed, his access was blocked by the revolutionary
guard, which is a shocking turn of events that has
affected us all. All of Nazanin’s family, including her
sister-in-law Rebecca, who lives in my constituency, are
going through hell as her situation deteriorates. When
will the Government explore new ways to get Nazanin
home safely as quickly as possible?

Dr Murrison: I share the hon. Lady’s frustration—I
really do. I want this brought to a conclusion as soon as
possible. She has to appreciate, though, that the United
Kingdom has a limited number of tools in its toolbox,
which is part of our frustration. I would love to be able
to resolve it tomorrow, but all we can do is what we do
diplomatically, which is to put pressure on our interlocutors
and try to explain to them what the benefits are, not
only for the individuals concerned, but for the country
concerned, of bringing it to a satisfactory resolution. It
is truly a win-win situation—it is clearly a win for
Nazanin and her family that she should be released as
soon as possible, and it is a win for the reputation of
Iran.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I congratulate the
Minister on the manner in which he has conducted his
response to the urgent question. There is widespread
support across the House for the humanitarian challenge
that is before us, and particularly before the Ratcliffe
family.

Does the Minister agree that this is not the time or
place for any attempts across the House, however gently
put, to seek party political advantage or division as a
result of the changes to the Conservative leadership?
We should all focus on ensuring that Nazanin can be returned to this country and on doing whatever we can to make representations to the right people in Iran to secure her release, irrespective of other political events surrounding our relationship with Iran.

Dr Murrison: Of course I agree with my right hon. Friend. I recall the remarks that you made a few minutes ago, Mr Speaker, about how this sort of issue sees the House is acting at its best, that we are not being partisan and that we are clearly focused on the interests of Nazanin and other dual nationals. That is where we need to be focused. I urge right hon. and hon. Members to approach these matters in that light and in the manner to which you rightly alluded, Mr Speaker.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is good to know that the Minister feels secure in his post. With all respect to him, however, Nazanin’s fate has been tied to the person of the Foreign Secretary, current and previous, for good or ill. I am not asking him to predict who will be the Foreign Secretary in a week’s time, but will he assure us that all eventualities are being planned for in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office so that the matter remains at the top of the agenda and we do not have any more confusion and delay?

Dr Murrison: I am not sure I would associate myself with the sense of security to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but I assure him that the matter is right at the top of the priorities of the Department that I have the honour of being a Minister in. That will endure. I have sought to explain to the House that, whatever the outcome next week, I am confident that it will continue to be a high priority for No. 10.

Tulip Siddiq: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have already indulged me today, so I hope you will indulge me a little further while I read out a message from Richard Ratcliffe, my constituent. He says:

“On behalf of Nazanin’s whole family, I want to thank the Speaker and the House from the bottom of my heart for the support, compassion and empathy that you have shown us in these troubled times. We won’t stop fighting for her release, and I hope the House won’t stop either.”

Mr Speaker: It was unsolicited, but it is greatly appreciated. We won’t let go. I think there is a pact between us on this matter.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Act:

Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) (No.3) Act 2019.

Immigration Detention: Victims of Modern Slavery

1.59 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on immigration detention and victims of modern slavery.

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Modern slavery is an abhorrent crime, and the Government are determined to stamp it out. In my role as Immigration Minister, I am especially aware of the shocking exploitation of vulnerable individuals from overseas who are duped by the promise of a better life in the UK, only to be trafficked and sold into modern slavery. Identifying and protecting victims of such crimes is a priority. In October 2017, we announced an ambitious package of reforms to the national referral mechanism. As well as improving the support on offer, these reforms are intended to provide quicker and more certain decision making, in which victims can have confidence.

I must make it clear, however, that being recognised as a victim of modern slavery does not automatically result in being granted immigration status in the UK. There may be victims of modern slavery who have no lawful basis to remain and for whom support is available to leave the UK voluntarily. It is important that we recognise the important role of our immigration policies. Although we are committed to supporting individuals to leave voluntarily, including with reintegration support, there may be occasions when they have exhausted all options and are refusing to leave, and we are faced with the difficult decision of detaining people to secure their return.

I want to reassure the House that we do not take these decisions lightly, but it may be necessary to detain individuals, even if they are vulnerable, to effect their removal. When that is the case, we seek to keep the period of detention as short as possible and place their welfare and safeguarding at the heart of what we do. The Home Secretary made clear his commitment to going further and faster with reforms to immigration detention, including by reducing the number of people we detain, increasing the number of voluntary returns and working with partners on alternatives to detention. We have made real progress in delivering these commitments. A number of women who would otherwise have been detained are now being managed in the community. Other pilots will begin later this year.

As we approach the first anniversary of Stephen Shaw’s second independent review of immigration detention, it is important to take stock of how far we have come, while acknowledging that there is much more to do to ensure that our approach to immigration detention is fair and humane.

Ms Abbott: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. On 19 June this year, the Immigration Minister provided a written answer on the possible immigration detention of persons who are in fact victims of slavery. The written answer read as follows:

“there is no central record”
of such persons, and

“The Home Office therefore does not collate or publish the data requested”.

As we approach the first anniversary of Stephen Shaw’s second independent review of immigration detention, it is important to take stock of how far we have come, while acknowledging that there is much more to do to ensure that our approach to immigration detention is fair and humane.
However, we now learn from a freedom of information request by The Independent that that is not the case: 500 victims of enslavement or trafficking were held in immigration detention. I have myself visited Yarl’s Wood detention centre and met such persons.

In response to an earlier written question on 20 December last year, the Immigration Minister said: “in cases in which it has been found that there are reasonable grounds to believe that an individual may be a victim of trafficking or modern slavery, the appropriateness of their being detained, or of their detention continuing, is governed by the Home Office’s modern slavery policy. This means that such individuals will not be detained”.

How many people who are victims of trafficking or modern slavery have been held in previous years? How many such people are currently held? Are the Government not in breach of their own stated policy on detention? How many of the 400 detainees were assessed as being a threat to public order and on what grounds? Does the Minister accept that when she responded to the written question saying that no data was available, she was in fact misleading the House?

Caroline Nokes: I reassure the right hon. Lady that I certainly was not misleading the House: there is no central record of those who have received a positive, conclusive grounds decision and are detained under immigration powers. While that information may be obtainable from the live Home Office case information database, otherwise referred to as CID, the information would be for internal management only. For example, some data may be incomplete and freedom of information requests are heavily caveated as such.

Releases of data from CID are always caveated and sometimes it is possible the data is not always accurate: there may be instances where individuals are counted twice. It is standard practice in parliamentary questions that we do not provide information that does not form part of published statistics. CID will show only those individuals who have been referred into the NRM from immigration teams and would not cover those referred to the NRM from other first responders, such as the police, social services or, potentially, medical practitioners.

The right hon. Lady asks specifically about the 507 individuals referred to in the After Exploitation report. I want to be very clear on this point: those were not 507 individuals detained after gaining a positive reasonable grounds. As stated very clearly in the freedom of information response, the figure relates to people who had a positive reasonable grounds when entering detention or while in detention.

Further analysis of the figures shows that, of the 507 people in question, 479 received the positive reasonable grounds decision during a detention period—and of those, 328, or 68%, were released within two days of the decision and in total 422 were released within a week. Of the 57 detained for eight days or more following a positive reasonable grounds decision, 81% were foreign national offenders.

Caroline Nokes: Individuals in immigration detention are entitled to a free legal advice surgery of 30 minutes within the first 24 hours of their detention and to have as many of those surgeries thereafter. As part of the Shaw re-review of last year, we piloted automatic bail referrals after two months instead of four months, as previously.

I must correct my right hon. Friend: it is not lawful to detain individuals indefinitely. They may be detained only when there are realistic grounds for removal within a reasonable timescale.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Immigration detention is a hellish thing to inflict on anybody; that is especially true of victims of modern slavery and trafficking. Will the Government accept that the supposed safeguards, particularly the gatekeeping process, are just not working? Signs of trafficking and enslavement are not being picked up, as these 507 cases show. Even when they are, immigration enforcement factors are given greater priority.

What will be done to improve the malfunctioning gatekeeping process and when will an overhaul of the rule 35 process be completed? More fundamentally, for as long as we continue to detain people indefinitely in these awful institutions, should not decisions on whether to detain any individual and on who should be released be made entirely independently of the Home Office? At the very least, we need much stronger and faster independent judicial oversight.

Caroline Nokes: The Government are committed to ensuring that the rule 35 process operates effectively. In March this year, we launched our targeted consultation on the overhaul of the detention centre rules within which the operation of rule 35 is a key element; of course it is closely linked into the operation of the “adults at risk” policy. We continue to keep the detention gatekeeper function under close review, but I certainly think that it has shown an improvement on the situation before its introduction.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Many victims of modern-day slavery are young and many are women. What support is given to such victims if they are identified as victims of modern-day slavery in a detention centre?

Caroline Nokes: As my hon. Friend will know, it is through the national referral mechanism that potential victims of modern slavery will be referred, and then support will be available to them. She is absolutely right to point out that many victims of modern slavery are young and many are women. I am sure that she will be pleased with our introduction of the pilot scheme currently operating in Newcastle; we have released women, who would otherwise be detained at Yarl’s Wood, to be supported in the community. I am very much looking forward to the possibility of introducing further pilots later this year. They will include not just women but men.

Frank Field ( Birkenhead) (Ind): Is there not something shocking about the Minister’s reply today? You may remember, Mr Speaker, that you allowed me a point of order on the factual inaccuracies that the Minister gave in a parliamentary answer when she said that she had
no idea of the number of people who had escaped slavery and were now in detention centres. If it were not for After Exploitation, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) said, we would have no idea what those numbers were. Since those parliamentary interventions, it is quite clear that the Minister has now been briefed on what is happening. Given that, in her answer to my right hon. Friend, she said that large numbers of people were now not in detention centres, may I ask her where they are, because when these people, largely women, are released like this, without any help, they are often scooped up by the slave owners.

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Gentleman will know that, at any one time, 95% of those liable to detention are actually in the community and not in immigration removal centres at all. It is important to emphasise that a freedom of information request will elicit different data to that which is available in parliamentary questions. I reiterate the point that no central record is held and that the information from the FOI has been collated from a variety of sources and may well give an inaccurate picture. If there is one thing that one learns as a Home Office Minister it is to be very wary of numbers at all times and not to seek to give numbers that may be inaccurate.

Henry Smith ( Crawley) (Con): In my constituency, there are two immigration detention centres: Tinsley House and Brook House. May I seek assurances from the Minister that the staff who operate those centres receive correct and adequate training to ensure that they are identifying and detecting those who may have been victims of modern slavery?

Caroline Nokes: It is still very much the case that it is the Home Office and Home Office staff in the widest sense who identify the greatest number of victims of modern slavery. Training is provided, and it is important that training is not only provided, but refreshed and is an ongoing process. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made her commitment clear on this issue, and it has been a driving force in the Home Office to support her in the mission to stamp out this terrible crime, to identify the victims and to ensure that they are given the help that they need as victims.

Wera Hobhouse ( Bath) (LD): The Government’s refusal to put a firewall between the police and labour inspection agencies and the Home Office for immigration purposes means that victims of modern slavery will continue to be at risk of detention and deportation. That is wrong, and it will deter victims from coming forward, which means that slavers and traffickers will get away with what they are doing. Will the Minister finally accept that data sharing for immigration enforcement must stop?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady is simply wrong to suggest that data sharing is always bad. In fact, in many instances, data sharing between the Home Office and the police can identify people who need to be safeguarded, and it is crucial that we have systems that will enable people to be correctly identified and then referred through the appropriate mechanisms. As I said in response to an earlier question, it is still the Home Office that identifies the highest number of victims of modern slavery.

Thangam Debbonaire ( Bristol West) (Lab): Further to the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), is it not the case that keeping numbers centrally might be a good idea? I understand that the Minister said that that number is not kept centrally, but part of my right hon. Friend’s point was that, perhaps, it should be.

Frank Field indicated assent.

Thangam Debbonaire: May I ask the Minister if she will reconsider the possibility of keeping such numbers centrally, including breaking them down, for instance, by how many victims of torture are kept in detention. I know that she will say that the number is low, but the rule on adults at risk surely suggests that that number should be kept as low as possible, and we cannot know if it is unless we know what those numbers are.

Caroline Nokes: The Home Office is making good progress in replacing antiquated case-working systems and data platforms, much of which will be complete by March next year, but it is a complex change process and although it will provide us with modern tools to protect and utilise data effectively, it is not an instant fix and will require further investment in the coming years. The changes will also mean that we will be able to act more swiftly to update systems to provide better organisation and granularity of data once they are deployed, but it does not negate the risk that data can be easily misinterpreted and each individual’s journey through the system is different, and aggregated information does not always represent the work undertaken. None the less, we will continue to focus on individual needs.

Alison Thewliss(Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituent Joel White, from Pollokshields, emailed me 20 minutes ago to say that he is a regular visitor to Dungavel immigration removal centre. He asked me to raise the case of a man that he spoke to recently who said: “The Home Office don’t tell me nothing—they don’t tell me what’s going on. When I sit down here, I don’t know what is going on. Time is just rolling down the road. You just lose your mind. I just need any help.”

This man has been in Dungavel for six months. He does not know whether he is being removed or whether he is likely to be released at any time. Will the Minister take on such cases and end the scandal of indefinite detention?

Caroline Nokes: I reiterate the point that detention can only be maintained where there is a realistic chance of removal within a reasonable timescale. The hon. Lady will have heard me comment earlier about auto-bail applications at two months. An individual in detention can apply for bail at any time. I urge her constituent to provide that advice to the individual concerned.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Every Child Protected Against Trafficking has worked with child victims of trafficking who have been detained in immigration detention having been incorrectly considered to be adults. Despite displaying indicators of having been trafficked, these children can struggle to prove
their age. They may not have identity documents or they may have been given false identity documents by their traffickers. What efforts is the Home Office making to ensure that no child who is a victim of trafficking is being held in immigration detention?

Caroline Nokes: The UK ended the routine detention of children in immigration removal centres in 2010 and enshrined that in law under the Immigration Act 2014. It is worth noting that, in the last year of the previous Labour Government, 1,100 children were held in detention. However, in some cases, individuals without documentary evidence of their age who are detained as adults subsequently claim to be children. When that occurs, our revised interim policy states that they will be afforded the benefit of the doubt and released into the care of social services until a further assessment of their age has been made, unless their physical appearance and demeanour very strongly suggest that they are over 25 years of age. Home Office policy means that such cases may be counted as under-18s for the purposes of data collection, but the hon. Lady is right that we should not be detaining children, and we have put in place steps that will prevent that from happening. Where there is an age-dispute case, the benefit of the doubt will always be afforded to the individual.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (IGC): I have repeatedly raised issues regarding victims of torture in immigration detention and asked questions on the number of Sri Lankan nationals granted refugee status after having previously been removed to Sri Lanka. Last November, the Minister said that there was no specific information available. It was only by pressing the Minister during a meeting in May that I was finally provided with the data requested—seven months after I asked the initial question. Why do we have to go to such lengths to pry information from the Home Office? Why do the Government withhold important data from public scrutiny? Where is the accountability and transparency in this situation?

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Lady will have heard my previous answers about the importance of relying on published statistics that can be properly verified. Relying on information that turns out to have come from aggregated sources, which then transpire to be inaccurate, is a very dangerous route to go down.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I think that the Minister has rather missed the point of what we are all saying. There is genuine shock across the House at the fact that it is Government policy to lock up victims of modern-day slavery as immigration offenders. What everybody is saying in different ways to the Minister is that that is unacceptable, and when is it going to stop?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman might have missed the comment that I made at the start of this urgent question. Just because somebody is a victim of modern slavery or trafficking does not mean that they have immigration status in this country. It is important that we reflect on the fact that our first port of call is to offer a voluntary return, so that somebody may go back to their country of origin and receive support there. There are reintegration packages. We must not assume that we are best placed to assist those people who have been trafficked.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): A system which detains people to whom the state has a duty of protection, which regularly separates parents from their children, which results in people being denied access to food and medicine and living in appalling conditions, and which incarcerates people indefinitely who present no risk to public safety in the UK, is a system of which we should all be ashamed. Does the Minister accept that the current immigration detention system is a pillar of the hostile environment, and that the time has come for radical reform?

Caroline Nokes: I remind the hon. Lady that the detention estate is significantly smaller than it was when the last Labour Government left office. She is wrong to suggest that people in immigration removal centres are denied access to food and medicine. They have 24/7 access to healthcare and it is absolutely right that they must do so. We take the vulnerability of detainees incredibly seriously, which is why we commissioned Stephen Shaw to do his re-review last year and are implementing his recommendations. It is absolutely right that we have chosen to shrink the detention estate and that we are seeking to pilot schemes where individuals can be better supported in the community. We will continue down that road.
Points of Order

2.20 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You were not in the Chair at the time, but the word that the Minister heard was “indefinite”. My recollection is that the word that I used was “indeterminate”. Thank you for indulging me so that I could get that on the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his brief and precise point of order. He has corrected the record. There is a distinction between the two words, and I am sure that his point will have been taken into consideration.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (IGC): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Minister’s answer to my question just a few moments ago regarding the unreliability of statistics was actually misleading. I accept that she may inadvertently be misleading the House, but she will know that I only got the answer on the numbers because I pointed out to her that a previous Minister had been asked the very same written question and gave the answer. As I said, I waited seven months, but the Minister did not give me an answer because she was unsure of the statistics. I do not know whether it is incompetence, inadequacy or what.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I appreciate the right hon. Lady’s point, but she will know that it is not a point of order for the Chair; it is a point of debate. The right hon. Lady has asked a question and the Minister has given an answer. It is not for the Chair to adjudicate as to whether any answer is acceptable or pleasing to the Member who asked the question. It is the Minister’s answer and I will give her the opportunity to expand on it if she wishes to do so.

Caroline Nokes indicated dissent.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Minister does not wish to expand on it; she has given her answer. The right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) is not satisfied, but c’est la vie—that’s life.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your advice on a very important matter for my constituents. Two in five pensioners do not claim the pension credit that they are due. My elderly constituents are now financially challenged constituents are facing considerable obstacles to claiming the support for which they are eligible, which would go some way to explaining why two in five pensioners do not claim pension credit. Madam Deputy Speaker, I seek your advice and guidance as to what action I can take to ensure that the Government make it as easy as possible for pensioners in my constituency and across the UK who are eligible for pension credit, and who need this important support, to claim it without encountering these obstacles.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her courtesy in giving me notice that she intended to raise that point of order. She raises a very important and serious matter about which the House has shown its concern on at least two occasions in the past few weeks—that I can recall—in the form of an urgent question and a debate. It is a matter of significant importance. I cannot give her any further advice from the Chair today, except to say that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard what she has said and I am quite sure that the appropriate Minister will be informed of her concerns. Of course, there are various ways in which the hon. Lady can bring this matter to the Floor of the House once again. If she cares to visit the Table Office, I am sure that she will be given the appropriate advice. I look forward to hearing her raise the matter with the Minister on the Floor of the House in due course.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You may be aware that yesterday the National Records of Scotland released the drug deaths figures for Scotland, which stand at a record high of 1,187 deaths—souls lost to drug addiction—in the past year. There is nothing to this effect on the Order Paper today, but have you been given any indication whether a Home Office Minister will come to the House and make a statement on this issue? Some of the responsibility lies with the Home Office, as these matters are considered to fall under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, so it may be helpful for a Minister to enlighten the House on what their part may be in dealing with this crisis.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. The answer to the first part of her question is that, yes, I am aware of these very worrying and serious statistics, which I am sure all Members will take very seriously. On her second point, I am not aware that a Minister is at this moment planning to come to the House to make a statement. I will say to the hon. Lady what I said to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) just a moment or two ago, which is that there are various ways in which she can bring this matter to the attention of the House in a formal way, and if she cares to visit the Table Office, I am sure that she will be given advice on how to do so. I look forward to hearing her raise these matters with the appropriate Minister in due course, because I am sure that it is a matter about which the House would like to hear.
Reservoirs (Flood Risk)

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

2.26 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to allow water companies to manage reservoirs to mitigate flood risk, and for connected purposes.

Calderdale—which comprises my Halifax constituency and that of my neighbour, the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker)—was devastated by flooding on Boxing day 2015. Storm Eva followed Storm Desmond, and wreaked havoc on parts of Cumbria, Lancashire and Yorkshire. My constituency, particularly Sowerby Bridge and Copley, was badly impacted by the floods, with the storm bringing extreme weather events, compounding a prolonged period of heavy rainfall. However, it was the total devastation further down the valley in Mytholmroyd and Hebden Bridge, with further damage in Elland, Todmorden and Brighouse, that brought Secretaries of State and the national press to Calderdale to see the unprecedented damage for themselves.

The River Calder was described as having become “weaponised” over Boxing day, picking up everything in its path and using it to smash its way through the valley, taking out bridges, roads, homes and businesses. In total, 2,781 residential properties and 1,635 businesses were affected in Calderdale alone. I hope this gives some sense of why flood protection is still a massive priority in our area. Residents are genuinely fearful every time the forecasts suggest that heavy rainfall is on its way. Since the flooding in 2015, many different initiatives have begun to help ensure that that level of destruction cannot be inflicted again. My Bill proposes to add the role of reservoirs to that package of initiatives. We need all these measures to work if we are truly to get a grip of flood risk in Calderdale.

The hard infrastructure work is currently ongoing across the borough, including a major remodelling at the centre of Mytholmroyd, with a new bridge and widened channel. Similar works are scheduled to start shortly in Hebden Bridge, providing that the funding gap can be closed. Natural flood management has also been a significant part of our response, with local organisation Slow the Flow deploying its team of energetic volunteers to such great effect. Since 2016, they have been working with the National Trust, the Environment Agency and Calderdale Council, using the natural environment to build leaky dams across streams, and to stuff deep gullies and channels. This work seeks to spread the water as it makes its way down the valley, to prevent it from coursing rapidly through channels to the valley below—delaying its journey to hold as much water up in the crags as possible. Managing the upper catchment in this way is essential if we are to do all that we can to mitigate flood risk for those in the valleys below.

Also in the upper catchment above Calder valley are six Yorkshire Water reservoirs, and conversations about their role in mitigating flood risk have been under way for some time. The Bill seeks to formalise that process and demonstrate parliamentary support for its aims. In the winter of 2017-18, Yorkshire Water and the Environment Agency started a trial to manage the Hebden Water reservoirs down to 90% of their usual top storage level, with the aim of assessing the potential of utilising the reservoirs as a more long-term flood risk management option. Maintaining the reservoirs at 90%, instead of the usual 100%, created the extra 10% capacity to hold more water in the upper catchment during periods of unusually heavy rainfall.

While the reservoirs were placed under nothing like the pressure of the 2015 Boxing day weather during the trial period, the report was able to conclude that:

“The lower reservoir levels did provide a significant impact on peak flows in Hebden Water for the largest events observed during this period”.

The report proposed that next steps might include trialling 85% capacity, as the levels in the reservoir had been restored faster than expected during periods of rainfall. The report was clear that the scheme had a positive impact on flood mitigation and that this managed and collaborative approach would be complementary to ongoing flood protection work in the area. This approach is not just happening in Calderdale. Similar conversations and trials are under way across the country, including at Thirlmere reservoir in Cumbria, reservoirs in the Upper Don valley and Watergrove reservoir in Rochdale—I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) in the Chamber.

So why do we need legislation to make this happen? There are still challenges that need to be ironed out before water companies have the confidence to commit to these types of scheme more routinely. Currently, the legislation that underpins water companies and the regulation of them has a focus on mitigating drought risk, rather than flood risk. We know that extreme weather will increase in frequency in the years to come, and reservoirs will be key in ensuring resilience within our water infrastructure if we are to manage both drought and flood risk. Right now, we need to give reservoir management of this kind a statutory thumbs-up, explicitly giving the Environment Agency the powers to instruct a water company to manage down the levels on pre-designated reservoirs, where the evidence suggests that doing so would reduce flood risk and protect communities.

To be clear, it would not be a case of drawing those reservoir levels down at speed at the point when we are faced with extreme weather, as that would place dangerous pressures on the watercourses and, if anything, contribute to flood risk. Instead, the Bill would set out a framework for having agreements in place long in advance of that for the EA and water companies to have identified which reservoirs, what capacity level is appropriate and when that reduction would be in place, with the evidence base to support those decisions.

Water companies are currently regulated by Ofwat, and inevitably there is a strong focus on preventing over-abstraction of water sources, particularly in the context of fears that climate change will bring about prolonged periods of hot, dry weather. However, the Environment Agency warned in May that entire communities might need to be moved away from rivers if we are to prepare for a predicted, terrifying average global temperature rise of 4°C. Again, regulation must find the appropriate balance between the two threats of drought and flooding.

The water industry in England and Wales is diverse, and pressures in one area are not the same as those in another, so regulation needs to allow for water companies
and the EA to respond to the local risks and react accordingly. The Bill would set out the transfer of powers to the EA and the framework in which such arrangements between the EA and water companies, in consultation with local authorities and communities, would work.

For the Bill to be as effective as we would all hope, further considerations might be needed. For all the reasons set out, resilient water infrastructure will ensure that reservoirs can assist in alleviating both drought and flood risk, and increased capacity would only be a good thing. To allow us to respond in real time to changes in our climate that mean we can face both drought risk and flood risk within months of each other, we need a more automated means of doing that. Reservoirs involved in the recent trial required an operator to alter the water levels manually using largely Victorian infrastructure. While the Bill focuses on the powers and framework required, it goes without saying that investment in automation and resilience in water infrastructure would be hugely beneficial.

In an ideal world, the ability to transfer water between reservoirs, and even across the country, would enable the release of excess water to mitigate flood risk, which could be sent elsewhere without wasting a single drop. Yorkshire Water is currently exploring the possibility of directing the water released from its trial reservoirs into its nearby treatment works, which is exactly the approach we would like to see.

With that in mind, I hope it is clear to Members why my Bill is needed and why those of us from flood-affected areas feel so passionately about getting this right. I want to take this opportunity to thank both Adrian Gill at the Environment Agency and Yorkshire Water’s Granville Davies, who strive to reduce flood risk every day in the Calder valley and who have been incredibly helpful in engaging in constructive dialogue.

I am not naive about the nature of ten-minute rule Bills, but I hope that the Environment Minister and her team have heard the details of my Bill and will reflect on its merits. I also want to stress that, just because the Bill will not become law tomorrow, it does not mean we are not looking to water companies to undertake this work on our behalf in the meantime. They have my full support and that of many MPs and our communities in doing just that. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Holly Lynch, Louise Haigh, Rachael Maskell, Diana Johnson, Hilary Benn, Paul Blomfield, Angela Smith, Rachel Reeves, Philip Davies, Trudy Harrison, Gill Furniss and John McNally present the Bill.

Holly Lynch accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time, and to be printed (Bill 424).

**Census (Return Particulars and Removal of Penalties) Bill [Lords]**

2.37 pm

The Minister without Portfolio (Brandon Lewis): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am delighted to present the Bill, the purpose of which is simple: it will remove the criminal penalty for not responding to new census questions on sexual orientation and gender identity, which means that these questions will be voluntary. The Office for National Statistics recommended that these questions only be asked of those aged 16 and over and, importantly, that they be voluntary. The Bill enables that by following the same method used to make the question on religion voluntary in the Census (Amendment) Act 2000, which is by removing the criminal penalty for not responding to census questions on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Following consultations with the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, we have extended the Bill to Northern Ireland. The Bill does not require either question to be asked in the 2021 census, but it does extend the voluntary nature of the questions should Northern Ireland decide to include either question in the 2021 census.

The 22nd national census is due to be carried out in March 2021, and that will be provided for by secondary legislation in the normal way. This Bill is distinct from that secondary legislation. It simply ensures that, in delivering on the White Paper’s proposals, the ONS can include these new questions on a voluntary basis. I want to make a couple of brief points on how that voluntary nature is guaranteed.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I support the thrust of what the Bill is designed to achieve. However, many of my constituents are concerned that the Bill does not seek to achieve more wide-ranging change by allowing both Jains and Zoroastrians—both internationally recognised religions—to be properly recognised in the forthcoming census, which would end the historical under-reporting of the number of people who subscribe to those religions in the UK.

Brandon Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point, but I would just say that everybody who wishes to identify, for example, as Jain in the census will be able to do so. They will be able to use the write-in option and a new search-as-you-type facility. The Jain populations are concentrated in a small number of local authorities, which we know, and the ONS has committed to work with local groups and organisations to ensure that anyone who wishes to identify as Jain knows how to do so.

First, the ONS has committed to ensure that the voluntary nature of the questions on sexual orientation and gender identity are made clear in its design for the census forms in England and Wales—both on the front pages of the forms, and alongside the questions themselves.

Secondly, respondents will be provided with a unique access code to the online census, and anyone aged 16 years and over will be able to request a code, or paper form if
answering offline, who wishes to respond privately. This will enable people to answer the census, including these two questions, without having to tell the person completing the household form that they have done so. Any individual answers will override any submitted on the household form. That is vital to protect people’s privacy.

Thirdly, census confidentiality remains of the utmost importance. All personal data collected by the census will be stored confidentially and not released for 100 years. This Bill delivers on the White Paper’s proposals to include new questions on sexual orientation and gender identity in the 2021 census, and on a voluntary basis. I urge all Members to join me in supporting this simple and worthwhile legislation, and I commend this Bill to the House.

2.41 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his introduction, and I also thank the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), for his willingness, once again, to work with me and our side openly on this important legislation, which is greatly appreciated. I have to note, when I look across the Atlantic and see the difficulties the racist President Trump is having about his citizenship question in the United States census, that the Minister here has surely shown how to get a census Bill through the House by working, as they say in the United States, across the aisle.

The aim of this Bill is to provide for voluntary questions on sexual orientation and gender identity to be asked in the England, Wales and Northern Ireland censuses. Crucially, this Bill renders questions concerning gender identity and sexual orientation voluntary, as the right hon. Gentleman has outlined. I think we can all agree that it would be totally inappropriate to compel someone to answer a deeply personal question about their sexuality or gender identity in the census. However, at the same time, these are vital questions that reflect better the modern UK and how we address the needs of a long discriminated against section of society.

Labour supports this Bill on the basis that any census must be LGBT+ inclusive. Recognising gender identity and sexual orientation as core aspects of personal identity in official statistics is a step forward in the fight for LGBT+ equality. It gives individuals the opportunity to identify themselves however they choose in this important civic event. Indeed, the Opposition support this change as a point of principle. This tick box clearly demonstrates that, as a society, we value LGBT+ inclusivity. As a party, we have always fought for minority rights. Progressive equality legislation is part of Labour’s history. Labour brought in the Equal Pay Act 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the Equality Act 2010, and we introduced the minimum wage and Sure Start. We support this Bill in the spirit of inclusivity and equality, strengthening a proud history within Labour of fighting for minority rights.

This change is not only symbolically important, but practically necessary. Gathering the required data to properly understand and support the LGBT+ community is vital. Information derived from the census helps us to inform policy, plan services and distribute resources effectively to local government and health authorities, and enable these resources to be directed where they are needed.

Of paramount importance is the acquisition of accurate data to address inequalities facing minority groups. Accurate data about the size and characteristics of the LGBT+ community are currently severely lacking. Small-scale surveys struggle to grasp the whole picture, producing significantly varied estimates of the size of the LGBT population. Without an accurate picture of the size or nature of any minority community in society, how can we provide the necessary targeted support and services they need?

We are talking about a community that is in particular need of support: LGBT+ people have worse mental and physical health outcomes on average than the rest of the population. In particular, suicide rates for gay and bisexual youth are significantly higher than for their heterosexual counterparts. It is not just the youth who are suffering; older LGBT people suffer disproportionately from social isolation and a lack of social support networks. It is only through accurate data about minority populations that agencies can begin to properly address the inequalities faced by LGBT people. The census has the advantage of being a whole-population count and can therefore build a representative and accurate picture of the whole country.

Privacy is always a matter of concern when discussing these topics. I commend the work that has been done by the Parliamentary Secretary, his officials and the ONS to consider people’s privacy when a family member is completing the census form. Any member of a household will be able to request their own individual census form if there is information they do not wish to disclose to the householder, such as gender identity, sexual orientation or a change of religion. These are clearly issues that we must be aware of and sensitive to when carrying out a census.

Labour has a proud record of championing the fight for LGBT equality. We abolished section 28, equalised the age of consent and created civil partnerships, and it was with Labour votes that equal marriage became law. The Opposition are committed to taking radical steps to improve inclusivity in our society. The inclusion of a gender identity box in the census is an important step in this direction, but there is still a long way to go, particularly in the area of LGBT inclusivity. We are still not free from bigotry as a society. Issues such as lack of education, unequal access to public services and levels of LGBT hate crime and mental health remain barriers to full equality.

By way of illustration, recently in my own county, Bob Fousert, the chair of the police and crime scrutiny panel, attacked our deputy chief constable, Julie Cooke, for wearing a rainbow lanyard in support of LGBT rights. He said it was a political statement. Well, if standing up against hate crime is a political statement, then yes, it was a political statement. His appalling comments were condemned, including by David Keane, the police and crime commissioner. I wrote to Deputy Chief Constable Cooke, who leads nationally for the police on LGBT issues, to offer my support. Mr Fousert had to resign as chair—and good riddance. I recount this story because, in the same week that those comments were made, there was a well-publicised attack on a lesbian couple on a bus in London and a vicious
homophobic attack in Liverpool. We may have made progress in the last couple of decades, but we are not there yet.

The Opposition have been calling for a particular focus in this census on homeless LGBT+ communities. The position of LGBT+ homeless people warrants particular attention in this discussion, not least given the shocking statistic that up to 24% of the youth homeless population are from the LGBT+ community. Clearly, we are far from solving the issue of LGBT+ discrimination. Young homeless people continue to be one of the most disenfranchised and marginalised groups in society, but young LGBT people are particularly isolated. The Albert Kennedy Trust reports that LGBT homeless youth are highly likely to have experienced familial rejection, abuse and violence, leading to their state of homelessness. In many cases, homophobia is the reason why they became homeless. LGBT+ homeless people are regularly at the receiving end of shocking levels of discrimination and abuse.

Homelessness in any form makes people more vulnerable to other risks, such as mental health problems. The unprecedented rise in homelessness under the current Government is a national disgrace, yet more and more people continue to be forced on to the streets by the Government’s policies—from welfare cuts to a lack of investment in social housing. Homelessness charities have reported a rise in homelessness of up to 169% since 2010. The Government hold a direct responsibility for the perpetuation of this national crisis. It is time the Government looked to the root causes of rising homelessness, and invested in more affordable homes and stronger rights for renters.

What is more shocking is the direct ramifications that austerity cuts have had for the LGBT+ voluntary and charity sector, given that public funding provides such a large proportion of overall income. This in turn further isolates LGBT homeless people. Not only do the Government need to support specialist LGBT services to allow greater access to more safe, accessible and affordable accommodation, but, above all, to fight for wider recognition of the issues that LGBT homeless people face.

Labour has pledged to tackle the bullying of LGBT young people by ensuring that all teachers receive initial and continuous training on LGBT issues experienced by students and how to address them. Furthermore, we fully support changes to the new guidance for relationships and sex education to ensure they are LGBT inclusive. Therefore, we believe that this census must make a particular effort to give LGBT homeless people the opportunity to contribute to this important civic exercise. Their inclusion will enable us to build an accurate picture of the number of people from the LGBT community living without a permanent address. It is only through an awareness of the scale of the issue that support and aid can be effectively targeted towards the most vulnerable communities.

Furthermore, there is a particular danger that all homeless people, whether rough sleepers, sofa surfers or, arguably, LGBT+ people, could be undercounted. There must be a particular effort by the ONS to ensure that those communities are reached on the day of the census. There are dangerous consequences of an undercount, which would play into the hands of those who would prefer to ignore the LGBT+ community and reverse progress towards equality.

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend is making an extremely good speech, which I strongly support. Will he join me in encouraging the ONS to look again at the representation of Jainism and Zoroastrianism in the religion section of the 2021 census? Notwithstanding the slight movement in progress alluded to by the Minister without Portfolio, the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), in relation to the provision of a drop-down box, there is a genuine concern among the leaders of both faith communities that there will continue to be a significant under-reporting of the number of Juins and Zoroastrians living and adhering to their faith in the UK.

Christian Matheson: My hon. Friend has been pushing this issue with perseverance and resilience. Representations have been made to the Minister by those and other religions and ethnic groups. It may well be that this issue is considered in Committee or on Report, or, if it is not included in the scope of the Bill, then later on when we come to the census. I look forward to reading any proposals my hon. Friend brings forward.

Returning to the homeless count, I am grateful to the Minister for assurances that the ONS will work with organisations representing LGBT people and charities, to locate hard-to-reach communities and ensure they are given the opportunity to complete the census. I understand that the ONS is organising both national and local campaigns to highlight that everyone in England and Wales should complete the census. Community engagement programmes will allow field teams to specifically target hard-to-reach communities and help minority groups with census completion.

Working with stakeholders throughout this process is vital, particularly when it comes to drafting specific questions for the census. The drafting of the questions and the accompanying guidance must be subject to extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders from across the LGBT community and women’s groups. I understand that my noble Friend Baroness Hayter made that important point via an amendment in the other place.

We are pleased to support the Bill, which is a step forward in the fight for LGBT+ recognition, and to ensure that the mirror we hold up to ourselves in the form of the census portrays an accurate reflection of all parts of our nation. It is vital that thorough consultation follows the passage of the Bill to ensure that these words are carried forward into action. Given the richness and range of data provided by a survey of this size, the 2021 census provides us with an exciting opportunity to gather accurate data about minority communities, and to plan services and distribute resources accordingly.

2.53 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate. I welcome the introduction of the Bill to ensure that the census is up to date and accurately reflects the country as we go to seek its views.

There was another census that took place about 2,000 years ago, possibly the most famous and most significant census ever undertaken. It was a census
where people returned to their homeland, to the place they were from, to register. There was a recently married couple at this time who left the town of Nazareth and undertook an arduous journey of about 100 miles on foot—maybe with a donkey, but probably on foot—to their home town of Bethlehem to register that this was the place that they belonged to, that this was their homeland. The journey was particularly gruelling because the wife was heavily pregnant. As is well known to us all now, when they got to Bethlehem the woman gave birth to a son, the most famous human to have ever lived and the founder of the Christian faith. I am sure Sir Cliff Richard is eternally grateful that they made it to Bethlehem, because “O Little Town of Nazareth” does not have quite the same ring to it and he would probably have been one Christmas No. 1 short.

Why did they make that journey? Because they had a strong connection with a place and its people. They wanted to demonstrate that this was the place that was bound up in their identity. This was the place that they were from; this was their homeland. That desire to identify with a place and its people remains as strong in many people today as it did 2,000 years ago. In fact, I would argue that in recent times there is a growing sense, with a more mobile population and globalisation impacting on communities, that the desire to have a strong connection and identity with a place is stronger today than it has been. Today, thankfully, we do not need to travel to our homelands to be able to identify where we are from. Modern census methods allow us to do that by way of a simple tick—well, that is true of almost everyone, as I will come on to explain.

The right to demonstrate which of the national identities within the UK we choose to identify with is not currently protected by legislation. Currently, it is down to the ONS to recommend to the Minister which national identities should be included in any census. I find it quite astonishing that it was only in the most recent 2011 census that the Welsh were given the opportunity to identify their national identity by way of a tick-box, and only in 2001 that the Scottish were given a tick-box. I find it incredible that those developments took place so recently. There is nothing that currently protects that status, and it could be removed in subsequent censuses by a recommendation from the ONS. I am sure many Members of this House would find that completely unacceptable.

Let me say that I have a great deal of respect for the officers and staff of the ONS, who provide a very important service to our nation. I do not believe, however, that it should be down to the ONS, using statistics and data, to decide which national identities should and should not be included in any given census every 10 years. The right to demonstrate one’s UK national identity should not be a matter of data or statistics. I believe it should be a right established in legislation. That right should also be a matter of equality across the whole UK. No one national identity should be considered more important or be recognised more than any other. All the national identities in the UK should be given equal status and equality of opportunity to be recognised as such within any census. We could never countenance one UK nationality being given less status in a census.

I, along with a number of my colleagues, will be looking to add a clause to the Bill to establish in legislation the right for all UK national identities to be treated equally in all future censuses. The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) is well aware of this issue. I want to put on record my thanks to him, and to the Minister he is currently filling in for, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), for their positive and constructive engagement on this issue.

The Minister is aware that there is a particular matter in this regard that I want to address. As matters currently stand, there is one UK national identity that is not being given equal status in the census. In 2014, the Cornish were recognised by the Council of Europe under the framework convention for national minorities. That status was not just accepted but enthusiastically embraced by the UK Government, who declared that this would now give the Cornish equality of status with the other Celtic parts of the UK. I do not believe, however, that this new status could be removed in subsequent censuses by a recommendation from the ONS, or that the ONS itself would be able to do that by way of a simple tick.

Steve Double: I will come on to why I believe that, at this time, the Cornish have a unique claim on the matter. In future, this may apply to other peoples, but I suspect that it does not at this time.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Steve Double: I will, gladly.

Eddie Hughes: I thought I had better get in before my hon. Friend moves on. I did not come to the Chamber today expecting to hear the Christmas story in the middle of July, but as we have inadvertently touched on religion, I want to say that I have 3,500 Sikhs living in my constituency. The idea that they would have some sort of write-in box to identify their ethnicity is not appropriate either. It is not too much to ask for Sikhs to have a box specifically to identify their ethnicity on the census.

Steve Double: I would say the same thing in reply to my hon. Friend. I believe that the Cornish have a unique claim in this regard, because it is the only UK national identity affected that is formally recognised by the Council of Europe under the framework convention for the protection of national minorities, which has been fully accepted and endorsed by the UK Government. I therefore think that there is a unique case for Cornish...
that perhaps does not apply to other ethnic identities. I say that in no way to belittle or denigrate other national identities, but—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I understand that the hon. Gentleman and various hon. Members who have intervened on him over the last few minutes have very genuine concerns, but we must stick to the purpose of the Bill, which is about sexual orientation and gender identity. I have allowed some illustrative points about religious belief, ethnicity, geographical attachment and so on, because I have a lot of sympathy, but we must stick to the purpose of the Bill.

Steve Double: I am grateful for that advice, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am raising this because I think that the Bill is an opportunity to address an issue that otherwise may be missed, but I take your point and will seek to wind up my comments quickly.

Gareth Thomas: Back Benches should stick together and, therefore, I strongly support the hon. Gentleman’s desire to amend the Bill to enable a longer debate about Cornish identity being included in the 2021 census. If I am sympathetic to him, will he be sympathetic to me and help me to find a way to amend the Bill to ensure that Jains and Zoroastrians, who are recognised as world religions by the United Nations—not merely by the Council of Europe, which he prays in aid—also have their concerns properly recognised?

Steve Double: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, but I return to the fact that I think that the Cornish case is unique, in that within the UK, it is the only national minority identity that is not being included as a tick-box on the census.

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): I am conscious of your comments, Madam Deputy Speaker, but is this Bill not really about equality of treatment for people? My hon. Friend makes a very good point about the Council of Europe framework convention. The UK Government have been criticised by the Council of Europe for failing to live up to their legal obligations on Cornwall, as undertaken when we signed that convention.

Steve Double: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and Cornwall colleague for making the point very well that the Government made this commitment in 2014. They have been criticised by the Council of Europe for not living up to that commitment and obligation under the framework convention. This is a very simple and straightforward way for the Government to go some way to rectifying that and fulfilling their commitments.

By saying that the matter of Cornish identity is primarily a geographical issue that is restricted to Cornwall, and that there will be an awareness campaign in Cornwall, we are effectively treating the Cornish around the country in the same way as Mary and Joseph were treated 2,000 years ago. We are saying, “In order to identify yourself as Cornish, you really should live in Cornwall and return to your homeland.” That is completely unacceptable, and it is definitely not equality of recognition for the Cornish, as the Government promised and made a clear commitment to in 2014.

Any argument that to extend this opportunity to the Cornish would open the floodgates for other minority groups who are also seeking some sort of recognition is, I believe, misdirected. The Cornish people’s claim to national minority status in the UK is unique. We are the only group who have been given this status by the Council of Europe, which the UK Government have accepted and endorsed. I believe that the unique claim for the Cornish means that we should be given equality with the rest of the UK.

Do people today still desire to identify themselves with their homeland? If so, should they be given equal opportunities in the forthcoming census to do so? Should that right be enshrined in legislation? I believe that the answer to all three questions is very much yes, and I trust that we can use the Bill to establish the right of national identity within the UK in law.

3.6 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I have been inspired to speak in the debate by the contribution of the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double). I agree with him about two things. The first is his strong support for the Bill; as I indicated in my two interventions on the Front-Bench spokesmen, I think they are right to bring in and strongly support the Bill. I also echo the praise from the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay for the tremendous job of work that the Office for National Statistics and all its staff do. However, I share his frustration that, with one or two questions that have faced the ONS in preparing for the 2021 census, its temptation has been to see them as a little local difficulty and perhaps not to take them as seriously as it might. I recognise that concern.

At the beginning of his remarks, the hon. Gentleman retold the Christmas story in his own unique way—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I have made it very clear that this is a very narrow Bill. I have allowed considerable leeway, and I have allowed the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) to make three very long interventions—[Interruption.] Oh, was it only two? I have allowed him to make two very long interventions, because I thought that he was not going to make a speech. Now he is making a speech on a subject that I have said is not within the scope of the Bill. I hope that he will not seek to go further down that line. The Bill is about sexual orientation and gender identity.

Gareth Thomas: For the record, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have not querying the number of interventions that you were gently chastising me for, but merely the accusation that they were long. I thought that they were entirely appropriate points to make.

Finally, I hope to follow the inspiration of the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay in looking for an opportunity, perhaps on Report or in Committee, to explore the under-representation of Jains and Zoroastrians in the census.

3.9 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is probably worth noting that much of the debate on this Bill has not been about its content, which concerns
inclusivity for LGBTQ people in the census. That is a good sign that the issue is not controversial and that common sense has been used and a consensus has been reached across the House. I hope that the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) have the opportunity in Committee to pursue the issues that they have raised during this debate.

I am proud of the steps that the House has taken to strengthen LGBTQ equality, including the amendment tabled to the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill last week by my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) to extend marriage equality to Northern Ireland. I am proud of the record of the last Labour Government, who were at the forefront of advancing progress for LGBTQ people with the equalisation of the age of consent, the repeal of section 28, and advancing progress for LGBTQ people with the Strengthening LGBTQ Equality Bill last week by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) to extend marriage equality to Northern Ireland. I am proud of the record of the last Labour Government, who were at the forefront of advancing progress for LGBTQ people with the equalisation of the age of consent, the repeal of section 28, and advancing progress for LGBTQ people with the Strengthening LGBTQ Equality Bill last week by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) to extend marriage equality to Northern Ireland.

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We cannot pretend, however, that LGBTQ people do not face disproportionate discrimination and prejudice in their day-to-day lives, including in schools, in employment and in accessing goods and services. The numbers of homophobic and transphobic hate crimes, including stalking, harassment and violent assault, has more than doubled in England and Wales over the past five years. LGBTQ people have worse health outcomes and are more likely to suffer from poor mental health than are the population as a whole. That is particularly true of the trans community, with roughly half of trans people in Britain having attempted suicide at least once. It is vital that the Government match their commitment to visibility for LGBTQ people in the census with a commitment properly to fund our public services, which provide essential support to marginalised groups across the country. The addition to the next census of the new questions on sexual orientation and gender identity is a welcome step, and it represents a significant victory for the LGBTQ community.

When it comes to statistics, the LGBTQ community are a hidden population. In the absence of comprehensive national population data for these groups, charities such as Stonewall are forced to rely on little more than estimates. Those estimates are frequently derived from smaller-scale surveys, and as a result, they vary widely. The data collected under the census will be vital to local authorities and other services in providing accurate estimates of the overall size of the LGBTQ community and providing geographical concentrations, which will be crucial for service planning. At a national level, it will have a significant impact on policy development, equipping regulators and Government bodies with accurate data to develop programmes of work that have a positive impact on LGBTQ people.

In a society where many LGBTQ people struggle with their sexual orientation or gender identity, there are challenges involved in ensuring that the data collected by the census is accurate. Given the personal and sensitive nature of the questions, a proportion of respondents will always prefer not to disclose their sexuality, even on a confidential form. We must be cognisant of the risks associated with an under-count of the LGBTQ population, because it could play into the hands of those who would attempt to reverse progress towards equality.

Furthermore, the fact that census responses are often completed by one member of the household represents a real barrier to disclosure for individuals who are not out to their families or those they live with. I understand that the Minister has thought about that and informed my Labour Front-Bench colleagues in recent meetings that he wants to establish a process whereby people in that position can fill in the census separately and privately, overriding the household response. We support that proposal, and I urge the Minister to ensure that such an arrangement is accessible to everyone, given that the privacy concerns will be felt by people of all ages and in a range of settings.

It is crucial that statistical agencies continue to engage with organisations that represent LGBTQ people to ensure that robust solutions are found and communicated. Privacy concerns must be fully addressed, and officials must work with LGBTQ communities to convey the importance of being counted and build trust in the census process—what is counted counts.

The drafting of the questions and the accompanying guidance must also be subjected to extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders from across the LGBTQ community and women’s groups. The Minister has informed the Opposition that the ONS is consulting, and we welcome sight of the draft guidance, but if he could provide more information to the House, it would be very much appreciated. As I have made clear, the Opposition welcome the Bill and believe it is an important step towards building a society in which LGBTQ people are truly accepted, included and counted.

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3.15 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): It is a pleasure to wind up this debate. I thank the Opposition Front-Bench team for their support and their kind words; I was almost blushing at times during their speeches. I confirm that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) said when he opened the debate, anyone who wishes to disclose a particularly private matter will be able to apply for a number and make a separate census return that overrides the household census. That information, in a non-anonymised form, will be held for 100 years. I want to make it very clear that that opportunity will be available.

It is clear from the debate that there is strong support for the Bill, and there is widespread recognition of the importance of the census as an event. As you have confirmed, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Bill is designed solely to enable the next censuses in England and Wales and in Northern Ireland to ask questions about sexual orientation and gender identity on a voluntary basis. The Bill does not prescribe that those questions should be asked, or how they should be asked. That is a matter of secondary legislation, which Parliament will have the opportunity to scrutinise later this year.

On that subject, I recognise the passion with which some Members of the House—especially the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double)—have expressed their concerns with the census secondary legislation, rather than for this Bill, which is purely about making the questions voluntary rather than compulsory.
Steve Double: Leaving aside the question of Cornish identity, does the Minister not think that there is a case to be made for protecting national identity in law, rather than leaving it to the data and statistics of the ONS?

Kevin Foster: In deciding the questions for the census, the Government will be guided by the technical recommendations of the ONS. Of course, the House and Parliament will need to decide on the questions in the census via the orders that will be introduced later this year, but the Government will continue to be guided by the ONS.

Gareth Thomas: Will the Minister ensure that the orders to which he has just referred, which would allow the inclusion of questions about national identity and about Jainism and Zoroastrianism, are debated on the Floor of the House? If they are debated upstairs in Committee, the vast majority of Members are likely to be excluded.

Kevin Foster: I will come back to the hon. Gentleman after a discussion via the usual channels. We are talking about a hybrid order of a unique nature, some of which will be amendable and some not, but we will certainly make sure that that is discussed. I thank him for the constructive meeting that we had about his concerns relating to his constituency.

When it comes to Cornwall, I can understand why we had a religious story—not least because Cornwall is located next to God’s own county, Devonshire. We will have an opportunity to debate that further in secondary legislation, but the Government are guided by the ONS.

I turn to homelessness, which was one of the main issues raised during the debate. The ONS is working with stakeholders such as Homeless Link, Shelter and St Mungo’s to develop plans to allow those who are experiencing homelessness to take part in the census. That will include work around census day, because not everyone will necessarily be in a particular shelter on the evening of the census. It will also include engagement with those connected with the LGBT sector to make sure that the census is thorough and counts everyone in.

This is a very simple piece of legislation, which does not direct that any questions should be in the 2021 census; it merely sets out that questions on those two subjects should be answered on a voluntary basis. That will ensure that vital information on both issues is captured, but that no one is forced to disclose it if they do not wish to. I therefore urge colleagues to support the Bill, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

CENSUS (RETURN PARTICULARS AND REMOVAL OF PENALTIES) BILL [LORDS]

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)), That the following provisions shall apply to the Census (Return Particulars and Removal of Penalties) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

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

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

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

Other proceedings

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(Amanda Milling.)

Question agreed to.
Bullying and Harassment of MPs’ Parliamentary Staff

[Relevant Documents: Bullying and harassment of MPs’ Parliamentary staff, Independent inquiry report, HC 2206]

3.20 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Gemma White report on bullying and harassment of MPs’ Parliamentary staff.

Let me begin by thanking Gemma White QC for her report, and paying tribute to all who came forward to share their personal experiences with her.

Each of us is directly responsible for the staff whom we employ. Without them we would not be able to carry out our duties effectively, and I am sure all Members will want to join me in expressing our immense gratitude for the hard work, support and loyalty that those who work in our offices provide for us day in and day out. We would not be able to serve our constituents without them, and, as such, they matter not just to us as Members of this House, but to the millions of constituents up and down our country whom we are here to represent.

I am sure that Members in all parts of the House will share my concern about a number of the matters to which the report refers. It highlights statements alleging deeply inappropriate conduct on the part of some Members towards their staff, and between staff. It contains serious allegations, including those relating to Members who “shout at, demean, belittle and humiliate their staff on a regular basis, often in public.”

Reference is made to “staff being subject to unwanted sexual advances, often accompanied by touching, sometimes forceful.”

We should not hesitate to condemn any occurrence of that kind as completely unacceptable, and as a failure to uphold the standards that we expect in our Parliament. The report constitutes a call to all Members of all parties to continue to act together to ensure that appropriate measures are taken to prevent and deal effectively with bullying, harassment and sexual harassment, and I reiterate that call today.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): The Leader of the House has made an appropriate point, but may I ask for clarification? A number of external members of the Labour party have been severely bullied and harassed, allegedly by people who are paid with Short money. Given that they are paid with parliamentary money, would they too be eligible to make complaints by means of parliamentary procedures?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman has raised a very specific and interesting point, to which, I am sorry to say, I do not immediately know the answer. I always like to know all the answers. [Interruption.] I am being told by Members sitting behind the hon. Gentleman that the answer is yes, but I will clarify that one way or the other and write to him accordingly.

None of the points that I have made are intended to suggest that progress has not already been achieved, or that serious shortcomings in the management of, and behaviour towards, members of staff have been universal. Indeed, in her report Gemma White says: “Most Members of Parliament treat their staff with dignity and respect.”

She says that she “received a number of written contributions from people who wrote only to tell me about their positive experiences in Parliament.” As she points out, that was despite the fact that her remit did not extend to inviting people to do so. She also says that during her work on the report, she heard or read of MPs who were “MPs who were “a model employer”, “a fantastic boss”, “the best employer I have ever had”.

The report draws attention to areas of slow progress, but recognises that important progress has been made. The independent complaints and grievance scheme is praised as being “an appropriate and relatively sophisticated means of investigating allegations.”

I echo the report’s praise for the dedicated implementation team who have made the scheme’s introduction, in the report’s own words, “a success”. Its operation is a clear improvement in the support that it offers to victims of bullying and harassment, and is also a firm indication of the seriousness with which Parliament views these matters. It shows the will and determination in the House to take strong and effective steps, working across the parties with the unified purpose of addressing inappropriate behaviour wherever it is found. It is important not to forget that before the introduction of the scheme, most complainants typically had recourse only to the Member about whom they were complaining, or to party political processes.

There has, of course, also been the Cox report. The White report calls for the implementation of Dame Laura Cox’s key recommendations, which include the removal of the June 2017 cut-off for historical complaints. That will be the subject of the motion that I will move shortly after this debate. If the motion is agreed, it will be a significant and important step forward. It will open up the ICGS to those who, for example, may have been bullied or harassed as recently as just before the last general election, and/or are no longer in the employ of a Member.

Although I recognise that there has been progress, there should be absolutely no cause for complacency, and Gemma White makes a number of important recommendations. Some appear relatively straightforward to consider and, potentially, implement, such as the recommendation for a review of confidentiality clauses within the standard contracts of employment of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority; the recommendation that IPSA should send out staff exit surveys; and the recommendation that the House Service should address the “fair recruitment and management of staff with disabilities” in its training. Other recommendations will require more thought, and present significant further questions. For instance, there is the recommendation that a new human resources department should be set up to cover Members’ staff, and to include HR personnel located both centrally and out in the regions.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I do not understand why there is any debate about this bit. I think that the vast majority of Members, when they arrived in the House, would welcome with open arms the idea of a good HR function here, providing them good training, because many of us were never employers before we
[Chris Bryant]

came here. I just do not understand why it is difficult for us to put that together. It seems to me to be the simplest thing of all.

Mel Stride: I do not think that anything I have said has suggested that we should not go ahead with this recommendation. The point that I am making is that it is a quite a major proposition which needs to be thought through carefully, as does any proposal of this magnitude. The hon. Gentleman shakes his head. That rather implies that he does not think it should be thought through carefully, which I am sure is not what he is intending to communicate.

Chris Bryant: I am not questioning the integrity of the Leader of the House, and I am sure that he is not questioning mine. It is just that this debate has been around for quite a long time, and the House of Commons Commission probably needs to meet more frequently and be able to transact business more expeditiously so that we can get on with this. The Finance Committee stands ready to do its share of the work, but honestly, some of us have been arguing for HR for a very long time.

Mel Stride: I know that some Members have been arguing for various aspects of the approach that we should take to addressing harassment, sexual harassment and bullying, and I know that there have been issues around the time that it has taken to put into place various aspects of our appropriate response to that. What I am saying from the Dispatch Box this afternoon is that we are now moving with pace. Directly after this debate we will have, as the hon. Gentleman is aware, a motion to bring in and broaden the scope of the ICGS, and that in itself is an example of how we are now moving forward with pace.

However, while recognising the progress made, there should be absolutely no cause for complacency on the various recommendations I have highlighted that have been brought forward by Gemma White. Consideration of the recommendations is of course a matter for the House, and today’s debate is an important part of that process. I say to the hon. Gentleman that the fact that this debate has been brought forward so shortly after the release of the White report is in itself a very healthy sign. We need now to continue to proceed at pace, to come to our conclusions on the recommendations of the report as soon as possible, and to bring forward further much-needed change at the earliest possible opportunity. We owe that to those who do so much to support us as Members of Parliament, but we owe it also to those who send us here and who in turn rightly support us as Members of Parliament, but we owe it also to those who send us here and who in turn rightly support us as Members of Parliament, but we owe it also to those who send us here and who in turn rightly support us as Members of Parliament.

Alison Stanley reviewed the first six months of the operation of the ICGS and her report was published on 12 June. I want to pull out some of its recommendations, because it is important going forward that we look at them. She suggested creating a fully resourced bicameral ICGS team with the requisite skills and experience to ensure effective implementation and streamlined operation; it is important that both Houses are able to access this excellent team. She also suggested proactively using the behaviour code to improve ways of working in teams, for example as part of the wider cultural work being led by Julie Harding, the new independent director of cultural transformation here in the House.

The Stanley report said also that the solid start of the training programme should be built on, ensuring that the principle of the equal importance of training for all members of the parliamentary community is addressed. It is compulsory for House staff to go on the training, and I think it should be compulsory for all of us. I think the Leader of the House has already been on the training or is about to go on it, and I have been on it. It is not a very onerous task, although not many people have signed up to it, as mentioned in the White report. The training is in groups of 12, and it might be difficult for the trainers to provide the training in one whole day. I know that it has been changed to two sessions, so I wonder whether later on when Parliament is sitting we could look at having a training session specifically for Members and Members’ staff, perhaps in a Committee Room, and have that rolled out over a long time so that we ensure that everybody takes part.

The Leader of the House was right to pull out Gemma White’s recommendation that there should be fair recruitment and that the management of staff with disabilities should be specifically covered in future training. I would add that that should also apply to visible minorities. Parliament needs to become a more diverse place. We know that the Bank of England has undertaken unconscious bias training, and it may be available here. A really good report has been produced about this place entitled “Stand in my shoes: race and culture in Parliament”, and it is available on the intranet. I certainly know that people sometimes feel uncomfortable about being around people from ethnic minorities and certainly they do not
want to take instructions from us, because we are in an unusual position. A bit of training along those lines might be useful.

On page 47 of her report, Gemma White refers to a “collective centralised solution”. In paragraph 166, she talks about having a body that she calls an “HR department” to support both Members and Members’ staff. In setting up such a department, it would be vital to ensure that staff felt that they had access to their own HR advice, which might be different from the HR advice given to Members.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Representing my party in the Chamber today, I wish to associate my party entirely with the thrust of what is being said. I have yet to do the training course, but I will be doing it in the early autumn. I was a Member of the Scottish Parliament for a number of years, and I believe that the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) would agree with me when I say that the Scottish Parliament has made some good moves in this direction. May I ask two things of the Government and perhaps of all of us? First, can we look at what the Scottish Parliament has done in this regard? Also, as we develop best practice, can we share it with the devolved Administrations across the UK? Bullying and sexual harassment are no respects of national or political boundaries, and if we can get a good policy, it should be for all of us, wherever we are in the UK.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. There is a lot to be learned from different organisations, including the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Government, the BBC and the Bank of England. There are a number of public service bodies that may have gone through this process, and we can look at this again.

The White report talks about an HR department, and I want to dwell on this slightly. She talks about a regulatory role in terms of documentation and of support. I believe that as the department is being set up, we need to look at separating those two functions, possibly within the same Department. It is a matter for the Commission to direct the House authorities to get the HR director in place first, and the HR director would then get his or her own staff, but it would be useful to ensure that there was no crossover between those two functions.

I know that hon. Members will have read the report and seen the helpful diagram on the last page, page 55, in which Gemma White talks about “Who”, “What” and “By when”. This gives us a useful timetable. The Commission has already issued a statement and indicated that it will set in train her recommendations. It has already started the consultation on those recommendations, and I hope that the Leader of the House will set out a timetable for the consultation and possible implementation of the proposed changes! As he said, we have lots of reports, and I hope that all the threads of those reports will be pulled together. I know, because I have had contact with them, that we have a dedicated and hard-working team currently working on the ICGS, and I have every confidence that Parliament will be an exemplary environment that is both inclusive and supportive.

Could I ask the Leader of the House how we will measure this cultural change, and what steps for immediate action the Government will take to promote these new policies? As many hon. and right hon. Members know, we have dedicated staff who are committed to democracy and public service, and I know that the House staff and our own staff do, and will, serve us well as we serve the public with the highest commitment to democracy in this extremely interesting and challenging time.

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate today, following the publication of Gemma White QC’s report last week. I would first like to pay tribute to her for the incredibly detailed independent inquiry that she led. Her report into the historical allegations of bullying and harassment of MPs’ staff adds greatly to the work done by the independent complaints and grievance scheme working group and will drive much-needed further reforms in the way we treat and value all those who work for and support us in our roles as MPs.

I also want to acknowledge all the current and former staff members who contributed their experiences to the inquiry and helped to expose behaviours that have clearly gone on in this place for far too long.

I met Gemma White during my time as Leader of the House and found her to be both knowledgeable and determinedly constructive in her support of continuous improvements in our practices. Her report highlights the need for everyone working in or visiting Parliament to be treated with dignity and respect, but she also highlighted some truly unacceptable employment practices. I was appalled, as I am sure were colleagues from both sides of the House, to read some of the comments from staff. As part of my work in chairing the ICGS working group, I heard some pretty harrowing testimony from several individuals, and I want to pay tribute to them for their bravery in coming forward to speak with the group. It is clear that we in Parliament must bring about long-lasting and positive institutional change without delay, and that change must come from the very top. Only then can we truly restore confidence in how Parliament works.

The report acknowledges that the ICGS provides MPs’ staff for the first time with a mechanism for having complaints of bullying and harassment independently investigated. Feedback from some of the first complainants is that turnaround times under the new procedure can be too slow. My first observation is that the scheme is still developing, so it is important that we allow it time to become fully embedded into the fabric of Westminster. The staff working for the scheme are all fully committed to continuous improvements in its processes. Secondly, I am glad that the White report agrees that employment relationships should continue to sit with individual MPs, and I fully agree with the recommendation for a centralised human resources function for MPs’ staff.

However, the question of where the responsibility for a new HR function would lie must be considered further, although the two obvious candidates would be either IPSA or the House authorities themselves. The former—I am sorry to say—currently suffers from fairly widespread feedback from Members’ staff about a lack of confidence.
in its practices and hence in its ability to be the supportive voice that staff members need. The other alternative provider of HR for staff would be the House authorities themselves. During the working group, they raised concerns about taking on an HR role for themselves, because that could create an unhelpful secondary employment relationship, but it would be worthwhile looking again at whether that could be the best way forward.

A key aspect of the White report is that many current staff still feel uncomfortable making complaints, and to assure them the working group must focus specifically on ensuring that, as far as possible, an individual’s career will not be affected in any way if they come forward with a complaint. That is why the ICGS carries out any investigation in strict confidence. I urge anyone with a grievance or a complaint to be encouraged to come forward via the helplines that have been widely advertised around the estate.

As part of the scope of the working group, it was recommended that a wide range of training should be available to MPs and their staff. The White report recommends making some of that training mandatory in order to bring about institutional behavioural change, and I totally agree. All MPs and all staff working for MPs should now be required to undertake at least the Valuing Everyone training that was implemented as part of the ICGS. I call on each of the Whips Offices to ensure that their MPs have completed their training within six months of the report’s publication.

Chris Bryant: When someone arrives here—perhaps straight out of university—to work for a Member of Parliament, that MP may be their first employer, so all the bad ways that they learn from them then become the bad ways that they may get into in later life, perhaps when they later go on to become an MP or work elsewhere in the civil service. Is it not therefore all the more important that new Members of Parliament are trained in human resources best practice from the moment they arrive here?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He has followed this closely, and he will recall that, during the working group’s investigations, it was clear that we needed to take things slowly and not to push for too much change too quickly, but it is also apparent that Parliament has come to value its progress and its modernisation of practices, and so on. We can now move much faster than was thought back in late 2017.

As part of the ICGS, we have made a number of changes to our working practices in Parliament, that MP may be their first employer, so all the bad ways that they learn from them then become the bad ways that they may get into in later life, perhaps when they later go on to become an MP or work elsewhere in the civil service. Is it not therefore all the more important that new Members of Parliament are trained in human resources best practice from the moment they arrive here?

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Does my right hon. Gentleman follow this closely, and will he recall that, during the working group’s investigations, it was clear that we needed to take things slowly and not to push for too much change too quickly, but it is also apparent that Parliament has come to value its progress and its modernisation of practices, and so on. We can now move much faster than was thought back in late 2017.

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I will briefly address the report, which we are happy to endorse, and what it means in terms of culture change and the professionalisation of Parliament, with some best practices from elsewhere. As the opening speakers have said, the report makes for sobering but not necessarily surprising reading. It is important to note, as the Leader of the House did, that Gemma White says “there are very many MPs who are good employers and who treat their staff with the dignity and respect that they deserve”.

We should also not be blind to the occasional possibility of vexatious or malicious complaints—we are in a high-pressured, high-profile environment—but overall the report presents a picture of a culture that badly and urgently needs to change. Sadly, it contains accounts of behaviours that many of us will have heard about and perhaps some of us will have witnessed. Bullying, harassment, and a toxic culture of insecurity and undermining have been found to be commonplace, and they are all perhaps manifestations of deeper-rooted cultures and behaviours associated with the abuse of power.

As the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) hinted at, eventually that can become embedded and it becomes a form of learned and normalised behaviour that others either pick up or openly embrace. Challenges arise from the fact that we work in a particularly fast-paced, rapidly changing environment, where employment can be precarious and opportunities for advancement can be limited. When it comes, advancement can be massive, involving significant leaps in responsibility. So this is a huge challenge that requires each and every one of us to go back to the start and question our own behaviours and assumptions.

**Jamie Stone:** The hon. Gentleman is correct in what he is saying, but there is a greyer area at the edge of this issue. He has outlined the obvious cases of shouting, bullying and so on, but I would also argue that when an MP asks a member of staff to babysit a child or go to the MP’s flat to wait for the gas man to come that, too, is an abuse of that member of staff.

**Patrick Grady:** The hon. Gentleman is touching on an important issue—these little grey areas where relationships can become very close, because of the intense environment, and we ask for things that perhaps we would ask a friend to do, but not necessarily a paid member of staff. It is important that boundaries are established, and some of this is covered in that Valuing Everyone training. I will say a little more about that later, but I cannot recommend that training highly enough. The former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire, will be pleased to hear that a significant number of the Scottish National party group took part in that training last Thursday, coincidentally just as this report was being published, and everybody came away with things to think about and having found it a very worthwhile experience.

As well as the Valuing Everyone training on respect, dignity and understanding boundaries, there is definitely a need for further training on employment best practice. It is important to know about what and how some of that training takes place. There is a role for the political parties to play here, even at the candidate selection stage. Doing what we are doing now, sitting on the Green Benches and standing to make speeches is the most visible part of the job, but it is a tiny part of what is involved in the work of a Member of Parliament. People putting themselves forward for election—and I count myself in this—do not necessarily realise everything that comes with the elected responsibility. So at the selection stage prospective candidates have to be fully aware of the responsibilities they will be taking on as employers and the standards that they will be expected to adhere to. There is also perhaps a more formal role for returning officers to play during that nomination stage or shortly after the election. Then, as the hon. Member for Rhondda said, very early in the MP induction process the advice and support on being an effective employer must be available.

That is why the proposal on a fully resourced human resources department is crucial to all of this, and we warmly welcome it. The system would probably be better sitting under the auspices of the House or the Commission. If it was to be somehow independent, it should be clearly so, even if staff continue to be funded through the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. This is not what IPSA has been set up for and I do not think it is fair to IPSA, let alone to the people who would have to live with the consequences of it.

A new-form HR department also leads on to the recommendation that MPs be required to adopt and follow employment practices and procedures aligned to best practice found in the public sector and elsewhere. We also fully support the recommendation that former members of staff be allowed to access the independent complaints and grievance scheme, and will support the motion to implement that following this debate.

As I said, underlying any structural and procedural changes that are put in place must be a wider cultural change. Politics and political considerations should never be allowed to take precedence over principles of dignity and respect. That means that Members of Parliament and staff must be active in calling out and working to eradicate unacceptable behaviour. It comes through in the training that I mentioned that as Members we all have a duty to recognise our privilege and power and not abuse it. When complaints are made, staff and MPs should be properly supported. Nothing should discourage staff members from coming forward through the proper channels if they have concerns about their own experiences or those of others. We must work towards creating an environment in which everyone feels empowered to speak out if they feel they are being affected by bullying or harassment, and in which everyone in the parliamentary community feels that they work in a safe, comfortable and professional environment, supported by a robust system of human resources and a complaints and grievance procedure.

It was not strictly part of the remit of either Gemma White or Laura Cox, but perhaps we need to look a bit deeper into where some of these practices and behaviours have come from and how they are perpetuated. We work in a building that was designed to promote power and hierarchy—to establish a culture of “them and us”. In previous debates, we have heard new Members of Parliament speak of how on their election they felt intimidated by signs on toilets and tea rooms that say “Members only”. That was certainly my experience back in 2015, and it sometimes still is today. Quite why a
staircase or a toilet is only for the use of Members of Parliament is somewhat beyond me. I know that moves are afoot to drive some change in that regard.

Once upon a time, I worked as a researcher in the Scottish Parliament. Although by no means was everything perfect there, there was an openness and transparency that undoubtedly shaped a different culture of tolerance and respect. In Portcullis House and on the Terrace, we still have tables that are clearly marked as for Members only. As the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) will know, in the Scottish Parliament canteen one will see Cabinet Secretaries sitting down next to the team from the mail room and special advisers sitting next to the cleaning staff. There is no sense of deference and no sense of particular entitlement based on obscure notions of seniority or grading.

Jamie Stone: I am always terribly glad when a colleague makes a good advert for the way we did things in Holyrood. That level society is a reflection of the fact that in Scotland we ourselves are all Jock Tamson’s bairns.

Patrick Grady: Absolutely. That is not to say that everything there is perfect—I do not pretend for a minute that everything is perfect—but when the Scottish Parliament was set up 20 years ago, it was designed with a completely different culture in mind, and that has led to very noticeable differences.

Here at Westminster, we work hours that push everyone to the limits of tolerance. Massive uncertainties, even on quiet days such as this, as to exactly when things are going to finish only contributes to the stress and tensions. Perhaps it would help if we had fixed times for voting and if we were not locked into crowded rooms to vote, which again promotes hierarchy and literally divides us. None of it is massively surprising. Another report that ought to be factored into this discussion is Professor Sarah Childs’ “The Good Parliament”, which is in many ways about driving a wider cultural change. Perhaps if more of her recommendations were put in place, that would go a long way towards driving that change forward. None of these reports should be left to sit on the shelf; we all have a responsibility to drive them forward.

This is not and should not be a comfortable debate for any of us. Nobody is in a position to claim the moral high ground; if the dignity of any individual member of staff has been violated, in some way we are all diminished by that. Perhaps, on reflection, some of us will recognise our own behaviours, although hopefully not the more extreme examples and hopefully not things that are intentional. In the heat of the moment, in a stressful situation, we can forget our privilege and project our behaviour head on.

Since many of these accusations and reports of bullying, harassment and unacceptable behaviours first began to surface, there has been a strong and commendable consensus throughout this process. In the SNP, we want to continue to be part of that consensus, and I assure the House that we will happily support any and all efforts to implement the recommendations of the White report, and anything that we can do to drive change of the toxic and outdated culture and practices that are experienced in this place.

3.59 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I join other hon. Members in welcoming Gemma White’s report. The Leader of the House is right that we should never fail to condemn the sort of bullying or harassing behaviour that is so carefully set out in the report. Everything needs to be done to ensure that we do not have a culture that would in any way perpetuate that. It is also right to recognise that, as Gemma White has clearly said, the severe criticisms are levelled at a minority of hon. Members. As in any organisation, however, regardless of whether it is Parliament, a public institution or a private sector company, we need to deal with that behaviour head on.

I cannot believe that many MPs do not want to work in a modern workplace or have the most modern workplace practices. Although some might not have employed people before they came here, many did, so they know what a good workplace is and what good workplace practice is. As the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) said, we should start at the beginning with our candidate selection process. I have the privilege of being involved in candidate selection for my party and I am impressed by what my party does to look at the qualities of the individuals who are accepted to stand for election. There may be more that we could do, however, to ensure that people have experience of running organisations, because that is what we expect them to do if they are successful in being selected and elected to this place.

Enormous strides have been made—no pun intended with regard to the Leader of the House—in recent months and years, which is in no small way attributable to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom). She brought a vigour to addressing the issues that was second to none. I pay personal tribute to her and reinforce the tributes that need to be done to ensure that we do not have a culture that is so carefully set out in the report. Everything fail to condemn the sort of bullying or harassing behaviour that is so carefully set out in the report. Everything needs to be done to ensure that we do not have a culture that would in any way perpetuate that. It is also right to recognise that, as Gemma White has clearly said, the severe criticisms are levelled at a minority of hon. Members. As in any organisation, however, regardless of whether it is Parliament, a public institution or a private sector company, we need to deal with that behaviour head on.

The Leader of the House talked in his opening remarks about his intention to introduce an instrument to ensure that non-recent cases could be heard. I say amen to that; it is vital that it is introduced immediately. My only question is, why delay until the autumn? Why can those non-recent cases not start to be heard from the moment the instrument is laid, so they can be brought forward in the summer when it is perhaps more convenient for people, and so there is no delay to his intention to make sure that everybody can be held to account?

I also note the introduction of the helplines and the training programme, which I have been on. I was very impressed by the quality of the training that was given and all of the individuals giving the training. I do not care who someone is, everyone who has gone through the training, however experienced they are, was the head of graduate recruitment in the firm that I worked for and I recruited many staff over my years in the private sector, and I am impressed by what my party does to look at the qualities of the individuals who are accepted to stand for election. There may be more that we could do, however, to ensure that people have experience of running organisations, because that is what we expect them to do if they are successful in being selected and elected to this place.

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sector, but I learned an enormous amount about self-awareness, particularly in a digital age, which has come midway through many of our careers. The use of electronic Committees, it may create tensions that none of us would want to exist.

There is also the behaviour code and the code of conduct. An enormous amount has been done in this space to address some of the issues that Gemma White raised in her excellent report, so I have only a few questions. I have huge respect for the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House, but I note that the report was commissioned by the House of Commons Commission. Although I believe that they are both members of the Commission, they are not responsible for it. Why, oh why—I have raised this issue before—are we talking again about an issue wholly in the remit of the House of Commons Commission, without the House of Commons Commission leading the debate on it? It asked Gemma White to produce the report and it has responded to it; indeed, as Gemma White clearly points out, it is the organisation most responsible for delivering on the report. As a Member of the House of Commons, I want to know where the accountability is so that we know how the House of Commons Commission has made progress and what Gemma White has set out and that it is being delivered on.

The House of Commons Commission is the most archaic bit of the House of Commons structure, and it is long overdue for reform. Unlike almost any other of our Committees, it is not chaired by an elected representative, or at least by somebody elected to that position; its membership is appointed, and it is not able, it appears, to come to the House of Commons to explain what it is doing. However, it is instrumental in making this a better place of work, a better parliamentary democracy and a better Parliament. Why is how the Commission operates still so opaque?

I can go on to the website and find details of the Commission’s meetings, although that is not always easy—and they are actions taken, rather than minutes of discussion. It is difficult, even for someone such as me who is interested in these issues, to stay abreast of what is going on. Is the biggest elephant in the room the need to understand who is accountable for implementing the Gemma White report? We have, of course, already had a debate about the Cox report, when the Commission had made very slow progress on the implementation of a number of recommendations.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire was right when she was Leader of the House to forever tell us that it is for Members to decide these things. The Commission, however, is the body that enables Members to have a collective thought and collective way of implementing things. Perhaps the current Leader of the House will be able to comment on that when he replies to the debate. I feel strongly that there is still opaqueness about how these things are handled. Why is that important? If we are to achieve the sort of institutional change that the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House and the hon. Member for Glasgow North have spoken about, we must have clarity about accountability. At the moment, that clarity is not there.

We have not yet picked up on the fact that Gemma White did not receive any reports from Members about harassment and bullying by other Members. We should be concerned about that; as a body of 650 people, we will have such instances. Clearly, however, Members still feel that they are not capable of talking even to somebody independent. The Conservative party has a strong Whips Office that has changed radically in the past 10 years. We need to make sure that Members feel that they can talk about these things. I was concerned that Gemma White had no examples of Members wishing to talk to her about bullying and abuse from other Members. We need to address that.

I also wish to pick up on the fact that non-disclosure agreements were discussed and highlighted in the report. Will the Leader of the House discuss that when he responds to the debate? The recommendation is:

“IPSA should consider amending the wording of the standard confidentiality clause to make it clear that it does not prevent employees bringing a claim of bullying and harassment.”

I say clearly that all my members of staff already have a standard confidentiality clause. If they were to exit my employment, I would have absolutely no requirement to reinforce or reiterate that, because it continues to stand. It is already there in our employment contracts. Why are we allowing IPSA to assert that it is a requirement on Members to have a further confidentiality clause when people leave their employment? I know from the work of my Select Committee, the Women and Equalities Committee, that this can cause considerable confusion in people’s minds and a feeling that they are being muzzled from ever talking about adverse experiences in an employment setting. That requires a little more thought and consideration before we take it as read that IPSA should view confidentiality clauses and exit contracts, or exit agreements, as being standard, because legally that is not correct.

My final point concerns the independence of Members of Parliament. We jealously guard our independence, and we are right to do so. Our employment relationship with our staff has to be independent of interference from others—that is the right of MPs—but with that right comes a responsibility to act as a sensible and a good employer. Every employee here has the right to expect their MP, whoever they are and whichever party they represent, to act in a responsible manner. I absolutely agree with others who have made the point that that has to be a relationship of which we are in charge. The idea that IPSA would become the employer of my staff, potentially imposing conditions on their employment that are inconsistent with the way in which a particular constituency office is run, would be entirely unacceptable. MPs are right jealously to guard their independence, not because of any personal gain but because, if our democratic Parliament is to work in the way that our constituents expect it to work, we have to have MPs independent of interference from outside.

This is an important debate, and it is important for every Member to engage in it and to understand that treating our staff well is a hygiene factor in being a Member of Parliament, not an added extra. I hope that even Members who are not in the Chamber today can recognise that and make sure that they take part in the training, that they raise awareness among their staff of the helplines that are available, and that they adhere absolutely to the behaviour code and the code of conduct, so that we can be truly proud of this House of Parliament.
4.12 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): My colleague next to me, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), has just reminded me of a point that I had omitted, but that I am now going to make. Let me clarify. From information that I have seen recently, it seems to me that, if a tribunal case were taken against an MP, the MP could use legal insurance to defend that case, and the only way that anyone would know would be the £500 excess that has been paid, which would be itemised as an expenditure. In other words, could a Member of Parliament use the parliamentary insurance system, and therefore very expensive lawyers, against an employee who had taken a case to tribunal? In particular, if the tribunal were to rule in favour of the employee, would the Member of Parliament be required to pay those legal costs back to the taxpayer?

The Leader of the House might like to clarify that point in his closing remarks, because that seems to tip the balance in favour of the employer and the Member of Parliament against the employee. The employee could, of course, attempt to get union representation. That used to be rather more difficult. It was the last Unite general secretariat election when, mysteriously, just before the nomination process, I got removed from my local branch, where I have a little bit of influence, and put in the Westminster staff branch. The matter was not resolved until after the nominations were done. Having been a member for 40 years, I cannot imagine what administrative change led to me being moved out of one branch, in which I have influence, to a branch in which I have none.

There was a positive conclusion, however: I was able to demonstrate that I had found a whole range of MPs in the same union branch as staff in this building. That was clearly a total nonsense and it had been going on for decades. I managed to get that resolved by protesting about being placed there myself, and MPs were then excluded from that branch—reputed to be the largest union branch representing employees in this Parliament.

Even though these problems have emerged very publicly in recent years, the unions have not quite caught up, although one has. I was pleased to hear the comments of the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), which were very appropriate, regarding the processes for selecting potential candidates for Parliament. I have previously given a bit of detail to the House about the exemplary role of the GMB in the east midlands in addressing sexual harassment. Following some press commentary, perhaps I ought to give a little more detail. In the recent past, David Prescott—a member of the Labour leader’s office—went for selection in Mansfield, and the GMB east midlands decided to give him an interview about sexual harassment to see whether he understood the issue. He did not pass that interview, so the GMB withdrew its nomination of him.

It seems that trade unions might have this remit within the Labour party because they have a significant role in the potential selection of Labour MPs, but this is an exemplary principle that should be the case everywhere. It ought to be a requirement for political parties to ask and interrogate their candidates about issues such as sexual harassment to ensure that they are up to the mark. The GMB east midlands withdrew its nomination; it obviously determined that the individual I mentioned was not.

Last week’s shocking “Panorama” programme featured eight mainly young former members of Labour party staff, who went through the traumas of harassment and intimidation that they had been involved in. The allegations are primarily against people who are employed by Short money through Parliament. I have a list with me, so I can see that large numbers of them are employed by Short money. Now, it is essential that these former members of staff, who are external to the building, can use our independent complaints and grievance procedure if they have complaints against individuals employed through Short money who have allegedly been misusing their power to pressure people in relation to various activities. It is essential that we clarify and confirm that position, because that route could then be open to these people.

The situation is similar when it comes to external sexual harassment allegations. This report is very helpful in strengthening the systems, but it is still noticeable how reluctant people are to pursue issues. I have spoken to people who work in this place and have very specific complaints against Members of Parliament or other staff. Some have been prepared to go out there, but I hesitate to use the word “brave” because there is no less bravery from someone who is not prepared to go public about their situation but is prepared to say things about it. The role of the political parties remains the Achilles heel—the weakness.

We have cases in the Labour party where people—I have met some of them—have made allegations but no action has been taken for two or three years. Where is the decency in that? What about the rights of those who say they have been inappropriately treated or harassed, whether it is sexual harassment or any other form? If there is no resolution one way or another for years, what message does that give to people working here about how seriously the political parties take this?

Nothing exemplifies this more than the House of Commons Commission. The Whips have never suggested that I should sit on such a body; I wonder why. That is the problem with it. I would have been more than happy to submit myself to the will of other Members of Parliament. I might get zero votes to sit on such a body—fine—but there would be accountability built in.

Things are done behind the scenes. There are time bombs in all the political parties. I am not aware of any political party that does not have them ticking away, and there are some big, very serious ones. The political parties love to cover these things up and try to manage them, especially if it relates to Members of Parliament. They do not want a Member of Parliament having to resign in scandal and shame, because that is not the best way to fight a by-election.

The norm now seems to be, “Let’s wait until we get to a general election, then we can quietly drop people, and no one will notice because it’s in the general hubbub and excitement of a general election.” There is nothing wrong with dropping people. I can think of one Conservative who was suspiciously dropped in a recent election. I was delighted to see him dropped. It was done very discreetly and effectively, and I commend those running the party for doing so, but that has become the system—in other words, sending the message, “Hang on and hope for the best.”
There is no question but that it is shameful how some of the Whips have dealt with this in my time here. Obviously, I only know my own party, but I do not think that this is particularly a Labour problem, as opposed to a cultural problem here. I will give one example. I was told in a meeting, unequivocally, “If anyone’s got a complaint about sexual harassment within the Labour party, they can go to the police.” If someone wanted to go to the police, they would have done so already. I deal with a lot of people when it comes to sexual assault and child abuse who have come to see me and had my assistance and advocacy and who do not want to be named and be in the public eye.

There was an exposé in The Sunday Times two or three weeks ago about an MP who went to their party leader—my party leader—and he did nothing about it. He did nothing whatsoever. We found out about it because emails were leaked that exposed what was going on. Is that leadership? It is not my definition of leadership. It is exactly the opposite.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I pay tribute to the brilliant speech he is making. I recognise much of what he is saying from my experience in my own party. The Liberal Democrats have been through an incredibly painful process of coming to our own independent complaints procedure, which enables many of the issues he is raising to come to the fore. Most importantly, it was co-created by activists and, in particular, young women in the party who felt that the current processes were not working. I believe that the procedure is now much more robust. It is by no means done, and he is right that the buck stops with MPs and that we have to lead from within our parties. I commend him for his words.

John Mann: The Liberal Democrats have had problems, like every other party, but my specialism is dealing with antisemitism, and I will say that the only political party I have met in the last three years that has a robust process for dealing with antisemitism at the moment is the Liberal Democrat party. The reason why I can say that it is one of the ways in which we have an external person—someone not in the party, and who may be an opponent of the party politically or electorally—can actually go in, make complaints and hold the party institution to account if it fails to take action. That does not mean it will necessarily draw the right conclusions in my judgment and it does not mean people will be coming forward, but it does mean people are far more likely to have trust in the system. It is a transparent system, and that is the key—it is not an opaque system—and it is impressive. The fact that it is transparent and that I and others were able to go in and say, “Well, you could perhaps change this, do it this way, consider this, speak to that person,” was also very healthy indeed.

Such a system would strengthen any political party. To be honest, it is in the electoral interests—in the medium term, not the short term—of political parties actually to get their act together, because it means they will keep far more young people, particularly women, and encourage more to stay. It will be easier for young people, and especially for women and minority groups, to progress within that party and feel confident in being able to do so. It is a sensible approach for any party that wants to be in power or expand its political base.

The “Panorama” programme shows where these things can end in terms of the impact on individuals. That could just as easily have been an exposé of members of staff in here about what has happened to them—just as easily. If all the emails, the WhatsApp messaging and the secret ways in which people deal with things, such as recordings from Whips Offices of meetings that I and others have unfortunately had to be in—not that they were recorded; I did not record them, anyway, but I hope that they were recorded—were put out there, such transparency would be of significance.

My appeal to this House is to speed up the processes, not to be scared of independence inside it and to get rid of the antiquated structures that are a blockage. We must make sure we have the widest possible definition of who can raise grievances, how complaints can be taken to the independent body and how they will be heard. We should be confident, if necessary and as necessary, in saying to people, “Well, the judge and jury has determined on you: out you get. We’re not having you in here as a Member of Parliament. You are not suitable because of the way that you have treated people.”

That would be a very good thing for democracy, because far too many people—brave people—are suffering anonymously and in silence, but they remain brave because they are refusing to be cowed by what has happened to them. There are far too many of them here, and we need to think that we will get on top of it, which needs our action and our honesty and, for the political parties, leadership. Perhaps some political parties might be prepared to show some.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): It is a pleasure to welcome this report and to speak in support of it. It is reassuring that the report shows that the majority of staff who responded have not experienced any harassment or bullying, but it is absolutely unacceptable that any of them have; we should really have a zero-tolerance approach.

As many Members have already said, one of the most shocking things I found as a newly elected MP was that there was absolutely no support or training in taking on staff. I had worked for many years in the NHS as a research sister, leading a team and being responsible for the staff of the team. I had had extensive experience of advertising for staff, interviewing and recruiting; doing staff appraisals and staff development; taking on disciplinary proceedings and dealing with conflict management within the team; looking at the staff budgets; looking at sick leave and maternity leave; looking after the temporary staff; and doing the payroll returns each month. I was therefore pretty experienced in staff management, but if I had not been, how on earth would I have learned how to take on a team of staff and look after them? We elect MPs on the basis that they will be good constituency MPs and good legislators, who bring their knowledge to this place when we make laws. We must give a moment’s thought as to whether they will any good at employing and supporting a team of people.

Language is important. It is not by chance that we do not have a staffing budget, but are termed to have an “expenses budget” for staff. In any other institution or big workplace, we would not treat our staffing budget as an expense. That demeans the staff we employ. It suggests that they are seen as a little bit extra, an
add-on, of no real significant structural value to the team. That term should be changed. It should be a staffing budget, which has procedures, policies and guidelines for how it is managed. The current term is unacceptable.

When I was a nurse with a team of staff, I had protected time to look after them. I had protected time to do their appraisals and training. I had other professionals to ask for support. I could phone up the HR department and say that I had someone going on maternity leave and had forgotten how to do the paperwork, and could ask for up-to-date guidelines? I could contact the payroll department if I wanted to look at giving someone a pay rise, or if someone needed to take sick leave. I had senior managers. If I was having a difficult time, I could ask for their support and some guidelines. We get none of that as an MP and we wonder why we run into problems.

My big difficulty with the report, which makes some excellent recommendations, is that it does not go far enough. It is all about dealing with bullying and harassment. We need to encourage a culture of staff welfare, because by the time we have got to bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct, it is far too late. From day one, or when a person is even applying for a job here, there should be policies and procedures that safeguard their welfare. If they are then employed, those structures and processes would be in place.

Layla Moran: I recognise much of what the hon. Lady is saying, but there is a Members’ HR service which has been dealing very professionally with some issues in my office. That service is available, although not enough. It should be much more structured in the way she suggests, but it does exist. I want to take a moment to thank the staff for their work; they probably just need a lot more resource.

Maria Caulfield: I have used that service, and its staff do provide a fantastic service. The point is that as an MP we have to approach them and know that their services are available. I recommend them to any MP because they are fantastic, but they are not available to staff. When I was working in the hospital and I had an issue, I could go to the HR department whether I was a team leader or an ordinary member of the team. That is the difference. Our staff do not have access to that wonderful support, advice and experience which could make a huge difference. The report recommends that they do have access to it.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) that MPs should remain as 650 small individual businesses, but changes do need to be made. We are treated as if we have autonomy over our staff, but there are some subtle things in the way that stop us. For example, I have a south-east constituency and my staff budget—it is not an expense, it is a budget—is £11,000 less than that for a London MP. Some of my staff live in London and some live in the south-east, which is as expensive as London. Some have to commute to London, spending £4,000 or £5,000 to do so. As I have £11,000 less in my budget, I cannot pay them as much or I cannot take on an extra member of staff. My small team, which does the casework and everything else that other staff members do, is under extra pressure from day one because they have the same workload as a London MP but without the same financial recognition. How is it fair that from day one the staff of non-London MPs already feel the pressure of being in a smaller team or of being less valued financially, while doing exactly the same work?

I have an office manager to whom I delegate responsibility for looking after some of the other members of the team; taking on appraisals, looking at staff leave, conducting staff training and working with them. Most of my staff work in the constituency office. They do not work in Parliament, so they cannot nip to the office next door in Norman Shaw North and say, “I have a difficult case; can we get some advice on it?” They are completely isolated as a team, and my office manager has the responsibility for looking after them. We have had members of the public come into the office in tears because we are the last port of call when the jobcentre has let them down, when they cannot get their housing benefit or when they have been made homeless on a Friday evening. They often land in tears in my office, and my staff, many of whom have just left university and do not have a huge amount of life experience, have to pick up the pieces.

Ultimately, I am responsible for my staff, but I am not there every day of the week. My office manager has to support them as a team. What training and support is available for those staff? I cannot do it all as their employer, so it is incumbent on the House of Commons to help MPs to provide that support for their staff—whether that means the senior staff who are delegated to look after them or the junior staff who have to do some very difficult work on a daily basis.

Mrs Miller: I apologise for not hearing the start of my hon. Friend’s speech. Does she not agree that there needs to be accountability for who is looking at that? This process needs to be led by Members, and therefore there is a role for the House of Commons Commission to be doing such things, although we do not really know whether it is doing that.

Maria Caulfield: I completely agree. Such things are part of our role, but I do not think they are treated seriously. We are seen as legislators and caseworkers, but our duty as an employer is seen as an expenses add-on. Until that is seen as a crucial part of our role, for which we need training on how to support our staff, including junior members of staff, a culture of staff welfare will not be created.

That brings me to my point about how we support MPs. I have been a MP for over four years. This is not a criticism of the Whips Office in any way—I do not think this is necessarily their job—but in that time, I have never had anyone sit down and ask me what my strengths and weaknesses are and what interests I have in policy. I have had health problems this year and I can get a slip any day of the week, but sometimes it would be nice for someone to sit down with me and say, “Can we give you extra support?” There is not the culture in this place to look after Members of Parliament, and that filters through to their staff. If we are dealing with a problem at the point at which it has become harassment, bullying or a sexual problem in the workplace, it is too late. We need to change the culture overall, and that starts with us looking after one another.
I come from an NHS background where training was ingrained in us. We all found that the fire training and so on was not what we wanted to be doing, but we had to do it; it was mandatory. Even as a bank nurse now, when I do shifts in the NHS, I get learning and development phoning me up to say, “You are not registered for your mandatory training. You will not be able to do any bank shifts until you have done it for this year.” I get HR telling me, “Your registration is due for renewal.” I have people checking on me.

We are busy people and we do not have someone to oversee what happens. That is exactly what is in the report. It says that we should have a body responsible to oversee us that can say, “Do you know your staff appraisals are overdue? Have you had those conversations with them? Have you looked at their annual leave? Are they taking their annual leave, or are you working them so hard that they feel that they cannot ask for it? Are they taking too much annual leave? Is there a problem with health and wellbeing?” We have no one.

We all know what it is like as busy MPs. I am just a Back Bencher—I do not have any other responsibilities—and I struggle to sit down with my staff every few months to go through some of the issues that they have. I absolutely agree, therefore, with the report’s recommendations that we need uniform policies and procedures, so that every MP’s office is the same; that assistance is provided with recruitment; that there is proactive contact with MP’s staff; and that probationary periods are checked, because they can just go on indefinitely, with people on temporary contracts when they should be employed in substantive posts. We should ensure that appraisals are in place, because these are talented people. They are often graduates of universities, who could be getting good jobs anywhere else, but they can get stuck working as a caseworker, not getting a pay rise or staff development, which is absolutely criminal. Why? Because as MPs—as their employers—we are not there to support them.

There are lots of recommendations in the report that I strongly support, but I go back the point made by the former Leader of the House that when training has been provided—I know that the training on valuing people only started a few months ago—very few of us take up the offer. I think there needs to be more publicity around it. This week, we had a very good email from the Clerk of the House of Commons about the Valuing Everyone training, Members’ HR support, the health and wellbeing service, the sexual misconduct advisory service, the bullying and harassment reporting hotline and the employee assistance programme. There are great measures in place, but I put my hand on my heart and say that I have used none of them, and I have told my staff about none of them. If we do not read our own emails and act on them, no one oversees whether we use those crucial services.

I conclude by saying that I completely agree with the report. I believe we should have autonomy over our staffing, but we need support to be able to support our employees properly. I do not think we recognise how much is expected of MPs. We are members of probably one of the most hated professions in the country, and sometimes we need to give ourselves a break. We may be great constituency caseworkers or fabulous legislators, but there is no shame in saying that we are not sure how to employ people or how to look after those we employ.

I urge everyone to read the recommendations, and to ensure that we and our staff take up the training and support that is available.

4.41 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who gave an interesting speech. The Committee on Standards, which I chair, will be discussing Gemma White’s report at its meeting next week, and I do not want to anticipate the Committee’s views ahead of that meeting. Speaking personally, and like other Members who have spoken this afternoon, I very much welcome her report. I put on record my thanks to her for her work on it and pay tribute to the staff, past and present, who spoke to her, often about very painful experiences.

As with last year’s report by Dame Laura Cox—indeed, as with last week’s report to the House of Lords by Naomi Ellenbogen QC—Gemma White’s report does not make comfortable reading for us as parliamentarians, but we must pay heed to what it tells us. The White report reinforces Dame Laura’s message that abuses have taken place in the dark corners and closed offices of our institution. Of course, that does not mean that all, or even a majority of, Members or senior staff have been abusers or complicit in abuse—Gemma White acknowledges that many are seen as good employers—but there have been enough documented cases of bad behaviour where the House authorities and the political parties have been unresponsive to cause us significant concern.

The Standards Committee is determined to play its part in evolving a better standards system for Parliament. As we have heard, that has proven to be a complicated and very protracted process. That is partly because of the complexity of parliamentary structures, but there is no doubt that the sheer number of alternative and competing centres of authority—including, as we have heard, the House of Commons Commission, the political parties, the Government, various teams in the House administration, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, the ICGS helplines and investigation services and the Standards Committee, as well as their duplicates in the House of Lords—have all made it much more difficult to capitalise on the political will that I believe exists in this place to deal with the problems that we face. The number of separate reviews that we have had, and the lack of co-ordination between them—not necessarily the fault of the individual reviewers—has not helped either. I hope that clarity is now slowly emerging and that Gemma White, like Dame Laura Cox before her, will assist us in moving forward rapidly.

I am pleased that Gemma White welcomes the Standards Committee’s current work on reviewing the range of sanctions available to the Committee, the House and the Parliamentary Commissioner. She notes that this development “has been a long time coming.” That is a fair comment, although we have not been short of other tasks to keep us busy in recent months. She has given us a deadline of December this year to put in place a package of reforms to the sanctions system. I assure the House that the Committee will use its best endeavours to meet that deadline, and I am confident that we will be able to put proposals to the Leader of the House, and the House as a whole, in time to do so.
I should add that the Committee’s work on this subject is without prejudice to any decisions that the House may make in response to Dame Laura Cox’s recommendation that Members should play no part in determining complaints about bullying and harassment against other Members. A working party of officials has been set up to put proposals to the Commission, and I am pleased that one of the lay members of the Committee has been appointed to it. I hope that the Committee will recommend an updated set of sanctions which are fit for purpose and can be implemented no matter who the decision-takers on sanctions are in future, whether they are MPs or not.

Other work by the Committee includes formulating a framework for considering ICGS appeals, on which we published a report in March. We have set up a formal sub-committee on ICGS matters to deal with that important and sensitive work. I am pleased to see that Gemma White comments favourably on the progress that the Committee has made in this area. As promised, we are keeping the appeal arrangements under review, and if necessary we will report further to the House on any modifications that we consider desirable. We have also set up an informal sub-committee to review the Code of Conduct and the associated Guide to the Rules relating to the conduct of Members, which we are required to do in each Parliament. The sub-committee, which is dominated by lay members of the Committee on Standards, has been doing good work, and we intend to launch a public consultation in the autumn on proposals for revisions to the code and guide.

Our seven lay members continue to play a very active role in the Committee, and to provide an independent perspective from outside the Westminster bubble. I want to place on record my thanks to them. The House will recall that it conferred full voting rights on the lay members in January this year. Because the Committee has equal numbers of lay and elected members, and because I, as Chair, only have a casting vote, they now have, in effect, a majority vote on the Committee. However, I am glad to say that in the six months since we made that decision, no formal votes have taken place in the Committee. We are working very much as a unified team, following the consensus-seeking approach of all Select Committees.

We also plan to report to the House soon on the subject of confidentiality in relation to complaints, in the light of early experience of how the ICGS procedures have been working in practice, as well as reflecting some of the concerns of both the Committee and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards about the recent extension of confidentiality to non-ICGS cases. I can assure the House that Committee members, including me, have also undertaken the Valuing Everyone training, and I endorse the comments that we have heard about it this afternoon. I should add that I will be supporting the proposals in respect of non-recent allegations on which the House will be asked to vote later today.

I thank the House for giving me an opportunity to update Members on the work that the Committee on Standards has been doing in order to play our part in making Parliament a safe and respectful place for everyone who visits or works here.
way things have always been in Parliament. While respecting the autonomy of parliamentary offices, as Gemma White’s report does, we need to ensure that the common standards and the common framework for protecting our employees’ rights, decency and dignity at work are protected, whoever they happen to work for. The only way in which we can move on from the cases raised in this report is to embrace its recommendations and implement them. We need to establish those common standards and practices across the House, regardless of a Member’s or staff member’s length of service, apparent seniority or junior position.

Like those in other public sector workplaces, we need to ensure that there is a properly resourced HR department that can support our staff as well as supporting us as employers. That would go a long way towards providing the support that our teams need and deserve. It would provide an impartial eye, so that any difficulties could be corrected before they became serious problems. Everyone in all parts of the House should come behind this report and invest all the time and effort needed to ensure that we end the culture of harassment and bullying that has clearly been common in a small number of, but still too many, cases in parliamentary offices in recent years. As I have said, we would expect any employer in our constituencies to follow these standards of decency. We need to set that example and to lead.

4.56 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am sure none of us thought we would be surprised to read Gemma White’s report, given that there were reports of bullying and harassment of MPs’ staff in the press as far back as November 2017, but even though we knew there was a problem, the report has been no less shocking. It is shocking to know that in the place where I work, some staff have been and are still being subjected to an “unacceptable risk of bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment, at work” from their employers. Those employers are Members of Parliament, not some backstreet employer. They are people elected by this country to lead, not to have an attitude to staff that belongs to a bygone era.

No one reading the report could fail to be moved by the testimonies of those who have suffered at the hands of some of our colleagues. Like many others who have spoken today, I want to pay tribute to the former and current members of staff who have been brave enough to come forward and participate in this inquiry. I am sure that their stories were not easy to share, and I want to assure them that I and others will listen to what they have to say and do our best to put in place measures to ensure that those in the future do not go through what they have gone through. I want to read out the words of some of those members of staff. One talked about an MP who “would intimidate, mock and undermine me every day”. Another stated:

“After I resigned I suffered a breakdown which I have never recovered from”.

Another said:

“My entire sense of self was crushed, and by the end, I felt incapable and incompetent”.

No one should be made to feel that way when they go to work.

Grown men and women have been shouted at, sworn at, belittled and humiliated. Some have been relentlessly picked on, day in and day out, and worn down by the drip-drip nature of the abuse that they have suffered. Others have been the victims of unwanted sexual advances or banter. This is nothing short of sickening. It might not be something that many Members have personally been on the receiving end of, but we all know people who have received appalling treatment at the hands of their employer. These are people who wake up each morning with a knot in their stomach, or worse, because they do not know what they will face when they go into work. However, they know that what they will face will be unpleasant, harrowing and debilitating.

Staff are already expressing their concern that the number of Members here today does not send out the right message about the importance that we should place on the way in which our staff are treated in this place. This has happened right here under our noses in these buildings, in the corridors and the offices. It is like something from a bygone era: staff feeling bullied and abused and, most importantly, feeling powerless to do anything about it. Talk to any member of staff and they will almost certainly know someone who has been involved in such issues. Unsurprisingly, that will have had a detrimental effect on them, with some becoming too anxious or ill to work. Some have been forced to resign, often following a period of sick leave, and some have been sacked. Some have left Parliament altogether with promising careers ruined while the perpetrators get off scot-free.

Eddie Hughes: I recognise so much of what the hon. Gentleman is saying. He used the word “banter”—he was referring to the report—so I googled it, and it seems to imply some sort of friendly, playful exchange. However, the impacts that he is describing are far from friendly and playful. We should get away from the idea that abuse can sometimes be acceptable because it is casual.

Justin Madders: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. People may sometimes feel that they are being amusing or engaging in banter, but they have no idea of the effect that that is having on the individual. Many sexual harassment cases over the years will have the same characteristic. That is why training is important, because we all must understand that some of the things we say can have a negative effect on people.

This behaviour has been happening for a long time, and perpetrators have been getting away with it, enabling them to carry on the cycle of abuse with the next member of staff, a problem that we absolutely must end. It is unsurprising that one contributor to the report states that staff have come to believe that there has been “general disregard for the dignity, wellbeing and employment rights of MPs’ staff”.

I agree with that, and Gemma White agrees with that. She concludes that “bullying and harassment in MPs’ offices is widespread and cultural”, and it would be impossible for anyone who reads her report to conclude otherwise.

As has already been said, a minority of Members are involved in this kind of activity, but it is important to say at this point that Gemma White explicitly stated:
beginning of this month, in evidence on a gender-sensitive Parliament, that sanctions against MPs appear to amount only to an informal quiet word with a dozen or so offenders. If that is all that happens, who can blame staff for feeling that there is not much point in going through the system?

Mrs Miller: It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman raises that point. The Select Committee’s concern is that, even though there is now a formal grievance procedure in place, it appears that some senior members of staff still think it is the right procedure just to have a quiet word. If they are not recording who they are talking to, there is no ability to monitor repeat offenders. We are quite concerned that that procedure and practice still seems to be embedded in this place.

Justin Madders: I thank the right hon. Lady for that point. I find it incredible that we are still in that place. I cannot imagine that the contracts of employment of those staff do not make it explicitly clear that bullying and harassment are considered gross misconduct. A quiet word following an allegation of gross misconduct is not good enough, and it deters people from making valid complaints in future. That really has to change.

Even if we get to a truly independent process, we still need to think about why staff feel inhibited in making a complaint against their employer. The employer might have to write them a reference, or they might still share an office. Until recently, staff could not pursue a complaint at all if they left Parliament. I think that will change with the motion on the independent complaints and grievance scheme, but it was a ridiculous distinction to make—it would not be allowed in any other workplace—because a lot of people, for valid reasons, will not make a complaint until they have left their employment.

I am pleased that we will finally have a chance to extend the independent complaints and grievance scheme to cover non-recurrent cases of bullying and harassment. I do not know why we need to wait for the autumn, as has already been mentioned, and we have to be clear that this is not the final point on our journey but is a step towards it.

From what Gemma White has said, it is clear to me that, without effective sanctions and a truly independent complaints panel, we will not have true justice. It is bizarre that we can talk about extending the scheme, when the report basically says that staff do not have confidence because of the lack of independence and the lack of sanctions. That problem will not be rectified when we pass the motion on the independent complaints and grievance scheme, and we need to address it as a matter of urgency.

Ultimately, this comes down to the power imbalance between MPs and staff, the high demand for jobs in politics and the reliance on patronage in our political system, which means that the risk of abuse of power is all too great. We have 650 individual offices, which together employ more than 3,200 staff. Any other public sector organisation of that size would have a body that allows some degree of independent oversight of its employment practices, whether it be the use of probation periods, appraisals, performance management or training.

As an absolute minimum, we need basic policies and procedures to drag our worst offenders into the 21st century, and it cannot be ignored that probation periods and
That starts with getting our house in order, and getting must be an example of the best practice, not the worst. Their staff if we cannot get our own house in order. We cannot lecture others on the way they treat standards not just for this place, but for the rest of the short timeframe. It is up to us as Parliament to set the and their staff, and it should be completed within a training should not be mandatory for all current Members take-up so far of the Valuing Everyone training, voluntary staff, set up offices and so on. Clearly, with such a low lack that training, we should be providing it, to make sure that no one falls behind. Even with my experience in the law, I would still have welcomed a Members’ staff handbook, with correct procedures and policies in place, and I was shocked to find that there was little support here when I was starting out as a new MP, having to hire staff, set up offices and so on. Clearly, with such a low take-up so far of the Valuing Everyone training, voluntary training is not the answer. I see no reason why that cannot be used as an excuse. If we know MPs with little or no management training or experience, but spoke about at length. Many MPs enter Parliament with no management training or experience, but I was shocked to find that there was little support—those are the tactics of a bullying employer. So I welcome the Commission’s statement that it will begin consulting immediately to see what implementation issues there will be in the creation of a new HR department, because it is clear that we need to give much more support to Members and staff in developing and implementing policies in a fair and reasonable manner. That we do not already do this in 2019 is shocking to the outside world, so we have to get on with it as soon as possible.

Having spoken to staff, I know that they are keen to see that department set up, because, as Gemma White recommends, it would also support staff welfare. We hope it would also introduce initiatives such as a buddy system for new staff, to reduce isolation, and peer mentoring for staff who need extra support. Many staff do this in an informal way already, but others are struggling behind closed doors and are not calling for help but actually need it.

There is a role for IPSA or a similar independent body in respect of the introduction of both a leavers survey and a way to collect data to monitor MPs’ employment records, which would help to identify trends or specific pockets of concern in individual offices. That is important, because there must be nowhere for bullies to hide. Only through introducing transparent systems and independent scrutiny will we be able to end the impunity that currently exists in some quarters to hire and fire at will. Let us imagine it became public knowledge that a Member had gone through a dozen or more staff in a couple of years—questions would rightly be asked about what was going on there. So although I also welcome the Commission’s announcement that it will consult on how to collate this data and use it to improve employment practices, I again urge it to do that with the utmost expediency.

Finally, I come to an issue that I have spoken about before and that the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) spoke about at length. Many MPs enter Parliament with little or no management training or experience, but that cannot be used as an excuse. If we know MPs lack that training, we should be providing it, to make sure that no one falls behind. Even with my experience in the law, I would still have welcomed a Members’ staff handbook, with correct procedures and policies in place, and I was shocked to find that there was little support here when I was starting out as a new MP, having to hire staff, set up offices and so on. Clearly, with such a low take-up so far of the Valuing Everyone training, voluntary training is not the answer. I see no reason why that training should not be mandatory for all current Members and their staff, and it should be completed within a short timeframe. It is up to us as Parliament to set the standards not just for this place, but for the rest of the country. We cannot lecture others on the way they treat their staff if we cannot get our own house in order. We must be an example of the best practice, not the worst. That starts with getting our house in order, and getting true independence in our procedures and meaningful sanctions for those who transgress.

5.12 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I wish to begin by apologising for not bobbing earlier; I was enjoying the speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) so much and reflecting upon it that I forgot to get to my feet. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), and I was obviously so engaged with what he was saying that I wanted to join in.

I can almost encapsulate the essence of my contribution in one or two sentences. I simply want to reach out to the staff who work on the estate or in offices around the country and say, “We are on your side. Clearly, bad things have happened. We understand and appreciate now, at least to some extent, the scale of the problem. And you do not need to fear that it will be limiting to your career or ‘career suicide’, to use the term used in the report, if you report terrible behaviour by your boss, who happens to be an MP.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) said that being an MP is held in very low regard by members of the public, but there is an unusual double-edged sword here, because although the public in many ways do not respect the role of an MP, a lot of people hold the job in such reverence that it gives us power, which should be used appropriately. For example, there are 150,000 doctors in the country, and I guess that vacancies for doctors are probably coming up every day of every week, but there are only 650 MPs and the opportunity to become one does not come around very often. Therefore, many people—we encounter them on the estate all the time—treat us with a degree of reverence that is completely inappropriate. Initially, I was surprised and delighted by it, but now I am slightly embarrassed by it. So I can completely see that a small number of MPs might let that feeling of power go to their heads and exercise it in a completely inappropriate way when it comes to their staff or other people—and we see that in the report.

Let us remember that the number of people who contributed to the report—220 people—feels relatively small, given that we have heard that figure of 3,200 staff, but it says in the report that more than half those people had significant mental or physical illness as a result of the behaviour that they experienced. That is 110 people, just from that small sample, who have experienced totally dreadful behaviour. I do not see how we could be in a position to do anything but treat this issue urgently and get on and address it.

With regard to the training, I seem to have made a bit of a mistake: when I said that only 34 MPs and 135 members of staff had taken part in that training, I did not realise that the opportunity to take part came about relatively recently. I was reminded of the fact that when I became a councillor in 1999—as a young, I think, very well brought up lad—I went to the council and was totally shocked by the way councillors berated and belittled members of staff. I just could not understand how they could treat them so poorly, yet it felt like that was just the way that relationship worked: the councillors had the upper hand, and it was perfectly acceptable for them to be rude in public to staff at the council. That clearly was not acceptable, and fortunately, three years later, the council was placed in special measures and it became mandatory for councillors to attend training.
One problem we have with training is that those people who need it least are the people most likely to take it up. Those people in the council who actually would have benefited from the training were completely aghast and self-righteous—“Why should I be made to attend any training?”—but the Government said, “This is mandatory. You don’t get out of special measures unless you attend training,” so those who needed it were forced to have it and the council moved quickly to a much more comfortable position. I hope that we do not end up in a position where we need to make training mandatory, but that MPs just accept that we have a problem and that it would be a good idea if we sought to address it.

Personally, I still found it a shock coming here. I had run teams and managed budgets—all those sorts of skills that would be necessary to do a good job of running a team in Parliament—but I distinctly remember how completely overwhelmed I was in my first weeks as an MP. There was information coming from all directions; I was trying to understand parliamentary procedure; and emails were coming in by the hundreds and thousands. I felt almost a sense of panic. I just wanted to understand my role as an MP, and my role as a manager was secondary.

When I attended the parliamentary assessment board to get on the candidates list, that was not exactly the skillset being tested. The board wanted to know that someone was a committed Conservative, that they understood policy and that they could make a reasonable job of representing the Conservative party publicly; it was not so focused on whether someone could manage a budget and staff and handle HR procedures. It is therefore completely appropriate that we have a beefed-up HR department and that there is the opportunity for us all to access the excellent support that already exists but perhaps not at a scale that is appropriate for 650 MPs.

I have one other thing to say. I agreed with almost everything that the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) said, with one exception, which was when he said that we should not have tables saved for us in Portcullis House with something that says “Reserved for MPs”. I completely understand his point, but on an estate where meeting rooms are at an absolute premium and with 650 of us looking to have meetings perhaps two or three times a day, sometimes the only way that I find the space to have a meeting is to meet people in Portcullis House and sit at one of those tables. I do not feel in any way that that sets me at a level above; it is just a practical thing. Give us some more meeting rooms and I say, “Let’s have equal access to tea, coffee and cake in future.”

I wish to conclude where I began, by saying to the staff, “We are wholeheartedly on your side. Do not suffer. And I say, “Let’s have equal access to tea, coffee and cake in future.”

Mel Stride: I thank everyone for their valuable contributions to the debate. Interestingly, there has been a high level of consensus. It appeared that it had broken at the end, when my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) suggested a disagreement with the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), but then the hon. Gentleman started to nod vigorously, so we are in agreement on virtually every aspect of the matter.

We agree that, as was set out in the White report, in the main Members of this House behave appropriately and in some cases in an exemplary manner towards their staff. We all recognise, however, that there are cases in which the behaviour between Members of Parliament and their staff is inappropriate, sometimes grossly. We all agree that, particularly as a Parliament that sets an example to others and, rightly, sets the legislation that requires businesses to conduct themselves in a certain manner, we should uphold the highest possible standards and that any example of egregious behaviour between a Member and their staff is one example too many. Equally, as has been clearly expressed, we share a desire to do something about that, which is why we welcome the recommendations of the White report, and to make sure that we proceed at pace to tackle the issues that Gemma White has rightly shone a light on.

I will deal with some of the specific questions asked in the debate. The shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), among others, raised the Valuing Everyone training and made the point that a relatively small number of hon. Members and their staff have engaged with it. Notwithstanding the valid point that it is in its early stages—I believe that it was only earlier this year that it was being piloted; my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) said that she had taken part in what was then a pilot—it is important to make sure that each and every Member undertakes it. I have undertaken it, as have the shadow Leader of the House and you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I found it helpful and useful.

Further suggestions were made about the training. We have discussed whether it might become necessary to mandate it. In the event of there not being broader engagement, that might have to be seriously considered. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire suggested that there might be a three-month induction period, during which that and other training sessions might be expected to be completed and, in the event that they were not, passes might be withheld as a consequence. There are different ways to address the issue, but there is no doubt that it needs to be addressed.

The shadow Leader of the House asked how long the consultation on the report will last. As she knows, although she is right to ask me that question in the context of this debate, which I am leading, it is a matter for the House and the House of Commons Commission, on which she, I and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, sit. What I will say is that we will press forward as quickly as we can in that respect, as was expressed at its last meeting.

The shadow Leader of the House also asked how we might measure the cultural change that we are seeking to achieve in this place. There are various statistics and numbers that we can use to measure progress: the statistics on access to the helplines that form part of the independent complaints and grievance scheme are publicly available; we touched on the number of hon. Members and their staff who attend the Valuing Everyone training; and there will be the 18-month review of the ICGS, as recommended under the terms of the Alison Stanley report.
My right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire welcomed the fact that the White paper does not recommend a fundamental change in employment status when it comes to Members of Parliament and staff, and I would agree. She also speculated about where the new HR function should rest, suggesting either IPSA or the House authorities. She had a fairly strong view on “the former”, as she termed it—on IPSA. That was echoed by the hon. Member for Glasgow North. We must have that debate, which is why sometimes these things take a little time. It should not take longer than it needs to, but we need to work our way around the human resources recommendation in particular, to make sure that that aspect is absolutely right in every possible detail.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North also spent time discussing hierarchy and the areas of the Palace not available to non-Members. He made an important point, and the House of Commons Commission is discussing those issues. Although the Government may not agree with him on the matter of Scottish nationalism, we can perhaps even learn some things from the Scottish Parliament in that respect, as he suggested.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) asked two specific questions, one by way of intervention on my opening remarks: it related to the treatment or accessibility of the ICGS for those whose employment is funded through Short money. I have had further notice from the box to tell me that if someone was part of the parliamentary community, they would have access to the independent complaints and grievance scheme, irrespective of how their employment was funded.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the payment for legal advice of which Members may be able to avail themselves under insurance policies provided by IPSA, if I understood him correctly. He may have been referring solely to industrial tribunals, which would be outside the context of the internal arrangements that we are discussing here. However, if his remarks pointed more towards the ICGS scheme, I should say that, as I understand it, there would be no advantage, under insurance arrangements or otherwise, to the MP as opposed to the member of staff who might be complaining about them.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) specifically asked about why the Cox 2 recommendation, which we will address in a moment by IPSA, if I understood him correctly. He may have been referring solely to industrial tribunals, which would be outside the context of the internal arrangements that we are discussing here. However, if his remarks pointed more towards the ICGS scheme, I should say that, as I understand it, there would be no advantage, under insurance arrangements or otherwise, to the MP as opposed to the member of staff who might be complaining about them.

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Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The Leader of the House may or may not know the answer to this question. What would be the total cost of setting up an organisation such as that?

Mel Stride: I do not know; the House of Commons Commission will consider that. I interpret the hon. Gentleman’s question as showing concern that we should always be aware of the costs of putting recommendations into place, and he is entirely correct. Often, reports come forward with recommendations, and off we go saying that we should accept everything exactly as it is presented; further down the line, we decide that it was rather bureaucratic and expensive. In making sure that the recommendations from the report are bedded in correctly, we should have such issues at the forefront of our minds.

Mrs Miller: No one would expect non-recent cases to be dealt with immediately; it is obvious that they will take time to look into. Why cannot the leader of the House enable cases to be brought forward now, while the recruitment process is going on? Clearly, during the summer period people might have more time to gather the necessary information to submit a claim.

Mel Stride: The message from the Dispatch Box this afternoon is that we expect these measures to be introduced by October. Therefore, the message to anybody who is minded to come forward is that there is now time to prepare prior to October, when we hope that the independent assessors, who will handle that work, will be in place. I think that I can at least signal that that is our anticipation, and hope that that in itself is helpful.

Justin Madders: I am grateful to the leader of the House for giving way. I must say that I am a little perplexed that we have a scheme that is essentially identical to the current complaints scheme, that it has taken this long to come to fruition and that there will be a further delay. What is also of concern is that there may be an election later this year and those who may get caught by this historical complaints process may no longer be Members of this place. Can the leader of the House confirm that, in those circumstances, those people will essentially not face any inquiry?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman has very perceptively poked his finger into one of a few areas where it is not entirely clear how the system will work. Indeed, he is right. If a Member has left this place, I guess that an investigation could be conducted, but then there would be the issue of what sanctions could be applied and by whom. Indeed, a Member may have left this place and gone to the other place and, in those circumstances, he might ask what the process would be and who would apply the sanctions—if sanctions are to be applied. The best answer that I can give him is that there are elements of this that will require further work. If he would like to contribute to that, my door is always open.

That brings me rather neatly on to the important point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke. She rightly asked the question about this whole issue of transparency, ownership, accountability and leadership, and where these decisions ultimately rest. I am standing at this Dispatch Box as a Minister leading this debate, but, of course, these are matters not for the Government, but for the House. They are matters for all 650—600-plus—MPs who have actually taken their seats in this place. In some senses, there are some quite deep and reform-related issues around governance here that various Members have raised, which really fall to the House to grapple with. My role in that is that I sit on the House of Commons Commission, as does the shadow leader of the House, but I do not lead the House in terms of reforming its own procedures and practices, albeit that I can facilitate some of those changes, as I have done, by bringing forward this debate today, and, indeed, the motion that we will very shortly and hopefully be passing in regard to historical cases.
Finally, let me turn to some other points that have been made. I thank the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) for her outstanding work on the Committee on Standards, and for the time and courtesy that she offered to me when we met recently to discuss a number of the aspects of the work of her Committee. I also thank her for the work that she is doing at the moment on the different sanctions that may apply to Members of Parliament and for her best endeavours to complete that work, as suggested in the report, by December of this year. Finally, I thank her for the work that she will be doing alongside the House of Commons Commission in respect of the Cox 3 recommendation around MPs effectively not being able to mark their own homework.

In conclusion, I thank again all those who have contributed to this very important debate. We in this House hold this place dear. We are the guardians of its present and of its future, and we have a duty to ensure that it represents the very finest traditions and principles of our country. The way in which we treat those who support us in that endeavour lies right at the heart of any claim that we may make that we meet that vital test. I thank Gemma White for her report. Progress has been made, but there is still more to do and we will press ahead now with vigour.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Gemma White report on bullying and harassment of MPs’ Parliamentary staff.
The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride): I beg to move,

That this House endorses the report of the House of Commons Commission entitled Extending the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, laid on Monday 15 July and approves the steps set out in paragraph 8 of the report to make the changes necessary to extend the scheme, endorsed under the resolution of 19 July 2018.

We have just debated the findings of the Gemma White report. In the course of her inquiry, MPs’ parliamentary staff came forward to discuss their experiences of working in the House of Commons, just as members of staff employed by the House of Commons came forward to speak to Dame Laura Cox last year. As I think all Members here today have recognised, even one case of bullying, harassment or sexual harassment in this place is one too many. I am grateful to those who have come forward to share their experience with these inquiries. As has been noted today, significant progress has already been made on these issues, and it has been made with cross-party support. In making this progress, it has been critical that the parties were able to work together to establish an independent complaints and grievance scheme for Parliament, which marks its first anniversary this week. I particularly my predecessor and colleagues from across the House for their work in setting up the scheme.

Now is the right time to make an important change to the function of the ICGS, to enable all those who came forward with past experiences of bullying or harassment to access the scheme and to have full access to an investigation where it is appropriate. I am determined that all those who have worked or are still working in Parliament should have an independent route to turn to if they have been bullied, harassed or sexually harassed. The opportunity for those with historical cases to access the ICGS was one of the three key recommendations made by Dame Laura Cox in her report of October last year. Gemma White has also recommended that the limitation on historical cases be removed, including to allow former members of staff access to the ICGS.

If we are to create a culture in Westminster in which everyone is confident that they will be treated with dignity and respect, we must continue to reform and also be prepared to confront the problems of the past. Today’s motion is about doing just that—giving complainants whose cases date from before June 2017 full access to the ICGS, along with providing access to this scheme to those who have left their employment here. There is certainly more to be done, but today’s motion is a huge step forward. By acting to address and face up to the past, we work towards creating a Parliament where all can rightly expect to be treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for tabling this motion, and all those involved with producing the House of Commons Commission report, “Extending the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme”, which was published on 15 July.

In May 2019, the Commission unanimously agreed to consult on its approved proposal for dealing with non-recent cases by using the existing ICGS and employing specialist investigators for both assessing and investigating non-recent and recent cases. The consultation was launched on 21 May and closed on 14 June. The responses to the Commission’s public consultation were overwhelmingly supportive of its preferred option. Respondents included current and former staff of the House service, the Centre for Women’s Justice, the trade union side, the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the Committee on Standards in Public Life. Accordingly, at its meeting on 24 June 2019, the Commission agreed to include non-recent cases in the ICGS—hence, this motion. Until now, the ICGS has been available to all those who make up the parliamentary community. Paragraph 8 of the Commission’s report sets out necessary changes to open the ICGS to non-recent cases and to former members of the parliamentary community.

I pay tribute to the staff who are currently working on Dame Laura Cox’s third recommendation; we know how hard they work. Every time Members say that things have to be done quickly, there are a lot of hard-working staff who have to carry out that work as soon as possible. The staff team are currently working on ways to implement a fully independent complaints system, and will be helped by a working group of experts in constitutional law, constitutional history, human resources and procedure, as well as consulting Chairs of various Select Committees and party representatives. The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) is one of those consultees. A statement has been published today, and I urge everyone to read it on the intranet and respond to it. She made a point about the Commission, but everything is open. The decisions are published on the intranet, and questions to the Commission can be answered in the Chamber by the right lion. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) or tabled.

I have a simple question for the Leader of the House: can he tell us the timetable for the report following the consultation and the completion of that work? He might know that, or he might want to ask his officials. In the circumstances, Her Majesty’s Opposition support the motion.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): As I said in the previous debate, the SNP is very happy to support this motion and welcomes the changes to the independent complaints and grievance procedure, to open it up to cases that predate the 2017 Parliament. That is the most important way we can ensure that anyone who has been affected by inappropriate behaviour in the parliamentary community has access to and independent means of achieving justice, as well as the many excellent support services that have been put in place.

While I understand why the previous cut-off date was introduced to begin the process, it now feels arbitrary, and it does not recognise that investigations should be based on the weight of evidence, not simply the passage of time. That is why we are pleased that in the Commission’s statement, a key emphasis is placed on ensuring that the investigatory process at all stages is “independent, impartial, thorough and fair, and evidence led”.
As was said in the previous debate, we have to remember that this is fundamentally about achieving not only justice for people who have been affected by inappropriate behaviour but longer-term cultural change in Parliament. Once again, the SNP is happy to support the motion.

I will not speak for too long, because I am sure the House has heard enough from me today, but I have a couple of queries, following what I said in the previous debate about this only being a staging post to our final destination.

Once again, the SNP is happy to support the motion.

... not contemplate making a complaint under the new ICGS procedure, because it would be ‘career suicide’... Some are concerned about the independence of the ICGS process... and the lack of clarity as to the sanctions which could be imposed on an MP.”

Those are still the issues with getting a process that we and, most importantly, staff can be confident in. Until we have a process that does not involve Members at all—I appreciate that work is going on in respect of that—staff will feel a bit inhibited in making a complaint.

The other issue is sanctions. I am not at all clear, and I hope the Leader of the House can clarify when he responds, what sanctions will be levied against an MP for a complaint being upheld under this procedure. For the procedure to have the confidence of staff, it must have proper sanctions.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): To clarify, on behalf of the Committee on Standards, we are conducting an inquiry into exactly the question of what sanctions would be appropriate in a number of different situations. We would be more than happy to hear from my hon. Friend and, indeed, all Members.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I am aware that a consultation is ongoing, but it begs the question of what will happen with complaints that are being dealt with now if sanctions have not been clarified. Presumably some complaints will be resolved before the Commission reports. If I am wrong about that, I am happy to be corrected. Will sanctions be applied retrospectively after they have been agreed, or will investigations be reopened? Those are the questions that I hope the Leader of the House can clarify when he responds.

Question put and agreed to.
the A6 just south of Bedford and adjacent to the village of Wilstead. He is quite right that its closure for up to six months will have a knock-on effect on constituents and on my constituency. I might say that am surprised he did not raise the user experience of Luton airport, as he is of course a keen commuter backwards and forwards to his own constituency. Later in my speech, he may have some views on Luton airport, as I am sure he will have tried one of the many routes allowing him to get back to his constituency from the brilliant user experience that is London Luton airport.

Jim Shannon: I am very pleased to say that I have had the opportunity to use the Luton airport connection to Belfast City. It is extremely usable and accessible, but I would say to the hon. Gentleman that, unfortunately, Heathrow is just that wee bit handier for here.

Mr Shuker: I am particularly grateful that the main business of the House finished much sooner than we were expecting, because if the hon. Gentleman wants a long list of the many advantages that are coming to London Luton airport—in many ways, they may outstrip the advantages of London Heathrow airport in the years to come—I am sure I will be able to mention them at some point in my speech.

As I was saying, the M1 south of Bedfordshire does need looking at, particularly as London Luton airport looks to expand in the coming years. I ask the Minister to consider carefully whether the existing programme of development that is already in place will provide the capacity needed to keep the traffic flowing not just in the next five or 10 years, but for the next 50 years.

That said, there is a wide body of evidence to show that simply widening roads does not do much to reduce congestion, as new capacity brings forward new demand. The brave programme, put in place under the previous Administration, of exploring smart motorways might allow further expansion of capacity south of Luton airport.

The other point I would like to make about roads before I move on is that it is 30 years since bus deregulation, and there is clear demand to reverse it. As a regular user of the bus services in my constituency—I acknowledge that there are many benefits as well as the cost implications, which in many ways are very different from those in major metropolitan areas—I am keen to hear the Minister’s thoughts on whether the process of allowing local authorities to have a greater say on the provision of services, achieved in places such as Manchester and London, could be extended to Luton, Bedfordshire and beyond.

Secondly, we must provide our railways with the resources they need to succeed in the decades to come. The railway is extremely important to Luton. Many people travel to London for work or to see friends and family, while many thousands of others travel in the other direction to take a flight from London Luton airport. There is even more travel from Luton to Kettering and on other directions to take a flight from London Luton airport. In the past decade, the area around Luton railway station has been completely transformed, with major investment by the local authority, businesses and others. The one remaining eyesore that still exists there, which I will come on to speak about, is Luton railway station.

I know the Minister has journeyed to see some of the improvements in Luton, and I met him at London Luton airport among other places, but I encourage him to see Luton railway station and the surrounding area. In the past decade, the area around Luton railway station has been completely transformed, with major investment by the local authority, businesses and others. The one remaining eyesore that still exists there, which I will come on to speak about, is Luton railway station.

Through the Luton to Dunstable busway, residents of the nearby town have access to London via Luton in less than 30 minutes. Over the past 30 years, Luton has grown significantly, and so have its transport needs. I am not the only Member of Parliament from this part of England to complain about his local train service. I acknowledge that the south-east does receive its fair share of transport funding, but that only serves to remind us that there is such a strain on railway services in the south-east because of demand.

I put on record that there are currently serious problems due to timetabling on the midland main line. As a result of the last-minute downgrading of the Thameslink programme and delays to the midland main line upgrade programme, last May, Luton station—where passenger numbers have risen by 12%—did not gain services but lost its peak-time East Midlands trains services. Many of my constituents preferred using these services to get into and out of London in the evening, because they get to London faster and go more directly. At least at that time, however, the Department for Transport, in seeking to try to take some responsibility for the mess that had been caused, mandated Thameslink to provide for the loss of the services by providing additional fast peak-time Thameslink trains.

Infrastructure constraints mean that providing the replacement services to Luton required some Thameslink services to no longer stop at Harpenden, just a couple of stations down the line. Govia Thameslink Railway, which manages the route, has announced today that it will consult on moving some peak-time Wimbledon services so that they stop at Harpenden. Many of my constituents rely on these services for their employment, and I would
be deeply concerned to see their livelihoods put at risk by any loss of services from Luton. In February this year, I successfully blocked that move in an ill-tempered meeting with representatives of the company, commuter groups and other MPs. It was not a pleasant experience to have to do that to try to prevent services that rightly serve my constituency from being taken away and given to groups that shout more loudly in more leafy areas further down the line. As this consultation opens today, I urge all residents of Luton and those who travel from there to take note and contribute. In a growing town with growing railway usage, train users should have more trains, not fewer, and Luton residents who rely on these services to get to work must be heard.

I understand that there are difficulties caused by the delayed midland main line upgrade in places such as Harpenden, and while it is easy to sympathise with commuters further down the network towards London, any changes to the timetable should reflect the data and not just those who shout the loudest. I would go further and say that the consultation should also take into account the economic inequalities that are in play. Arguments to move services based on the proportion of season ticket holders, for example, do not accurately reflect the number of commuters, but rather the number of commuters who have the financial means and access to purchase expensive season tickets. It is a misleading comparison, and acting upon it would be hugely regressive for my constituents. It would be wrong to remove services, and particularly those put in place to mitigate the loss of other services due to the Government failing to foresee what was about to happen on that congested stretch of line, to serve a richer, more vocal community at the cost of a poorer one.

Let me say this: I will not stand by and watch my residents’ services taken away by a more vocal minority. It is an injustice, and the Department should not hide behind Thameslink’s action, if the move that the consultation brings about takes services away from Luton and places them in the hands of Harpenden.

Thirdly, we must make our railway stations fit for everyone in the community, so I make no apologies for raising again the matter of Luton station, which serves Harpenden, and while it is easy to sympathise with commuters further down the network towards London, any changes to the timetable should reflect the data and not just those who shout the loudest. I would go further and say that the consultation should also take into account the economic inequalities that are in play. Arguments to move services based on the proportion of season ticket holders, for example, do not accurately reflect the number of commuters, but rather the number of commuters who have the financial means and access to purchase expensive season tickets. It is a misleading comparison, and acting upon it would be hugely regressive for my constituents. It would be wrong to remove services, and particularly those put in place to mitigate the loss of other services due to the Government failing to foresee what was about to happen on that congested stretch of line, to serve a richer, more vocal community at the cost of a poorer one.

I seek a commitment from the Minister to meeting me, GTR and local rail users to discuss how we can improve Luton station. There is no point in delivering a railway that succeeds for the decades to come if it continues to fail some of the most marginalised groups in our society. I would like the Minister to reflect on the fact that in richer constituencies along the Thameslink line—the line has received £7 billion of investment to upgrade capacity—works have been scheduled in control period 6, and other upgrades have been delivered in control periods 4 and 5, but there has been a complete failure to mandate any upgrades to the facilities at Luton station.

Fourthly, we must enable aviation to succeed in the national interest. I see you taking the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, and you will be pleased to hear that I only wish to make five points. I have long championed Luton airport, which is in my constituency and which supports around 30,000 jobs and puts £1.5 billion into the local economy. Each household in Luton benefits to the tune of £340 a year because we chose not to sell off London Luton airport in the late 1980s, as many on the local authority wished us to do. In retrospect, that looks like a very smart decision.

The benefits are widely spread. The airport carries 16.6 million passengers a year; that figure is 80% higher than when I came into the House in 2010. The airport is England’s gateway to the rest of the world, and it brings major benefits to the whole country, as well as to my constituency. Crucially, it has delivered growth and improvement with no additional runway capacity; we still operate with the same runway that we have used for many years. That is in line with the Government’s aviation strategy, which allows expansion but not at Luton airport. I welcome the airport’s masterplan for sustainable growth over the next 30 years, which seeks to take capacity from 18 million passengers a year to 32 million or 33 million.

The Government will be asked to make a decision on expansion at Luton airport, because only central Government can balance matters of national importance against local concerns. Against the backdrop of otherwise unmetered aviation demand in the south of England, expansion is necessary and wholly appropriate. We know that we can deliver it at Luton, where we have a real vision for an airport that is currently Britain’s fifth largest. It is also right that local authorities make decisions on smaller matters that might affect local residents but that are not strategic concerns for the nation. As an example, increasing the planning limit on noise at Luton airport by some small amount will directly affect local residents, but it will not have massive strategic implications for the future of the nation.

Both those planning processes are appropriate and important. Personally, I think that it is outrageous deliberately to conflate the two, alongside the local authority’s ownership of London Luton airport. That might make good copy in the pages of the Herts Advertiser, but it represents really poor behaviour from those who should know better. I would appreciate it if the Minister laid out his understanding and expectation that under
the current planning framework, the decision to undertake any major expansion at London Luton airport would be made by central Government after weighing up all the implications.

Fifthly, and finally, interconnectivity between different modes of transport must be at the heart of any transport strategy for Bedfordshire. I should point out that the largest railway station in my constituency is not Luton, but Luton Airport Parkway, which serves 3.9 million passengers each year. At present, it takes about at least 20 minutes to get from the station to the airport terminals. If we are to enable aviation to succeed—Luton airport is particularly important to airport capacity in the south of England—we must provide easy interconnectivity between the airport and the railway. That is why the Luton Borough Council’s investment of £220 million in the direct air-rail transit, or DART, system is so important.

I now take great pleasure in commuting from my constituency and seeing the progress that is being made on that project every day. DART will greatly improve passenger connectivity, cutting the shortest journey time between St Pancras station in central London and the terminal door to less than 30 minutes. I believe that when it is in place, it will be quicker for me to travel from the House of Commons to Luton airport than to travel from the House to Heathrow—certainly before the new Elizabeth line opens. I encourage Members to try that out when the opportunity comes along.

Most services currently take considerably longer than 30 minutes, however. The shortest journey time of under 30 minutes is possible on just one train per hour. Most airports—for example, Gatwick and Heathrow—benefit from four fast trains per hour from central London, but those airports are full, and any new construction will not be completed for decades. I am sure the Minister will agree that Luton airport has an essential role in meeting new aviation demand, but it will not be able to play that role without effective surface access, which, in my view, requires a Government commitment to putting its rail connections on an equal footing with those of Gatwick and Heathrow. As the Minister knows, I lobbied hard for that at the time of the awarding of the East Midlands franchise and was disappointed by the missed opportunity to mandate four fast trains per hour. I ask the Minister to work with me in trying to lobby the new operator, Abellio, to introduce that service voluntarily. Even at this late stage, it will be missing an opportunity if it does not do so, as the airport seeks to expand and potentially double its numbers over the coming years.

That five-point plan for improving transport connectivity in my constituency and beyond is obviously not conclusive. It will not radically transform transport. The issues are more complex than that. No single Minister is likely to pick up a pen to grant all those wishes in one go. That is, in many ways, part of the frustration experienced by a Minister at the Department for Transport: making decisions that will take a long time to come to fruition. However, these are the important bread-and-butter issues on which we are elected to the House to deliver. I would love the sort of decision-making prowess for which the Minister is renowned to be applied to them and particularly to the rebuilding of Luton station. In that context, I shall welcome him back to Luton as soon as his diary secretary will allow him to pay it a visit.

6.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I congratulate the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) and welcome the opportunity to discuss the important issue of transport in Bedfordshire. I will deal with all the points that he raised. He ended his speech by saying that there were some frustrations for a Minister in the Department for Transport. I have to say that being a Minister in the Department for Transport is a great privilege and honour, and great fun, too, but it would be nice if we could sometimes deliver projects a little more quickly in the United Kingdom. That problem has bedevilled the delivery of infrastructure and, indeed, all sorts of procurement in the UK. But we fully recognise the importance of transport underpinning the economy of our nation. The investment in transport we are making underpins economic growth and investment in social mobility and in environmental improvement—all points the hon. Gentleman made very eloquently in his speech.

It is a while since I last visited Luton, but I recall doing so and I am acutely aware that Bedfordshire is an historic county and an important county in transport terms. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the M1, and there is also the A1, the A5 and a number of key rail routes, and obviously it is home to a major international airport. Transport is critical in ensuring that his communities can work together to secure the local ambitions of a vibrant place to work and live. He also mentioned the important social function of tackling loneliness, which I entirely agree with.

Across transport modes, the Government are making a number of key investments to help drive economic growth through our transport networks. Let me start by talking about the investment in rail. I am aware of how critical rail is to the Bedfordshire economy and transport network, and the number of people who rely upon it for their daily commutes. As the hon. Gentleman highlighted, the majority of services in Bedfordshire are delivered by GTR and East Midlands, and he highlighted the particular challenge in terms of GTR performance last year. I am pleased to say that the service has been significantly better over recent months, although several external incidents have impacted on services over the past few weeks, such as some flooding and trespass on the line.

The performance of Thameslink and, indeed, the entire network in terms of punctuality is absolutely my priority. Officials in the Department are continuing to engage with GTR to ensure that performance improvements are delivered and then sustained, and I have also raised this with GTR and will continue to do so. The entire industry knows, because I have been very boring in saying nothing much else, that I expect to see performance improvements and it basically doing what it says on the tin: keeping to the timetable. That is the rail industry’s key customer pledge.

Since the timetable change of May this year, Luton is receiving an increased weekend service and passengers are seeing the benefits of the Thameslink programme, providing enhanced connectivity for Luton and Bedfordshire, and Luton and Luton Airport Parkway stations will both receive £80,000 from the GTR £15 million passenger benefits fund.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Secretary of State announced in April that Abellio East Midlands will operate the next East Midlands rail franchise. This new franchise will bring a host of enhanced services and
passenger benefits to Bedfordshire. The service is due to start almost exactly one month from today, and Abellio East Midlands will invest over £500 million pounds in the network; this will deliver significant improvements in the quality of trains and stations to maximise and build upon the £1.5 billion investment the Government are making in the midland main line upgrade.

Abellio will oversee the introduction of a brand new fleet of trains to the upgraded midland main line from 2022, which will result in faster journeys over long distances in the peak and introduce new frequent express services from Corby through Luton into London. From December 2020, once the relevant section of the midland main line upgrade is complete, the additional East Midlands services mean that Luton Airport Parkway will benefit from an extra-fast direct, branded Luton airport express service from St Pancras every hour throughout most of the day.

This is in addition to the current East Midlands service and the GTR services, so up to 10 trains per hour will run to Luton Airport Parkway in the peak and a minimum of eight during the off peak, including twice hourly fast and direct express services. This additional East Midlands express service will also benefit Luton station, which will be served by eight trains per hour all day, up from seven, and up to 14 trains per hour during the peak, up from 12. Together, these improved services will improve access to and from Luton airport.

The points that the hon. Gentleman made about the importance of connectivity to airports were absolutely spot on. We obviously wish that connectivity to be increased through the rail network, not through the road network. These improved services will help that objective significantly. He mentioned the consultation that GTR will carry out with Luton and Harpenden passengers, which could indeed see some small targeted changes made to the timetable from December this year. GTR opted to undertake the consultation so that it could fully consider the views of both sets of stakeholders, alongside other factors such as passenger numbers, in making its decision on what represents the best balance of services on the line.

I understand entirely where the hon. Gentleman was coming from on that point, and I encourage him to ensure that all his constituents contribute to that consultation. My focus will be on increasing the capacity on the line so that both communities benefit from better services. The objective is to ensure that we do not have to worry about the allocation of rare slots and that we see the upgrades that will ensure that all communities are better connected.

The hon. Gentleman made a good point about the station at Luton, and I hope that the news that Luton is one of the 73 stations that will benefit from the £300 million Access for All funding available in this spending period has been welcomed. It is part of our inclusive transport strategy to ensure that our railways are open to everyone. I am aware that local partners, including the borough council, have aspirations for a much wider redevelopment of the station. I believe that Network Rail is working with the council to try to ensure that their proposals are integrated and will allow the Access for All phase of the development to commence as soon as possible. However, delivery of the Access for All work can progress only with the co-operation of Luton Borough Council, and I therefore hope that the current co-operation between the council and Network Rail will continue, because the project is long overdue and we want to see it delivered.

The hon. Gentleman has a very good track record of bringing people together to solve community issues on his patch, and I hope that he will continue that work to bring people together on this issue. I will be happy to take up the issue with Network Rail. He asked for urgency, and I am happy to give that undertaking. I will of course keep him updated on progress.

The hon. Gentleman highlighted the importance of local roads and congestion, and he pointed out that 54% of his constituents travel to work in their cars every day. As we know, there is congestion in the area, and congestion is a problem that we take very seriously. That is why we have made a number of investments for local transport within Bedfordshire to help to address this issue, and we will continue to invest. This includes £2.5 million towards a new Bedford western bypass and £11 million towards the regeneration of Bedford town centre. We are also funding £22 million towards the A421 dualling scheme that is being led by Central Bedfordshire Council. That £22 million investment will improve journey times and ease congestion from Fen Farm to junction 13 of the M1.

I clearly remember my visits to Bedfordshire during my time as Roads Minister. In fact, there were three visits. Two of those were related to the £162 million investment in the new link road between the A5 and the M1 north of Dunstable. I saw the project twice during its construction, and I know how important it has been in improving journey times and reliability, and in improving the quality of life in that area, because Dunstable was a real bottleneck and the town centre was being made significantly less pleasant than it could be because of the sheer volume of through traffic, particularly heavy traffic. I hope that that construction has helped to tackle that problem.

That project followed earlier investment in Bedfordshire, including the £30 million improvement to junction 10A, which the hon. Gentleman and I both visited. We visited a number of places across the constituency. Indeed, it was my honour as Roads Minister to cut the ribbon to open that new spur to the airport. I will certainly pass on the comments about the M1 south of Luton to the current Roads Minister. The smart motorway network has helped to improve the capacity and predictability of our network. The system has evolved through several iterations since the early days on the M42 many years ago, and the scheme has helped to improve capacity considerably.

Buses are a core part of local transport infrastructure, and bus use in central Bedfordshire has risen by 27% over the past 10 years. The innovative Luton to Dunstable Busway, which my Department helped to fund, has been key in increasing bus patronage in the area, allowing Luton to be reached from Houghton Regis and Dunstable in less than 30 minutes, which puts Luton’s employment opportunities, airport and fast London trains within easier reach.

The hon. Gentleman had some specific questions about the A421 dualling, which takes us back to the Bus Services Act 2017. Franchising is a significant responsibility, and all authorities must have a compelling case to implement such a scheme. Local decisions to move to
franchising must be based on robust evidence and analysis, with the needs of passengers firmly at the centre of a council’s decisions, which can be subject to judicial review. The 2017 Act provided a suite of options, which include partnerships and enhanced partnerships. It may be preferable for local authorities to consider partnerships with bus operators to improve services in their area. Although I am no longer the Bus Minister, I am aware that partnerships have successfully helped to drive up bus usage, and they are also less disruptive, with less risk for the franchising authority—the local council. Several options are available, but I would encourage all councils to start by looking at the opportunities in the different partnership models.

At the heart of the hon. Gentleman’s speech was the importance of Luton airport to the local economy and community, and he made the case for the connectivity required to help it thrive very well. Luton is the fifth largest airport in our country, and air travel is vital across the UK and the EU for connecting people and businesses. The UK and EU have a mutual interest in maintaining closely integrated aviation markets, and both have put in place measures to ensure that flights can continue under any EU-exit scenario, demonstrating a clear commitment to maintaining connectivity. That should give Luton airport’s customers the confidence to book and fly to European destinations however we leave the EU. I am aware of some uncertainty in the press about how dampened demand has potentially led to people redirecting their holiday choices, but the key thing is that we have made great progress and that there will be a clear commitment to maintain connectivity whatever the EU-exit scenario. We want Luton’s customers—indeed, all aviation customers—to book with confidence.

I am aware of Luton Borough Council’s desire to increase the capacity of the airport and that it will be undertaking a consultation in advance of a potential development consent order application next year. As the final decision on the planning application will be taken on its merits by the Secretary of State for Transport, it would be inappropriate to comment any further, but it is good to see people working to improve the local economy and the factors that drive it.

The issue of connectivity to the airport is perhaps the fundamental point, and the hon. Gentleman has requested four trains an hour. In the development of the east midlands franchise there was a public consultation on the question of Luton airport services, and the public were supportive of the status quo, so we did not specify an increase in services to Luton Airport Parkway as a requirement. However, bidders were incentivised to propose initiatives to increase rail access to the airport that would not cause a reduction to existing services.

Passengers will benefit from a doubling of fast East Midlands services to two an hour, both to and from the airport, from December next year, and they will be modern, comfortable Luton Airport Express-branded services. The hon. Gentleman makes his case well, and I will pass on his comments to GTR and East Midlands Trains so that they both consider connectivity to the airport, as he requests.

I hope the hon. Gentleman and, indeed, Members right across Bedfordshire recognise there has been considerable investment in the county’s transport network. I simply urge local partners to identify the best solutions to address their transport problems and to build a robust and compelling case that demonstrates to Government the need for investment in key infrastructure in this high growth, high potential part of the country, delivering benefits for current users and equipping the area for future growth and success.

We have had a good debate that has covered all modes of transport. The only one we have not covered, for fairly obvious reasons, is maritime—[Interruption.] Perhaps I should not tempt the hon. Member for Luton South. There has been significant progress, and I look forward to seeing more progress delivered to improve quality of life and to drive the economy of the constituency he serves.

Question put and agreed to.

6.26 pm
House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

A417 Brockworth to Cowley

1. Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of progress on improving the A417 missing link between Brockworth and Cowley; and if he will make a statement. [912024]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I have taken a personal interest in this project, which I regard as an important part of our infrastructure that needs to be addressed, and my hon. Friend will be pleased to know that it is moving forward. Highways England announced its preferred route for the scheme in March, and it is now preparing for the next stage of the planning process, statutory consultation, followed by a development consent order process.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Sadly, there have been 10 fatalities and 123 casualties on that road in the last four years for which figures are available, so the improvement is desperately needed. Has my right hon. Friend had the chance to evaluate the Labour party’s proposals to scrap the roads programme, which would mean hundreds of road schemes such as this never being built and motorists being hugely inconvenienced?

Mr Speaker: But that is not a matter for the Secretary of State—

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown rose—

Mr Speaker: No, no—[Interruption.] Order. Resume your seat. We are talking about Government policy. If the Secretary of State wants to say something about Government policy, he can, but he cannot ruminate or pontificate on Opposition policy. That is not a matter for the Secretary of State.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Chris Grayling: Labour Members say “Hear, hear!” because they do not want to hear the truth, which is that we are putting in place schemes that will benefit road safety, that will improve journey times and that will be good for our economy. The A417 improvement is a much needed scheme that does all those things, and it will be an essential part of this Government’s future planning. It is simply a tragedy that Labour wants to scrap it.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Sorry, Mr Speaker, I was eager to speak to Question 2.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman was ahead of himself, not for the first time and probably not for the last.

Electric Vehicles: Infrastructure

2. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve charging infrastructure for electric vehicles.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): We are consulting on all new build homes in England being fitted with charge points, and we want all new public rapid charge points also to offer pay-as-you-go card payments from the spring of 2020. Our grant schemes and the £400 million charging infrastructure investment fund will see the installation of thousands more public charge points, adding to the 20,000 already installed.

Peter Aldous: I am grateful to the Minister of State for that reply. At sea, Lowestoft is at the forefront of the transition to a low-carbon economy—the world’s largest offshore wind farm is being built just off our coast—but the town also wants to be in the driving seat on land. Will the Minister outline the initiatives that have been put in place to ensure that electric vehicle charging infrastructure can be rolled out quickly and early in Lowestoft, and that the work will not just be focused in large cities?

Michael Ellis: With my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft, I believe that it is doing very well indeed on land, at sea and in the air. We have to remember that the majority of electric vehicle drivers charge their cars at home overnight or at the workplace. We want people across the country, and especially in Lowestoft, to switch to electric vehicles, and we want to leverage private sector investment to provide a self-sustaining public network that is affordable, reliable and accessible. As my hon. Friend knows, the market is best placed to identify the right locations.

Andrew Lewer: That was slightly more pointed than I expected. At the moment, there is very little provision of electric car charging points in my constituency of Northampton South; I have only been able to find one in the whole constituency. What schemes does the Minister have planned for urban constituencies such as mine, and his?

Michael Ellis: I am very familiar with my hon. Friend’s constituency, which neighbours my own. I am pleased to say that in February this year Northampton Borough Council was awarded £45,000 under the Government’s ultra low emission taxi infrastructure competition to deliver two rapid charge points dedicated to electric taxis and private hire vehicles. He is right to focus on this issue, but we have a number of schemes that can be
accessed by electric vehicle drivers across the country, including in Northampton South and Northampton North. The electric vehicles home charge scheme is just one of them; the on-street residential scheme is another. Local authorities are receiving significant funding to install recharging points, including with these new technologies.

23. [912047] Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): E-bikes will offer enormous benefits for transport, health, wellbeing, the environment and green business growth, especially if Government funding is made available to support them. What steps is the Minister taking to incentivise the use of e-bikes?

Michael Ellis: I have recently been on an e-bike, and it was very good on hills. E-bikes are of great assistance to people with health and mobility issues. We want to encourage their use, and we are doing just that. We are also investing vast sums in cycle lanes and road infrastructure improvements, and we are focusing on safety. There is more to be done, as always, but we have done an awful lot more than Labour did in this area.

Mr Speaker: It is very interesting to learn of the personal experience of the Minister, but all that I can say at this stage is that he is challenging our vivid imaginations. I was going to call Mr Stringer. Are you still interested, sir? Get in there.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was surprised to find that the charging sockets are not standardised, either on cars or on charging points. Would it not make sense to regulate to standardise them?

Michael Ellis: Of course, the market has been leading in this area, and we now have 20,000 publicly accessible charging points, but I take the hon. Gentleman’s point. We know from the charging of other devices that we use every day that they do not all share the same fixtures, but the fact of the matter is that we have an advanced system in this country. We are growing it, and we will be providing more funding in this area and looking to do more.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Contrary to popular myth, most particulates do not come from modern diesel engines, but from wear between the vehicle’s tyres and the road. Given that electric vehicles tend to be heavier than their conventional counterparts owing to the weight of the batteries, which increases tyre wear and road wear, does the Minister have any concerns that the increased use of electric vehicles may lead to increasing levels of particulates?

Mr Speaker: Interesting—the hon. Gentleman is giving the impression of knowing something.

Michael Ellis: And what a good impression it is, Mr Speaker. The reality is that we all know that electric vehicles are tremendously advantageous to the economy and, frankly, to the environment, and there is work to be done. My hon. Friend is quite right to mention particulates, and we are looking at that issue, but electric vehicles provide massive benefits to the environment.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is a sad day, because rumour has it that this is the Secretary of State’s last outing at the Dispatch Box. He is the gift that keeps on giving, but that is not funny because he has cost the country billions. Earlier this month, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders announced that sales of low-emission cars in the UK have fallen for the first time in two years. The SMMT’s chief executive, Mike Hawes, described the decline as a “grave concern” and blamed the Secretary of State’s confusing policies and premature removal of purchase incentives. Will the right hon. Gentleman finally apologise for his political blunders that have cost the taxpayer £2.7 billion?

Michael Ellis: As usual, I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is quite wrong. The fact is that the Secretary of State has been leading the way in this area, and the Department for Transport is also a world leader. Some 200,000 ultra-low-emission battery, electric, and plug-in hybrid vehicles are registered in the UK, and we are the second-largest market for ultra low emission vehicles in the European Union, so the hon. Gentleman is quite wrong.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): How will it work for houses that do not have a driveway or reserved on-street parking, and what does the Minister mean by the term “en suite”?

Michael Ellis: Did I say “en suite”? We are investing in technologies and supporting innovations in on-street architecture—[Laughter] We might invest in “en suite” architecture as well, but that would not be for my Department. Fixtures have been fitted to streetlights, for example, and there have been innovations in contactless charging. Businesses around the country are working on various mechanisms, and this Department is supporting many of them with funding to help them to invent new technologies.

London Low Emission Zone: HGVs

3. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Transport for London on the effect of the roll-out of the London low emission zone on showpeople who drive heavy goods vehicles.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): Transport in London is devolved to the Mayor of London and is delivered by Transport for London. Ministers and officials meet TfL regularly to discuss a range of topics. I have not discussed the effect of the roll-out of the London low emission zone on showpeople who drive heavy goods vehicles.

David Linden: I am sure that the Minister is aware that under section 62 of the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994, showpeople have a number of exemptions and concessions. There is a possibility that showpeople could get an exemption from low emission zones in recognition of their lifestyle and businesses. Will the Minister encourage Transport for London to look favourably at that and make sure that we are supporting these people?
Michael Ellis: Yes I will. The hon. Gentleman alludes to the fact that Transport for London has agreed a 100% exemption for some showpeople using adapted vehicles from both the ultra low emission and low emission zones. The detail of that is up to the Mayor of London, not the Government, but I understand that the Mayor’s office is agreeing a meeting with the hon. Gentleman to discuss the matter, and I wish him well in that.

Blue Badge Scheme: Hidden Disabilities

4. Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the blue badge scheme for people with hidden disabilities.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): From 30 August 2019, the blue badge scheme will include non-visible as well as visible disabilities. This change will be assessed 12 months after implementation, using feedback from the public, stakeholders and local authorities who administer the scheme. We will be tracking how many badges are awarded under the new criteria.

Mike Wood: I welcome the £1.7 million that has been allocated to councils to implement the new regulations, but will the Minister encourage local councils to spend that money on autism training for assessors, so that they can have a better understanding of how autism can affect people’s ability to travel?

Michael Ellis: Yes I will. My hon. Friend is right: the £1.7 million of funding is to support local authorities in the administration of the scheme. Local authorities can use their share of the funding to train assessors on specific conditions such as autism. We will let local authorities make the actual decisions on how the money can be used most effectively to support the implementation of the new regulations, but I hope that local authorities will look sympathetically at the difficulties faced by people with autism.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I am sure that the whole House is keen to improve accessibility for people with all disabilities, which is why I am sure that the Minister will join me in condemning TransPennine Express and its decision to close the gate at Hull Paragon station, which is making it much more difficult for people with disabilities to access the station.

Michael Ellis: I am sorry to hear about that. I will raise the matter with the Rail Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones)—and perhaps he will write to the hon. Lady about it.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): While the £1.7 million is welcome, may I ask for advice and guidance for local authorities who might come under increasing pressure from the huge number of new blue badge applications? What advice can the Minister give to local authorities such as Cornwall?

Michael Ellis: This is a matter for local authorities and they can exercise their discretion, depending on the circumstances in their particular area. I appreciate that there is a demand for the blue badge scheme; that means that the scheme works very effectively. It assists people who have mobility issues, and that is what it is designed to do. It is right that people with non-visible disabilities are also covered by the scheme. That has been the case heretofore, but this highlights the issue and we encourage local authorities to work with the system.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am a Scottish MP, but the blue badge scheme is UK-wide. As the Chamber knows, my wife is disabled and nothing is a bigger pain than to run my wife to Raigmore Hospital in Inverness and find that all the parking spaces have been taken or, worse still, that people who do not have the badge have taken spaces. Will the Government ensure that people who abuse the system are sorted out and brought to account as quickly as possible?

Michael Ellis: Yes. First, the fraudulent use of blue badges is a criminal matter and that can be dealt with accordingly, as one would expect. As for those who park in disabled parking spaces when they are not permitted to do so, such infractions ought to be dealt with by the supervisory authority, and that can be by way of fines.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister further outline what training must be undertaken by those responsible for parking enforcement to ensure that people entitled to a blue badge for hidden illnesses are not interrogated by traffic wardens when their blue badge is clearly on display?

Michael Ellis: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We expect those who are charged with enforcing our parking regulations to be sympathetic to these issues and alive to the fact that there will be people with non-visible disabilities who are perfectly entitled to use a blue badge.

Community Transport Operators

5. Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support community transport operators.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Community transport is incredibly important for both urban and rural communities, and in March the Department took steps to protect community transport operators so that they can carry on doing their valuable work. We have clarified, in guidance, the scope of two exemptions from the EU regulation on operator licensing, and we have enacted new legislation. We will revise the guidance on the non-commercial exemption once the High Court has reached a decision and will carry out a review of the domestic permit regime later in 2019.

Karin Smyth: I thank the Minister for her answer. She is right: the service is very valuable. In parts of Bristol South, 40% of people do not own a car or van, so public transport is crucial to getting about in daily life. Will she join me in congratulating Bristol Community Transport on running the M1 metrobus service this year? Does she
agree that local authorities need more funding to support bus services, particularly in communities where there are low incomes and older people?

Ms Ghanı: I am more than happy to celebrate the work of Bristol Community Transport; Hartclife and Withywood Community Partnership, which is in or close to the hon. Lady’s constituency, also does incredibly good work. We have done everything we can in the Department to be as flexible as possible, so that those with community transport contracts in constituencies can carry on doing their work. We provide substantial financial support for all public transport, but of course I will always aim to secure even more funding, including in the next spending review.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Community transport in Essex would benefit from investment in Essex’s roads, and particularly from the dualling of the A12 and the widening of A12. Will the Minister work with the Department to ensure that both those schemes feature in the road investment strategy?

Ms Ghanı: That is a fantastic question. My right hon. Friend has captured my imagination, and that of the Roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis). I believe that the schemes are in the pipeline, and if I cannot meet my right hon. Friend, no doubt the Roads Minister will, to make sure that the schemes are carried forward.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Over 90% of community transport operators in Scotland use section 19 or section 22 permits, but changes to legislation will lead to onerous conditions regarding driver qualifications and bus adaptations, and that threatens the existence of these important service providers. Coalfield Community Transport in my constituency believes that the measures will give them up-front costs of £50,000. Does the Minister accept how real these risks are, and will she meet me to discuss the issue and changes that could be made?

Ms Ghanı: I am more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman, because I am concerned about the cases that he has raised. I am also concerned that information is not filtering through, and that is creating panic among community transport operators that need not be felt. We have spent a lot of time working with community transport operators and local authorities; I have a list in front of me of everyone to whom we have spoken. Operators can also go on the community transport website, which has further clarification of what needs to be done. If they hold a licence at present, they are eligible to carry on doing their work.

Mr Speaker: Does the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) want to make a second inquiry? No! I do not want to tempt him beyond his natural appetite. I had him down for two questions, but we are grateful for his self-denying ordinance. In that case, we probably just have time to include Mr Farron.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): In places such as Sedbergh and Dent, community bus services have become a lifeline for people who would otherwise be isolated from the communities around them, and I am massively grateful to the volunteers who make those services possible. Community bus services have become essential because over the past 30 years Governments of all colours have chosen to stop seeing the provision of bus services as a service at all and have allowed rural communities such as mine to become increasingly cut off and stranded. Will the Minister agree to launch a new transport deal for rural communities, with new investment for bus services that are regular, reliable and affordable?

Ms Ghanı: The hon. Gentleman has mixed up two distinct types of services: community transport, and regular bus services. Over £1 billion is spent on concessionary travel, and over £250 million directly on bus service operators grant. If he wants to sit down with me and get further ideas on how his local authority can secure a partnership, I am more than happy to do that.

Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy

6. Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the resources required to implement his Department’s cycling and walking investment strategy.

16. John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): What recent estimate he has made of the resources required to implement his Department’s cycling and walking investment strategy.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): Spending on cycling and walking in England has doubled from £3.50 per head to around £7 per head over the current spending review period. The Government estimate that around £2 billion will have been spent on measures to implement the strategy between 2016 to 2021 alone.

Matt Western: While I welcome that increased investment, the Department has acknowledged that “current policy and resource levels will not enable the current aim of doubling the number of trips made wholly or partially by cycling to be met”, including in my own constituency of Warwick and Leamington. Will the Minister meet me and my parliamentary neighbour, the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright), to discuss a particular project, namely the Kenilworth to Leamington cycle route, which is in desperate need of investment?

Michael Ellis: I am always very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman. I would point out, however, that as well as the doubling of investment in cycling and walking and the £2 billion, we channel money from the Department for Transport and the Government to local authorities such as his so that there is even more money for them to allocate to cycling and walking.

John Woodcock: But will the Minister publish the evidence his Department has commissioned? Surely that will show that the current levels of investment will not be sufficient to meet the target. When he recognises that, will he direct his attention to the disused railway that Highways England wants to turn into a cycle lane between Ulverston canal and Greenodd roundabout?
Michael Ellis: I think the hon. Gentleman is referring to the Morecambe Bay cycle way. The Government recognise the benefits of such schemes, which may be able to provide opportunities to increase active travel and significant benefit to the local economy, as well as to health and the environment. We have recently provided more than £20 million of support to Sustrans, to improve stretches of the national cycle network. I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman if he wishes, but the reality is that we are putting considerable investment into cycling across the country.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I have seen the benefits of active travel and have been using the A44 cycle path from Woodstock to Oxford, but I want to see the same in other areas of my constituency, not least Eynsham, to alleviate, among other things, the congestion on the A40. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how that strategy might help the B4044 community path?

Michael Ellis: I know that my hon. Friend is an avid cyclist and he sets an example of active travel that is beneficial both to the environment and to health. I would be very happy to meet him to discuss the route he has in mind.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Studies now show that, even among older people, the resumption of an active lifestyle, including cycling and walking, helps counter the onset of dementia. Will the Minister do more to highlight that, to try to get older people even more active?

Michael Ellis: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. There is no doubt that life expectancy increases among older people who are active. In fact, that is the case across all ages. We support that, which is why considerable investment is going into cycling and walking. I very much accept that the more active any person of any age is, the more likely it is that they will be in good health.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The Minister do more to highlight that, to try to get older people even more active?

Michael Ellis: The hon. Gentleman is correct to pursue this point. The Government are leading the way in promoting the use of cycling and walking. We have doubled investment and it absolutely dwarfs that of the Labour party when it was last in government. The fact is that we have put £2 billion into cycling and walking, which is a monumental increase on Labour’s investment. We recognise that it is good both for the environment and for health, including mental health and wellbeing. That is why the investment is going in. We also have to factor in safety—we are very focused on that. As we have reiterated time and again, this is a priority for the Department.

Matt Rodda: The Government have once again shown their lack of commitment to tackling the real problems facing this country. The Secretary of State has failed to meet his own targets for encouraging cycling, and the Department for Transport is spending just 1.5% of its budget on walking and cycling. The Minister’s attempts to dress up what is clearly a failing policy are, quite frankly, deeply disappointing and show that the Government are simply not capable of providing the leadership needed to tackle climate change, which is the greatest threat to our country and, indeed, to humanity. When will the Secretary of State and his colleagues get a grip and show some leadership?

Michael Ellis: There is £50 million for Bikeability training for schoolchildren; £101 million for cycling infrastructure for cycle ambition cities; £80 million for the local authority access fund; £85 million from Highways England for cycling and walking; £597 million from the local growth fund; £77 million for local road schemes; £194 million from the integrated transport block for micro-enhancement projects—I shall keep going until Mr Speaker stops me—£196 million from the highways maintenance refund; and some £500 million from a range of cross-Government infrastructure funds, so there are hundreds of millions of pounds of investment, and that is what the Department is doing.

Mr Speaker: I must say, having listened to the Minister I do not think I can take any more such excitement. It is almost too much.

Transport for Vulnerable Children: Driver Training

7. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the provision of training on transporting vulnerable children and adults for people who drive (a) taxis and (b) private hire vehicles.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We work across government to ensure that safeguarding practice is as safe as it can be in the taxi and private hire sector. The issue has been discussed at an inter-ministerial group chaired by the Home Secretary. The Government have committed to legislate for national minimum standards, which will include making it a legal requirement that licensees undertake safeguarding awareness training. However, I encourage all licensing authorities to act now and use their existing powers to protect passengers.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer, and to build on it, may I ask what plans her Department currently has to produce a standardised national training programme for people who transport vulnerable children and adults?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend touches on an important piece of work that is being carried out across a number of Departments, including the Home Office and the Department for Education, and in local government. In the Department for Transport, we are looking to obtain the powers to create a national minimum standard, which will be quite high, and a national database, and to increase enforcement powers for traffic commissioners. Put together, all those things will ensure that the quality of service and safety for people when they enter a private hire vehicle is the same up and down the country.
Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): We have known for a while that the Secretary of State does not run the railways, and yesterday he told the Transport Committee that “we don’t really do buses”, but the chair of the Government’s own task and finish group on taxi and private hire vehicle licensing told us in March that he was “truly frightened” about the risk to the public under the current regulations. Thankfully, it seems that even the Secretary of State is not trying to dodge responsibility for legislating to protect passengers, but when will a Bill on taxi and private hire licensing be laid before Parliament?

Ms Ghani: The Chair of the Select Committee knows that I am just as passionate as she is about this issue within this part of my brief. I was hoping that we could start to legislate before the summer, and I now hope that I can crack on with it in the autumn. We have to start to legislate before the summer, and I now hope that I am just as passionate as she is about this issue.

Strategic Road Network: Manchester to Sheffield

8. Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the strategic road network between Manchester and Sheffield.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I am clear that we need to deliver a much upgraded strategic road between Manchester and Sheffield—there is no doubt about that at all—as we do further north between east Lancashire and west Yorkshire, and further north still between Cumbria and Teesside, so I absolutely accept the hon. Lady’s point. She might agree that there is still more that we can do to improve that connectivity across the Pennines?

Ruth George: The Secretary of State’s confirmation of those projects is welcome, but fixing the strategic gap in economic productivity between Manchester and Sheffield will require a strategic road investment between the two cities, as Transport for the North has identified. Is the Secretary of State committing to prioritise that gap to unlock the potential £20 billion of economic productivity that could be unleashed?

Chris Grayling: I am clear that we need to deliver a much upgraded strategic road between Manchester and Sheffield—there is no doubt about that at all—as we do further north between east Lancashire and west Yorkshire, and further north still between Cumbria and Teesside, so I absolutely accept the hon. Lady’s point. She might, though, like to have a gentle word with her Front-Bench colleagues, who, of course, have committed to scrap the road improvement schemes that we have in the pipeline.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): As someone whose constituency borders the city of Sheffield, I say to the Minister that we need to get economic productivity moving in our areas, as was outlined by the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George). Does he agree that, for communities such as Barrow Hill and Staveley, the Staveley bypass, which is 90 years in the asking, would be a great idea for Chesterfield and North East Derbyshire?

Chris Grayling: I know that my hon. Friend is seeking funding from the housing infrastructure fund for that scheme. I have been to the area and seen what is needed. I think that it is a very good scheme, and I hope that his application is successful. The reality is that, if we are to drive economic growth in the northern part of the country, we need road improvements. Those who argue against road improvements are letting down the north.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I declare an interest as a metro mayor. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) is absolutely right: the connectivity, both road and rail, between south Yorkshire and Greater Manchester is not fit for the 21st century. The 30 miles between Sheffield and Manchester is just about the longest 30 miles anywhere in England. It is good to hear from the Secretary of State that investment and work are taking place to address that, but does he agree that we should have a Bill to decarbonise road transport.

Road Transport: Decarbonisation

9. Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): What steps he is taking to decarbonise road transport.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): It is the Government’s mission for all new cars and vans to be effectively zero emission by 2040. “The Road to Zero” strategy sets out the action that the Government are taking to support this mission, as well as the steps that we are taking to drive down emissions from conventional vehicles during the transition.

Louise Haigh: But the Committee on Climate Change made it crystal clear this month that the target for 2040 is simply in no way compatible with our international obligations under the Paris accord and advised that we bring it down to 2030, which would bring us in line with countries such as Norway and the Netherlands. Will the Minister explain to the House how that 2040 target is in any way compatible with the climate emergency that is facing this country now?
Michael Ellis: The move to zero-emission vehicles is the biggest technology upheaval to hit UK roads since the invention of the combustion engine. “The Road to Zero” strategy, which we published in July last year, sets out comprehensive plans to support this change and, frankly, the work that the Government are doing today will mean that they are handing the next generation a better, cleaner and greener Britain. That is crucial not only to improve the lives and health of people across Britain—it will do that—but to be able to meet the only to improve the lives and health of people across Britain— it will do that—but to be able to meet the UK’s statutory climate change targets, and, frankly, the Government expect the transition to zero-emission transport to be industry and consumer-led. Therefore, we are leading the way in this area and we have considerable ambitions. We are beating most countries around the world in terms of cleaner air, a better environment, zero-emission vehicles and a strong, clean economy.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Accidents on major roads cause terrible traffic jams, which increases pollution. As the Minister knows, I have written to him quite recently about the promised improvements to the A34 to improve safety. I would be very grateful if he updated us today, or wrote to me as soon as possible, about when these improvements will be made.

Michael Ellis: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this matter of the A34 with me, but I have already written to him and it is in the post.

Mr Speaker: Gosh, I suspect the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) is in a state of uncontrollable excitement in anticipation of the Minister’s letter.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Low emission zones are vital to decarbonising our cities. My constituency of Edinburgh West has two of the worst polluted roads in Scotland. At the moment, the city is consulting on a low emission zone, but it can work effectively only if all road transport, not just commercial, is decarbonised and moved out of the city altogether—not just moved from one area to another. Will the Minister commit to what we have already heard, which is that we need to decarbonise to clean up our cities—and we need to do it quicker than 2040?

Michael Ellis: The facts are clear: the United Kingdom is a global leader in zero-emission vehicles. In 2018, for example, the UK was the second largest market in new ULEVs in the EU. We were behind only Germany. One in five electric cars sold in Europe was made in the UK. We are leading the way on design and technology. We are in the top tier in this area, and we are doing everything that we can with a highly ambitious project towards 2040, which is only 20 years away.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): One of the best ways to decarbonise roads is to improve rail services, so will the Minister join me in congratulating Cooksbridge Area Rail Action Group, which has managed to secure an hourly rail service mid-week and, for the first time in years, on a Saturday, which will move more passengers in Lewes off the roads and on to the railways?

Michael Ellis: I very much congratulate my hon. Friend and her group for their work in this area. It will only serve to assist her constituents, residents of the local area and any visitors.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The best way of decarbonising road transport is to ensure that more people use public transport. It was therefore alarming to hear the Secretary of State tell the Select Committee on Transport yesterday that he thought that automated vehicles were the answer and that any modal shift should be incremental. Incremental? There is a climate emergency now and an incremental response will not cut it. Does not this show that the Secretary of State is not taking the climate crisis seriously?

Michael Ellis: That is quite wrong. The fact is that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been in charge of a record investment in rail. That form of public transport has seen huge sums of investment. In fact, we have invested across the board. The hon. Gentleman talks about the climate. This Government are doing more on that issue than countries around the world, and certainly far more than Labour ever did when it was in power. We are taking a multifaceted approach, and automated vehicles, public transport, electric vehicles and rail are also important in this regard. Rail investment from this Government beats them all.

Andy McDonald: I was delighted to hear that Andy Burnham has secured the recommendation of Transport for Greater Manchester to franchise bus services. Contrary to the nonsense spouted from the Government Benches, this has been done at the earliest possible moment following the passing of the necessary secondary legislation, and Liverpool will be next. Modal shift from car to bus will make an enormous contribution to reducing carbon emissions. Why, then, does the Secretary of State—perhaps as a parting gift—not do what a Labour Government will do and give every local authority the power to re-regulate their buses?

Michael Ellis: Every local authority already has the power. Andy Burnham and Labour in his area had that power for three years, and they did nowt about it. It was this Secretary of State who pushed through the Bus Services Act 2017.

Rail Services: Cheshire

10. Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): What recent progress he has made on improving rail services in (a) Tatton constituency and (b) Cheshire.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): Since May, Cheshire’s passengers have received a new direct hourly service between Chester and Leeds, linking the two cities for the first time in many years. Services also started on the Halton curve after a gap of 40 years. Customers in my right hon. Friend’s area will benefit from Northern’s £500 million investment in new trains, which started being rolled out on 1 July.

Turning to stations, I had the pleasure of visiting Handforth station recently with my right hon. Friend. I am happy to say that it is one of the 73 stations in the Access for All programme that will receive an accessible route to and between platforms. The new £20 million Warrington West station is also due to open this autumn.

Ms McVey: I thank the Minister for the Access for All programme at Handforth station, which is much appreciated by the local community and community groups. However, Northern won the franchise for the
mid-Cheshire line in 2015, and the bid included a commitment to increase connectivity—from one to two trains an hour—between my constituency and Manchester. That was meant to happen in 2017. We are now in mid-2019 and it has not happened. I have heard the excuses from Northern and from Network Rail. What can the Minister do to ensure that there are no more excuses and that this line frequency occurs?

Andrew Jones: My right hon. Friend is a great champion for the commuters in her area. There is a commitment within the franchise to deliver additional services on the mid-Cheshire line, but this has proved to be a very challenging operationally because of capacity issues in the area, particularly around Manchester and through Stockport. I have been clear that although I want to see the additional capacity delivered as soon as possible, this cannot be done at the expense of performance. Delivering a railway that passengers can rely on is the absolute priority. All options are being looked at to deliver these additional services. I will keep the House fully apprised of progress and this matter will be a priority for me.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his support for the upgrading of the Ebbw Vale line. That part of the Wales and Borders franchise has complicated responsibility and funding issues. Will he meet me and Ken Skates, the Welsh Government’s Economy and Transport Minister, to tease out the complexities and seek investment for that important line?

Andrew Jones: I had a meeting with the hon. Gentleman only a few days ago, although I am, of course, very happy to have further meetings with him. I understand why he is making the case for that line. It is important for his constituency, which requires improved transport connections to address the economic difficulties faced there. I am very happy to continue to support the process.

Fuel Catalysts

11. Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect of the use of fuel catalysts on vehicle emissions. [912035]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): As one of the ways in which we can reduce emissions of both carbon and other substances emitted from motor vehicles, the potential benefits of fuel additives and catalysts are certainly an area of great interest. Clearly, we need to be certain that there is scientific evidence about whether an individual additive makes a difference or not, but I have tasked my officials with looking clearly at the issue again to see what additions to our fuel can make a difference in the immediate future.

Robert Halfon: May I briefly thank the Secretary of State for giving us junction 7A on the M11, for which we campaigned in Harlow for more than 30 years?

The all-party parliamentary group on fair fuel for UK motorists and UK hauliers is shortly to publish a UK motorists and UK hauliers is shortly to publish a UK motorists and UK hauliers is shortly to publish a UK motorists and UK hauliers is shortly to publish a UK motorists and UK hauliers is shortly to publish a UK motorists and UK hauliers is shortly to publish a UK motorists and UK hauliers is shortly to publish a UK motorists and UK hauliers is shortly to publish a UK motorists and UK hauliers is shortly to publish a UK motorists and UK hauliers is shortly to publish a UK motorists and UK hauliers is shortly to publish a UK motorists and UK hauliers is shortly to publish a UK motorists and UK hauliers is shortly to publish a UK motorists and UK hauliers is shortly to publish a UK motorists and UK hauliers is shortly to publish a UK motorists and UK hauliers is shortly to publish a UK motorists and UK hauliers is shortly to publish a UK motorists and UK hauliers is shortly to 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the Conservatives, catching up on the no-growth franchise that Labour gave the north and that served from 2004 until 2016.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Thankfully, Cleethorpes does not rely on too many Pacer units, but the Saturday-only service from Sheffield to Cleethorpes is provided by Pacers, and they approach Cleethorpes station, they cross over the now-famous Suggitts Lane level crossing. The Minister is well aware of the problems that the high-handed actions of Network Rail have caused disabled people and local businesses. It now proposes to spend hundreds of thousands to resolve that. Would that money not be better spent elsewhere on the network where there is more danger and on reopening Suggitts Lane?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend is ingenious in the way he brings Suggitts Lane into all Transport question sessions. He is a most diligent campaigner on this issue. Since it was last raised, I have met Network Rail and the regulator to discuss the issue, and I know that he has also recently met Network Rail. I look forward to seeing the output of those conversations, and we will take up the issue.

Rail Station Accessibility

13. Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What recent steps has he taken to improve accessibility at railway stations.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): You may have noticed, Mr Speaker, that most of our rail infrastructure is Victorian. That is why we have made £300 million available for the Access for All programme, which will cover 73 stations over the next five years. We are also seeking nominations for £20 million of funding for smaller-scale accessibility improvements for the mid-tier Access for All programme.

Huw Merriman: I thank my constituency neighbour for her response. Many MPs across the House met the Office of Rail and Road this week. We were delighted to hear that it fed into the Williams review that it thinks passenger assistance notice should be reduced from 24 hours to the same day. Does she agree that it should be possible for everybody, including those with mobility issues, to wake up in the morning and decide to use the train later that day?

Ms Ghani: I agree with my constituency neighbour. As a member of the Transport Committee, he will have heard a lot of evidence about how we can use new technology to make our rail network even more accessible. I have tasked the Rail Delivery Group with looking at the Passenger Assist app, so that it works in a way that he and I would accept, with live, up-to-date information about what is accessible on trains, including toilets, and the services needed in between.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): May I press the Minister on accessibility? One thing that could be done to improve station safety is the closure of dangerous level crossings, including the one at Pencoed in my constituency. This has been an issue for years. There is support from the Welsh Government and local authorities. Following the feasibility study by Bridgend County Borough Council, we need the DFT to allocate some funding, to ensure that the crossing is closed and new disability access is included.

Ms Ghani: If funding was denied in the last round of Access for All allocation, another application can be made. If not, I suggest that an application is made with matching funding for the next tier of Access for All funding.

Engine Idling

14. Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): What steps is he taking to reduce levels of engine idling.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Mr Speaker, you will be aware that vehicle idling is a major factor in poor air quality. That is why we plan to launch a consultation on increasing fines for idling drivers. We will seek a range of views on changes that would be the biggest since 2002 and how we can work with local authorities to tackle the issue.

Royston Smith: Southampton, like many other cities, has poor air quality, and engine idling makes that worse, particularly on the Northam rail bridge in my constituency. I have written to the Secretary of State to support a bid to replace that bridge. When will he make a decision? Will he look favourably on our bid, and are we likely to be successful?

Chris Grayling: I am expecting to receive proposals from Transport for the South East at the end of July on the schemes that we prioritise for the major road network and large local majors funding for that area. I am certainly aware of the proposal in my hon. Friend’s constituency, which is a potential candidate. I cannot anticipate the result, but he makes a good point about the way in which schemes like that can make a real difference to air quality. Those who seek to cancel improvements on our roads will make matters worse, not better.

Topical Questions

T1. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Although we have one of the safest railways in the world, we must never be complacent, and I hope that the thoughts of the whole House are with the family, friends and colleagues of the two Network Rail staff who lost their lives in the tragic accident in south Wales two weeks ago. There is an ongoing investigation into what happened. I have asked both the Rail Accident Investigation Branch and Network Rail to ensure that lessons are properly learned from that tragedy.

Daniel Zeichner: I associate myself with the Secretary of State’s comments.

The £1.5 billion A14 improvement scheme is, I am told, the biggest civil engineering project in Europe. Highways England is brilliant at moving bridges and flyovers but hopeless at enforcing the diversions that should protect local people when the road is closed at night. Incredibly, it cannot even put traffic counters on
the roads affected. Will the Secretary of State therefore join me at 3 o’clock in the morning on King’s Hedges Road to count the HGVs? Failing that—if that offer is not attractive enough—will he talk with me about how we can end the misery for my constituents?

Chris Grayling: I am afraid that I am not going to accept the hon. Gentleman’s offer to spend part of the night with him, but I will have a word with Highways England on his behalf and ask it to ensure that the impact on the surrounding area is lessened. No major project can be delivered without some disruption, but we do not want the disruption to be excessive or inappropriate.

T2. [912050] Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Towns such as Evesham and Droitwich Spa in my constituency continue to grow, which puts considerable pressure on local roads. What is the Department for Transport doing to support small towns with their traffic management and traffic lights systems to ease congestion?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): The Department has funded a significant number of local authorities to trial innovative technologies and share good practice. Some of the connected traffic management measures, including the use of sensors to provide real-time parking space availability, for example, are already being adopted more widely. We are encouraging local authorities to install more of these systems.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Gareth Delbridge; Michael Lewis: today we pay homage to two rail workers who tragically lost their lives at work near Port Talbot. It is all the more shocking in the light of the report into the fatality of a track worker at Stoats Nest junction, which described Victorian methods of protection, brought about by casual labour, a zero-hours culture and the worker probably being fatigued, having had to work because his colleague had failed to turn up to work. It was clearly unsafe. Will the Secretary of State bring an immediate end to zero-hours contracts, as advised by the regulator, the Office of Rail and Road, bring this work back in-house and end these exploitative and unsafe work practices?

Chris Grayling: I defend no unsafe work practices on my roads. I agree with the hon. Lady that the railways should always aspire to the highest safety standards. She should remember that we have the safest railways in Europe, but I am very clear, as I said in earlier remarks, that lessons need to be learnt when things go tragically wrong, as they have done on a small number of occasions in recent years, and I expect changes to be made as a result of the lessons that are learnt from those tragic incidents.

T3. [912051] Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): The residents of Herriard in my constituency have campaigned for many years against the disruptive, antisocial behaviour of some motorists on the A339. I have written to my hon. Friend the Minister about Herriard being included in the acoustic noise camera trial, and I hope that he might use his good offices to direct the consultants who have been commissioned by the Department for Transport. Will he also separately commit to rolling them out to Herriard as early as possible if they are not part of the trial?

Michael Ellis: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this point. That experimental equipment is very interesting. The number of locations for the noise camera trials will be limited, because at the moment it is only experimental. We need to factor in such things as speed limits, road type, road gradient, accessibility and safety considerations. I cannot absolutely commit to Herriard having that experimental equipment at the moment, but my officials and I are well aware of Herriard’s willingness to contribute to the trials and we will definitely bear it in mind.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State has stated that, in the event of a no-deal Brexit, EU regulation 2019/501 will allow UK drivers to continue to drive HGVs in the EU. That regulation has an end date of 31 December this year, so will he confirm that the 2020 vision under a no-deal Brexit for UK drivers, importers and exporters is one of chaos and uncertainty?

Chris Grayling: No, I will not confirm that. First, the Government’s policy is not to pursue a no-deal Brexit. We will continue under both our current and future leadership to pursue a deal with the European Union—that has been abundantly clear. However, both sides have equally been abundantly clear that we want trade to continue, and the European Union and we have both been very ready to say that we will allow the flow of hauliers to continue so that trade carries on.

T4. [912052] Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): East Midlands Trains, my local rail users group and I are bidding for funds for a cycle hub at Market Harborough railway station. The Minister, who has recently visited, knows that many more people are taking that healthy way to the station in the morning. Will he look favourably on our bid?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I thoroughly enjoyed my recent visit to Market Harborough to see the work taking place there: the significant upgrade to services, the straightening of the line and a new station. The new east midlands franchise will deliver over £17 million of investment in station facilities across the route, including extra cycle spaces, 100 of which will be delivered at Market Harborough. I am very happy to champion that and to encourage smooth and early delivery.

T5. [912053] Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Is it true that the Secretary of State called the Road Haulage Association and advised it not to criticise his botched Brexit preparations in public? Is this the Government’s new policy for stakeholders: “Don’t criticise us or you’ll be left in the dark.”?

Chris Grayling: No; the hon. Gentleman has completely misunderstood.

T6. [912054] Bin Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Luton Borough Council is the 100% shareholder of Luton airport, which yields about £26 million a year for the council. What action are the Government taking...
to address the conflict of interest, where the Labour-run Luton Borough Council frequently gives the airport permission to flout planning permissions that it has itself imposed?

Chris Grayling: I understand the sensitivity, particularly for local Members of Parliament and local communities who see that joint role. I reassure my hon. Friend that there are very clear statutory rules on how a local authority can and cannot act when it owns a piece of land that is subject to a planning application. I give him that reassurance that clear rules are in place.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): The Government are investing £36 billion in HS2, £18 billion in Crossrail and £9 billion on the west coast. When will the Minister have some consideration for the people of the north-east, who do not get anything?

Chris Grayling: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the current £700 million upgrade to the east coast main line, the brand new trains arriving on the east coast main line, the new trains the Government are providing for the Newcastle-upon-Tyne metro, our plans to reopen the Blythe to Ashington rail line with financial support from Nexus, the opening of the last leg of motorway-grade road between Newcastle and London, and of course the mayor of Teesside’s exciting plans for his airport. One of the most extraordinary things I have come across recently is that the shadow Secretary of State proposes nationalisation in every field of transport except for his local airport, on which he is opposed to nationalisation.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us hear Mr Pурсгlove. Blurt it out, man.

T8. [912056] Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): The Government are investing £36 billion in HS2, £18 billion in Crossrail and £9 billion on the west coast. When will the Minister have some consideration for the people of the north-east, who do not get anything?

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Three weeks ago, I went on a parliamentary visit to the Netherlands and had a tour of the port of Rotterdam. That one port alone is recruiting over 100 new vets to ensure that ports are prepared for the post-Brexit period.

Ms Ghani: I share the hon. Gentleman’s frustration, but that is actually already illegal. I am working with a number of charities, including Guide Dogs, to ensure they can complain effectively and that the local authorities handing out licences are far more diligent about who those licences go to. As I mentioned earlier, once we are able to put together a national database, it will be a lot easier to stop people who have already broken the law from getting licences.

Andrew Jones: First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) for their campaigning on this issue. This is an important issue locally. Network Rail has made progress in finalising the design for the bridge and will start work as soon as possible. I will contact Network Rail to find the most up-to-date information, put pressure on it for the earliest possible completion of this project and keep my hon. Friend informed.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Three weeks ago, I went on a parliamentary visit to the Netherlands and had a tour of the port of Rotterdam. That one port alone is recruiting over 100 new vets to carry out the necessary regulatory checks in the light of a no-deal Brexit. Does that not demonstrate the scale of the cost of a no-deal Brexit and the likely delays from the checks that will be necessary?

Chris Grayling: It is not the Government’s policy to pursue a no-deal Brexit. It is the Government’s policy, under current and future leadership, to pursue an agreement with the European Union. That is what we want. We would all prefer to leave with a deal with the European Union, but that has got to be the right deal.

Ms Ghani: The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I share the hon. Gentleman’s frustration, but that is actually already illegal. I am working with a number of charities, including Guide Dogs, to ensure they can complain effectively and that the local authorities handing out licences are far more diligent about who those licences go to. As I mentioned earlier, once we are able to put together a national database, it will be a lot easier to stop people who have already broken the law from getting licences.

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Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I am, of course, delighted to welcome the new trains on the east coast main line, but when will they get to Stirling?

Andrew Jones: The new Azuma trains entered service on the Hull and Leeds routes in May this year. We will launch Edinburgh services on 1 August and they will be reaching destinations north of Edinburgh by the end of this year.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State share my concern that in response to a survey by the Guide Dogs charity, 42% of assistance dog owners reported being refused access to taxis and minicabs because of their dogs. What is he going to do in practice to ensure that all drivers of taxis and minicabs receive disability equality training?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I share the hon. Gentleman’s frustration, but that is actually already illegal. I am working with a number of charities, including Guide Dogs, to ensure they can complain effectively and that the local authorities handing out licences are far more diligent about who those licences go to. As I mentioned earlier, once we are able to put together a national database, it will be a lot easier to stop people who have already broken the law from getting licences.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It appears that the introduction of the hybrid Bill for HS2 phase 2b has been delayed yet again, causing further uncertainty and stress to my residents and businesses. Will the Minister give a cast-iron guarantee that my constituents will receive a bespoke financial package, given that Long Eaton is grossly affected because the line goes straight through it and put that into the Bill?

Ms Ghani: I share the hon. Gentleman’s frustration, but that is actually already illegal. I am working with a number of charities, including Guide Dogs, to ensure they can complain effectively and that the local authorities handing out licences are far more diligent about who those licences go to. As I mentioned earlier, once we are able to put together a national database, it will be a lot easier to stop people who have already broken the law from getting licences.

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Chris Grayling: It is not the Government’s policy to pursue a no-deal Brexit. It is the Government’s policy, under current and future leadership, to pursue an agreement with the European Union. That is what we want. We would all prefer to leave with a deal with the European Union, but that has got to be the right deal.
forward, I will ask the train companies and Network Rail to try to be careful to avoid some of the busiest peak weekends. We have to use periods such as Christmas and Easter, but I do understand the hon. Lady’s issue about the August bank holiday.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): For six years, I have tried to work proactively with HS2 on the route going through my constituency, and had great success, only for HS2 now to produce a Bill that sees a viaduct tear through Rothwell Country Park. HS2 has now had the audacity to send me a letter saying, “We don’t think it affects your area”—that is to the MP for Elmet and Rothwell. What can the Minister do to make Labour-led Leeds City Council, which does not care about my constituents or about us having an inappropriate station location, make this route change? Quite frankly, I can no longer support the HS2 project as it stands.

Ms Ghani: I am disappointed that my hon. Friend can no longer support the project, because I know he understands the power of investing in infrastructure and how important this line is to ensure that communities and regions beyond London thrive going forward. I am disappointed that his local Labour-led council is not working proactively with him. I would hope that it is able to petition, when the opportunity arises, and also to put its comments into the design refinement consultation, which is open until 6 September.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Yesterday, Highways England wrote to me to confirm that it is going ahead with the road through Rimrose valley, an area with some of the worst roadside emissions in the country. Why are the Government not proceeding with the option of rail? Putting more freight on rail addresses the urgent need to address the climate emergency. Why are they so complacent about this existential threat to the world?

Chris Grayling: It is precisely because we want to see more freight on rail that we are spending £48 billion on our railways over the next five years, looking to expand capacity. Of course, one of the things HS2 will do—I absolutely understand the concern of my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), and the HS2 Minister and I will look carefully at the issues in his constituency for him—is create extra space for freight on rail. None the less, better road links to our ports, and to the port of Liverpool in particular, are also an essential part of economic development for an area such as Merseyside.
Business of the House

10.39 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride): The business for the week commencing on 22 July will include the following:

Monday 22 July—Tributes to the Serjeant at Arms, followed by remaining stages of the Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

Tuesday 23 July—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Cableway Installations (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion relating to the reappointment of an electoral commissioner, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the British Nationality Act 1981 (Remedial) Order 2019, followed by a general debate on body image and mental health.

Wednesday 24 July—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by Legislative Grand Committee (England) and remaining stages of the Kew Garden (Leases) (No.3) Bill [Lords], followed by a general debate on the role and sufficiency of youth services.

Thursday 25 July—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment.

At the conclusion of business, the House will rise for the summer recess and return on Tuesday 3 September.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House. I do not know what he said to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), but he is not in his place. I think it is because he would not allow the hon. Gentleman and the rest of MP4 to get into his car. He has usurped the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee and arranged a pre-recess Adjournment debate next week.

It seems that, just as the Leader of the House is hitting his stride, we will have a new Prime Minister. I have asked the Leader of the House this before, but will he tell us whether there will be a statement from the new Prime Minister that has not been included in the business for next week, or at least set out the timetable for what will happen next Wednesday, when the former Prime Minister will go to the palace? I assume that the new Prime Minister will go to the palace on the same day.

The Leader of the House said that we would return from the recess on 3 September. Is he able to say whether the House will sit throughout the conference recess?

The pound has fallen to its lowest level against the dollar in 27 months, and to its lowest level this year against the euro, because of the prospect of no deal. No deal would have a damaging effect on research: EU research funding would cease overnight. In 2016, the nine Russell Group universities engaged in 50 large European collaborations; in 2018, the number fell to 20. The Leader of the House will have heard from Venki Ramakrishnan, the president of the Royal Society, how much more we get back when we collaborate with Europe in science projects.

Some Members seem to know more than the Chancellor. The Chancellor has said that there will be a £90 billion contraction in the economy if there is no deal, but someone who is not the Chancellor reckons that leaving without a deal would boost the economy by £80 billion. Who is right?

How is the Leader of the House getting on with setting up the Joint Select Committee that I asked about last week? We have received a Lords message about it, and I know that the Leader of the House was keen to respond to it “this side of the recess”.—[Official Report, 11 July 2019; Vol. 663, c. 462.] He also said that he was having discussions with his end of the usual channels. Will they be the same usual channels next week? We need a response urgently, because we need to do this for the good of our country.

Despite what you and the Leader of the House said last week, Mr Speaker, Prorogation is now becoming a major issue. The team of the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) have confirmed that they are looking into the possibility of proroguing Parliament for up to two weeks in October. A member of the team has said:

“A number of ideas are under consideration, including this one.”

Friends of the right hon. Gentleman said that he hoped to have a “simple trade pact” with the United States ready to go on the day of Brexit, 31 October, but the Secretary of State for International Trade said that a deal could not be agreed before then. He said:

“We can’t negotiate anything with the US until after we’ve left the European Union. It would be in breach of European law”. Who is right?

The Government were defeated in the other place yesterday on an amendment relating to intentions to prorogue Parliament. Now both Houses have spoken. I know that the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill is due to come back to this House shortly, so can the Leader of the House categorically state that Prorogation will not happen and that it is against the will of the House and democracy?

Mr Speaker, you kindly granted the urgent question yesterday to my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq). As Nazanin said, she went to visit her parents and has ended up in an asylum. This cannot be about a woman against a tanker; it is like a butterfly being crushed against a wheel. We say to the Iranian Government, “Show your humanity to an innocent woman and release her to her family.” And as you said yesterday, Mr Speaker, we won’t let go. I know that the Leader of the House has taken a keen interest in this matter: what update does he have for the House following the urgent question yesterday?

Ahead of the summer recess, I ask the Leader of the House to raise some matters with his colleagues in the Cabinet. Will he make representations to the Secretary
of State for Education to tell all parents of schoolchildren, when they are taking their children abroad, that female genital mutilation is illegal: it is not a cultural issue and it is not a religious issue; it is an assault. And I would like the Secretary of State for International Development to say to those who are carrying out this practice that they should retrain so that they help the young women, not hurt them.

As we celebrate Nelson Mandela International Day, marking someone who suffered a terrible injustice but worked for a better society, I am sure all hon. Members will join me in welcoming the Bank of England’s decision to have Alan Turing on the £50 note; he was a genius, and during world war two he was instrumental in breaking the German Enigma code. He has been credited with shortening the war by as much as two years, saving countless lives in the process, and it is terrible that he could not witness how much we value his life.

We are celebrating the moon landing, and I am sure everyone was excited when they saw Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin on the moon. I know I was; I was watching it on television in the sitting room and then ran out and looked at the moon and thought about the fact that someone was standing on it. I think I wanted to be an astronaut, but in the end I ended up here, which is not the Sea of Tranquillity. We should use our creativity and talent not to destroy each other, but for the good of all and our precious Earth.

**Mel Stride:** May I thank the hon. Lady for her questions and express, as she did, disappointment that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) is not in his place? I had lined up numerous dreadful gags at his expense, which we will now probably never hear. I also thank the hon. Lady for welcoming the pre-recess Adjournment debate; I was pleased that we were able to accommodate that. She referred at one point to “hitting his stride”, but I thought we were going to outlaw all bullying and harassment in this place—I obviously have a wolf in sheep’s clothing opposite me.

I feel sure that there will be an opportunity for the House to hear from the new Prime Minister next week, although clearly I cannot comment on the precise circumstances that may pertain to that; that will be a matter for him, whoever he is.

The hon. Lady also raised the issue of the recess dates beyond 3 September, and what I would say in response is that that, once again, will be a matter for the new Prime Minister to decide upon, and whoever is the Leader of the House at that time will come forward and make the announcement in the usual way.

The hon. Lady raised a number of matters around no deal, and she asked whether I thought the Chancellor’s assessment that the impact of no deal will cost the economy £90 billion or that of another person—I think I know who that other person is—who suggested that it might actually add to the economy by some £80 billion was right; I suspect the answer lies somewhere between those two figures.

The hon. Lady also rightly raised yet again the issue of the Select Committee on no deal, and when that motion will be coming before the House. I am afraid that I have nothing to add today to what I have said before on this subject, which is that I am engaged with our end of the usual channels and am keen to see that motion coming forward. At the earliest opportunity I will return to the House with further information on that.

The hon. Lady once again raised the issue of Prorogation, and of course there are a number of circumstances in which Prorogation may occur, but the essential principle here is that it should not occur simply as a device to exempt Parliament from the important decisions that there will be around no deal or a deal as we approach the end of October.

The hon. Lady, once again quite rightly, raised the issue of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and the news that she has now been moved to a psychiatric hospital. This is a lady who, as we know, went to Iran simply to visit friends and family. She has now been detained for around three years. That is totally unacceptable. As the hon. Lady pointed out, my office has been in close engagement with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The latest update I have, as of tomorrow, is that discussions have been held at a senior level between the Foreign Office and the Iranian regime, and that we are again urging that Nazanin be released and returned to her family here in the United Kingdom. I will welcome every occasion on which the hon. Lady raises this matter because, like her, I believe it to be extremely important. She also raised the issue of female genital mutilation and made the important point that it is nothing less than an assault. She is absolutely right about that.

Finally, the hon. Lady mentioned the moon landing and said that she had seen it on television. I find that extraordinary, given that it happened in 1969. She cannot possibly be old enough to have been cognisant of that event at the time, but we all, right across the House, celebrate that one giant step for the whole of mankind.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Over the past month, a group of Travellers ensconced themselves in my constituency, first at Anmer Lodge, then on to Hatch End playing fields, then on to Stanmore Marsh and then into Canons Park, finally ending up at Whitchurch playing fields. Harrow Council and the police have done everything they can to move them on swiftly, but the Travellers have left behind hundreds of thousands of pounds-worth of damage to be cleared up after them. May we have a debate in Government time on what more can be done to expedite dealing with the illegal occupation of public land by groups of Travellers?

**Mel Stride:** I know that this is a problem for many of us, particularly those in rural constituencies such as mine. I would say two things to my hon. Friend. First, we have Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government questions next Monday and he might wish to raise the matter then. Secondly, I think that this would be an excellent opportunity for a debate—perhaps an Adjournment debate—and if he would like to speak to me, I will see what I can do to facilitate that.
Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart)—in fact, I think he should be my right hon. Friend—is racing back in breathless anticipation of the Lords amendments. We all know how much he values the Lords and their amendments. I have been left here to respond, but I do not know whether I would qualify for a last-minute spot on the Leader of the House’s caravan holiday, I am not as musically talented as my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire, but I was told at my auntie’s recent birthday party—she turns 70 today, Mr Speaker—that I mix a good Bloody Mary. That might be helpful for Conservative Members next week when they wake up after six weeks of self-indulgence with an almighty hangover and realise the enormity of what they have done in selecting the new Prime Minister. That is why the Leader of the House really must make time for my hon. Friend’s Prime Minister (Nomination) and Cabinet (Appointment) Bill, which would give this House the opportunity to endorse any candidate put forward for nomination as Prime Minister. That is what happens in most civilised democratic institutions these days—starting, of course, with the Scottish Parliament.

Failing that, perhaps the Leader of the House’s caravan could be fitted with a rocket booster so that we can all observe the new Prime Minister’s blunders from the safety of the moon. Perhaps we could also have some time to debate my early-day motion 2599, which I have launched with support from across the House. It commemorates the 50th anniversary of that shared human endeavour.

[That this House recognises that 20 July 2019 marks 50 years since humanity first landed on the moon; remembers that NASA’s legendary Apollo 11 mission was launched by a Saturn V rocket from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida with the ambition of landing a crew on the moon and returning them safely to earth; thanks the crew of three American astronauts, Commander Neil Armstrong, Command Module Pilot Michael Collins and Lunar Module Pilot Edwin ‘Buzz’ Aldrin; recalls that the Lunar module, nicknamed the Eagle, finally touched down on the moon on 20th July 1969; celebrates the legacy of Commander Armstrong who became the first human to ever set foot on the moon as he took one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind on to the lunar surface; further recognises that the moon landing represented the single greatest accomplishment in human history as it pushed the boundaries of what was believed to be possible and united humanity in a sense of collective purpose and hopes that the spirit of Apollo 11 will inspire future generations to better understand the complexities of the universe.]

If we cannot go to the moon, perhaps we could go to Kew Gardens. At least, Scottish National party Members could go to Kew Gardens, because we are all going to be shut out of the debate on the Kew Gardens (Leases) (No. 3) Bill next week as the English Parliament—the English votes for English laws Legislative Grand Committee—meets for the first time in its full glory to consider that Bill in Committee. We look forward to seeing how many Members from England actually turn up to take part in that process, which was supposed to transform democracy in the United Kingdom.

Perhaps while we are in Kew Gardens, we can have a look under the bushes to see whether we can find out where the 1.5 allocated Opposition days that are still due to the SNP have got to. There are many good reasons not to prorogue Parliament in the autumn, but if it were to be prorogued without our having had those opportunities that we as the third party are entitled to under the terms of the Standing Orders, that—and the use of the EVEL procedures—would serve only to demonstrate the fact that Scotland’s voice is being tuned out and that the Leader of the House’s caravan is ready to drive off into the Brexit sunset without us.

Mel Stride: I welcome the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) to his place, standing in for the legendary hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire, who I hope will be here next week, so that I can use my various lines on him. The hon. Member for Glasgow North mentioned the Prime Minister (Nomination) and Cabinet (Appointment) Bill, which would make the Prime Minister’s appointment subject to a vote in this House. However, I think it is just a thinly veiled attempt by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire to get himself into No. 10 Downing Street, coming hard on the heels, as it does, of his tilt at the speakership and his Speaker’s manifesto. We know that all that is just a blatant power grab.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North mentioned EVEL. All I have to say is that this approach is working well and gives everybody across the House the ability to participate in the various debates at the different stages of a Bill, while giving the final veto on devolved competencies to the relevant area, such as England and Wales. He also mentioned Opposition day debates, and the Standing Orders are clear that there will be 20 such days per session, with 17 for the main Opposition party and three for the second largest, which is the SNP. My understanding is that that allocation has been met.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I was elected chair at the inaugural meeting of the all-party parliamentary group for sustainable clothing and textiles. This House should have a debate on whether we are moving too far towards a plastic-free environment for the things that we pick up while retaining too much plastic in our textiles. We need to support our farmers who want to give us more natural fabrics, and we need to get out of wearing plastic.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend makes some important points, and I urge her to make them again at Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions next Thursday. We should not overlook this Government’s considerable achievements in getting plastics out of our economy. Single-use plastic bag usage has reduced by some 86% since we introduced the plastic bag levy. I take on board her comments about plastics in clothing, which would make an excellent subject for debate.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the leader of the pack—sorry, the Leader of the House—for next week’s business. As you know, Mr Speaker, the Backbench Business Committee puts on debates in the Chamber when the Government give us the time, so we are a little taken aback that the Leader of the House has decided that next Thursday will not be a Backbench Business day, going instead for a general debate in Government time on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment.
I am also a little surprised that the Leader of the House has also stolen from the Backbench Business Committee the subjects of two debates to be held on Tuesday and Wednesday. That is fine, and I am sure that the Members who applied to the Committee will be happy to have the subject matters aired, but one of them was going to involve a votable motion and is now a general debate. The other thing is that the lead Members in those applications do not now get to lead those important debates. Mr Speaker, will you give special consideration to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) in the general debate on body image and mental health and to the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) in the debate on the role and sufficiency of youth services and give them slots high up in the pecking order?

Mel Stride: I take on board the hon. Gentleman’s comments about the absence of a Backbench Business debate next week. He has become rather used to having such debates almost every day over the past few weeks. I am particularly pleased that we are having the usual pre-recess debate, because it would have broken the heart of my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) had we not done so. If I have the opportunity to find time at a late stage for a Backbench Business debate—the hon. Gentleman has mentioned this to me before—I will attempt to accommodate that, although I make no promises. Finally, I am sure that Mr Speaker has noted the hon. Gentleman’s request regarding my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) and the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle).

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Apparently—not that I remember it—my parents got me up so that I could watch the moon landing, just as the shadow Leader of the House did. On its 50th anniversary, we should use its inspiration. May we have a statement on the importance of STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and mathematics—as we remember the inspirational Apollo mission? I pay particular tribute to Ifield Community College in my constituency, which is undertaking a solar car project.

Mel Stride: In case anybody was wondering, I was just eight years old at the time of the lunar landing, and I remember watching it; it was an extraordinary moment. I remember watching it; it was an extraordinary moment. May we have an urgent statement from the Home Secretary, on the resources available to the Child Exploitation and Online Protection command and the NCA, so that we can ensure that we are properly resourced to combat a crime that sometimes, alas, includes children around the world being peddled by their own family, and so that we can make sure that we are doing everything that we can to control and stamp out this abhorrent behaviour?

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend raises an appalling and deeply distressing set of issues that would be well served by a debate. Perhaps the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) might consider this a subject for a future Backbench Business debate. I would be very happy to go further and offer to facilitate a meeting for my right hon. Friend with any particular Minister.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): In the very city where William Wilberforce led the fight against slavery, P&O Ferries is employing Portuguese and Polish crews on £1.83 an hour. The deck crew are required to work five months on. British ratings earn about £35,000 a year and are required to do two weeks on, two weeks off. Could we have a debate on this really important issue? I think this is slavery.

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend—I will call him that—for raising this issue with me personally prior to business questions. He is absolutely right. On the face of it, what he has shared with the House is a deeply unsatisfactory situation, which appears, to me at least, to be a form of exploitation instead of the wages and conditions we would expect. It is certainly a good topic for debate, but if he would like me to arrange a meeting with the relevant Minister to take a closer look at the issue, I would be very happy to be of assistance.
clubs do fantastic work in raising awareness of the farming industry, with social events and sporting events, and my locality had an annual cabaret competition. It did not dream and has refused to, which is why I am not on the stage but on these Benches instead. Will the Leader of the House join me in commending the fantastic work of young farmers clubs up and down the country, because they should be recognised in this place?

**Mel Stride**: I thank my hon. Friend for asking a fantastic question. The young farmers in my constituency are a vibrant and important force. Farming sits right at the heart of our rural communities, in terms of employment, looking after the environment and so on, but farmers are generally getting older and the average age is increasing as the years go by. It is really important to get young blood into farming, and the young farmers clubs, including my hon. Friend’s, do a great job.

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Staff in libraries across Bromley are currently on indefinite strike because of draconian terms and conditions placed on them by the contractor, Greenwich Leisure Ltd, and Bromley Council has refused to take action. Our libraries are a fantastic community asset, but they are nothing without the dedicated staff who work there. Can we please have a debate in Government time about support and funding for our libraries?

**Mel Stride**: I will direct the hon. Lady to Housing, Communities and Local Government questions on Monday. I think that would be useful. Libraries are hugely important, and we have provided considerable funding for them. There is no doubt that the terrain on which libraries operate is changing dramatically, with the use of digital information as opposed to books and print media, but we as a Government are very keen to support them.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): Can we have an urgent statement from the Housing Minister about Persimmon Homes, following my question yesterday to the Prime Minister, which you kindly allowed, Mr Speaker? The homes dreams and lives of Gilden Way residents in Harlow have been ruined because of shoddy building by Persimmon Homes. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Persimmon should be removed from the right to buy scheme until these problems are sorted out, not just in Harlow but in other Persimmon properties across the country?

**Mel Stride**: We are making considerable progress in increasing the supply of new build housing, but that is not the same as saying that all housing is of the appropriate quality. It is characteristic of my right hon. Friend to look closely at that particular issue, to make sure that housing is fit for purpose. We have announced our intention for a new homes ombudsman, to protect the rights of homebuyers and to hold developers to account. I know that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will have heard my right hon. Friend’s request for a statement, and I am happy to meet him to follow that up if he wishes.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**Mr Speaker**: Order. In calling the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), I congratulate him on, and offer him best wishes for, his wedding on Saturday. I know that the House will join me in that expression of good will. [**Hon. Members**: “Hear, hear.”] He is a very young man to be contemplating the state of matrimony, but we wish him well in its pursuit.

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): I am very grateful, Mr Speaker. Thank you very much. I am quite thrown now.

The Leader of the House may be aware that this week the Disability Benefits Consortium has highlighted the devastating impact of welfare changes on disabled people. The report highlights how disabled people have lost benefit payments of an average of around £1,200 each year as a result of Government changes. May we have an urgent debate on how we can change our benefits system to ensure that we actually help disabled people, rather than push them further into poverty?

**Mel Stride**: In the spirit of the wedding fest, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman, and I thank my wife for having put up with me for 14 years. It is our anniversary this weekend and she has truly put up with a great deal. I love you very much, Michelle. [**Hon. Members**: “Ah!”] Now I can do no wrong, can I?

On the hon. Gentleman’s question, overall we have brought in through universal credit a welfare system that is making sure that work pays, which is the best way for people to work out of poverty and why we have the lowest level of absolute poverty in our history. We recently made some changes to universal credit, including an increase in the annual allowance, which is worth £670 per year to 2.3 million people. Various other changes were made to help those who need support, but at the same time to encourage employment.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): It is a huge source of shame that modern slavery persists in our country, in some cases on an industrial scale. It is always accompanied by other forms of organised crime, such as people trafficking, sexual exploitation and money laundering. May we have a debate on whether the modern slavery unit in the Home Office has sufficient manpower and resources to successfully and swiftly bring the perpetrators of such heinous crimes, and the complex criminal networks associated with them, to justice?

**Mel Stride**: Modern slavery is one of the scourges of a modern and global world. It is worth reflecting for a moment that one of the current Prime Minister’s key legacies will be the extraordinary work that she did and drove forward in this policy area, particularly when she was Home Secretary. For example, she brought in the statutory guidance on school uniform costs. Since then, the cuts have got worse, and the Tory council has axed the school uniform grant in my constituency, leaving parents in Peterborough forced to fork out three-figure sums annually. Education Ministers have replied to my questions by stating that, four years on, they are still waiting for parliamentary time. Will the Leader of the House make it clear that time is available?

**Lisa Forbes** (Peterborough) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House provide Government time to implement one of the Government’s own pledges? In 2015, they promised statutory guidance on school uniform costs. Since then, the cuts have got worse, and the Tory council has axed the school uniform grant in my constituency, leaving parents in Peterborough forced to fork out three-figure sums annually. Education Ministers have replied to my questions by stating that, four years on, they are still waiting for parliamentary time. Will the Leader of the House make it clear that time is available?
**Mel Stride:** The hon. Lady appropriately raises the question with me, because it relates to the provision of parliamentary time to bring in measures that she wants to see brought before the House. On that basis, I am happy to meet her over a cup of tea to talk about what might be done.

**Mr Speaker:** Unless I am misinformed, I think that was the hon. Lady’s first intervention in the Chamber. I congratulate her on it and express the hope that we will hear a lot more from her in the days, weeks and months to come.

**Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con):** On Tuesday, we learned that drug-related deaths in Scotland have reached their highest level on record—three times higher than the rest of the UK and the highest in the developed world. After 10 years in government, that is a shameful stain on the SNP’s record. This needless loss of life is a national emergency, so will the Leader of the House agree to hold an urgent debate in Government time?

**Mel Stride:** Scotland questions are on Wednesday, so I urge my hon. Friend to raise that issue on that occasion, as I have no doubt others will, too. As the House will probably be aware, the UK legislative framework in this policy area falls to the Government here in Westminster, but operations on the ground—if I may term it that way—are the responsibility of the Scottish Government, who I am sure will have heard my hon. Friend’s comments.

**Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab):** Sanctuary Care runs a number of care homes in the London Borough of Greenwich, and it is cutting the pay and conditions of staff who were TUPE-ed over several years ago from the Royal Borough of Greenwich. The chief exec earns £240,000 a year. At a time when people are concerned about standards of care in social care, is the company doing the right thing? May we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about this kind of practice in the care system?

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Gentleman raises a very specific issue relating to a particular care home in his constituency, and, of course, it is very difficult for me to comment with any intelligence on the points that he has made, other than to say that I would be very happy to assist him in facilitating a meeting with the relevant Minister at the Department of Health and Social Care should he so desire it.

**Several hon. Members rose**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Ordinarily, I call everybody in business questions, as colleagues can testify from personal experience, but that will not be possible today because of the pressure on time. I give notice that we will be moving on at 11.30 am. Colleagues, therefore, should be considerate of each other and—dare I say it?—perhaps behave in a comradely manner towards each other.

**Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con):** May we have a statement on the issue of short formation trains? In Lewes, on peak services, we still get four-carriage trains, and passengers who pay an average of £4,500 a year for a season ticket cannot get on them. Will the Leader of the House ask for a statement from the Department for Transport?

**Mel Stride:** I am very happy to forward that request.

**Several hon. Members rose**

**Mr Speaker:** I will go for the broadest smile. I call Lucy Powell.

**Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op):** Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I try.

With new Government figures out this week showing that, for the first time ever, there are now more young black and minority ethnic young people in young offenders institutions than there are white people, will the Government make time for a debate on this important issue, given that their own race audit, the David Lammy review, and other evidence show that the way that charges are brought, prosecutions are made and courts are run disproportionately affect those from certain backgrounds and certain communities more than their better-off peers?

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Lady does indeed have a wonderful smile, though it is the smile of a crocodile, I think. Notwithstanding that, I will give her an answer and make it snappy, shall I?

The hon. Lady raises a very important point. We did, of course, commission the Lammy review. We accepted its recommendations and we are keen to crack on with them. The Minister responsible for the issue, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), is sitting next to me on the Treasury Bench and would be delighted to meet her.

**Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con):** Last week, I met my 97-year-old constituent Ron Mockford, who served in the far east in the second world war, was captured by the Japanese and spent three and a half years in captivity, during which time he worked on the Burma railway. Next year is the 75th anniversary of VJ-day, and Mr Mockford has called for a national day to mark it. Can we have a statement from the Government on their response to this very reasonable and sensible appeal?

**Mel Stride:** My hon. Friend raises a very important point. Because of the sequencing of the end of the second world war, we tend perhaps to focus more on VE-day than on VJ-day, but I can inform him that the Government, working with the Royal British Legion, will look to mark the 75th anniversary of Victory over Japan Day on 15 August next year in the appropriate way.

**Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** Following the recent European Parliament elections, three SNP MEPs have been working hard to represent Scotland in the family of European democracies. However, there are three Catalan MEPs who are being denied their seats in the European Parliament for protecting Catalonia’s right to self-determination. Ministers in this place have frequently committed themselves to defending democracy, so can we have a debate, in Government time, on the state of democracy in Europe and what this Government are doing to protect it?

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Lady raises an important point about representation within Parliaments and about Members of Parliament taking their seats once they have been elected. I think that, perhaps, an Adjournment debate might be the right approach to ventilate that matter.

**Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con):** Can we have a debate about British Telecom’s hapless delivery of broadband under the Building Digital UK taxpayer-funded programme? Constituents of mine in Cirencester Road have been waiting for cabinet 129 to be fixed up. They...
Mel Stride: Once again, this might be a good subject for an Adjournment debate, when the very specific issues—not least around cabinet 129—can be aired with the appropriate Minister.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Could the Leader of the House arrange a statement from the Secretary of State for Transport? Although the Secretary of State has said since 2017 that the Pacer trains are going, we have just heard in Transport questions that “the majority” of the 101 Pacer trains are going. May we have a statement on which trains are going and when?

Mel Stride: I am sure that the hon. Lady will have taken the opportunity to raise that matter in Transport questions. If not, she has raised it now and I have no doubt that the Secretary of State will shortly be aware of that. What I would say is that this Government have invested more in rail than at any time since the Victorian era.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): If someone were caught speeding, the police would have two weeks to notify them and six months to bring proceedings, but that person could bring a complaint against the police officer at any time and the investigation could take years to resolve. Could we have a debate on limiting the time for police complaint investigations to provide certainty for the complainant and for serving police officers?

Mel Stride: The whole issue of speeding has been raised with me in different ways and from across the House in the short time that I have been Leader of the House, so it appears that it is probably an area on which further debate is well overdue. I have just been passed a note to tell me that my hon. Friend’s father served 29 years with the West Midlands police; we thank him for his service.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): This summer, schools in Barnsley East will be taking part in my Little Litter Champions project to help keep Barnsley tidy. Can we have a debate to discuss how we can use this initiative and others like it to promote recycling, protect our environment and promote pride in our local communities?

Mr Speaker: Did the hon. Lady say that she was taking part in this initiative?

Stephanie Peacock: I am encouraging local schoolchildren to take part.

Mr Speaker: Ah, but I am sure the hon. Lady will be taking part herself, being such a virtuous individual.

Stephanie Peacock: I will be.

Mr Speaker: I have no reason to doubt it.

Mel Stride: I direct the hon. Lady to Environment questions, which are next Thursday.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I want to raise an issue that I know Mr Speaker has previously commented on. All too often my constituency office staff are being blocked from assisting my constituents by overly officious staff at Cornwall Council saying that we do not have the required authorisation to act on behalf of our constituents under general data protection regulation rules. Could we have a statement from a Minister to make it absolutely clear that as elected representatives of our constituents, we are authorised to act and that no further authorisation is required?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises an important point that lies right at the heart of our ability as Members of this place to serve our constituents effectively. I would be happy to go further and arrange a meeting with the relevant Minister so that my hon. Friend can ensure that we have clarity on this matter.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The healthtech industry and health technology is a very valuable sector for the United Kingdom economy. This technology sector is very important, with 127,400 jobs, 3,860 companies and a turnover of £24 billion, and it has seen a 5% increase in growth in the last year. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on this sector, which promotes and creates so much for the economy of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises the important topic of the use of technology in healthcare—something with which the current Secretary of State for Health is very personally engaged as it features in our NHS long-term plan. I think this would make an excellent topic for a Westminster Hall debate.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): We all know that helping the environment is the greatest challenge of our time, but we cannot just leave the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to crack on with its work when we need reforms of planning systems so that we can have solar panels on houses and reforms of transport infrastructure so that air quality is improved in places such as Chipping Norton. Can we have a series of debates in Government time so that we can examine how climate change and environment issues can be tackled holistically across government?

Mel Stride: Taking a holistic approach to the many measures that are being taken right across Departments would be a very good angle for a debate. Of course, we are right in the lead when it comes to climate change internationally, having made the commitment to net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The Sankey canal, first opened in 1757, is an important green corridor and is used by a boat club in my constituency. It is in danger of drying out because the Fiddler’s Ferry power station, which supplies its water, is due to close next year. May we have an urgent statement or a debate involving the Environment Secretary to discuss what the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs can do to help this situation?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises a matter specific to his constituency. If he writes to me or has a word with me about it after these questions, I will see what I can do to facilitate an engagement with DEFRA.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I want to return to the subject raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson): the 1,187 people who have died in Scotland because of drug misuse. This is the sovereign Parliament of the United Kingdom. There is clearly a drugs emergency in my part of the UK, yet no urgent question was granted and no Minister appeared at the
Dispatch Box to make a statement. Will the Leader of the House facilitate an early statement from either the Home Office or the Department of Health and Social Care about what they will do to support the Scottish authorities to deal with the crisis?

Mel Stride: Given that my hon. Friend has raised that important matter as a follow-up to my other hon. Friend’s question, the best thing I can do to take it forward is to offer to meet them and any others interested in this subject, so that we can discuss the best way forward.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Ms Watson is a disabled single parent who is studying to become a children’s social worker. She gave all her information to the universal credit authorities correctly and on time. Some 18 months later, they uploaded the information; two years later, they decided that she had had an overpayment of £10,000. They have accepted that that is their fault and even paid her £100 in compensation but they still want her to pay the money back. May we have an urgent debate on how the debt management department in the Department for Work and Pensions actually works and why it will not take responsibility for its errors?

Mel Stride: I am happy for the hon. Lady to write to me on the specific point about her constituent so that I can take it up with the DWP, to make sure that we get a full and detailed response to the various issues. However, as I said earlier, the general principle of universal credit and how it works has been a major driver of employment in this country: we have the highest level of employment in our history and the lowest level of unemployment since 1974. We have halved youth unemployment since 2010.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Mr Speaker: As a parliamentary statesman, the hon. Member for Huddersfield will wish to exemplify the single-sentence question.

Mr Sheerman: When all the kipper waving is over, may we have the Chancellor of the Exchequer here to tell us how we can use the French method of taking on Google, Facebook and others to regenerate our towns and cities so that they are safe, secure and prosperous?

Mel Stride: Treasury questions are on 10 September, when there may or may not be a new Chancellor of the Exchequer. All I can say is that, as regards current Government policy in this area, we have committed to a digital services tax—a levy on platform-based businesses that generate significant value within the United Kingdom, while not traditionally falling within the criteria whereby we would normally have the taxation right. We are doing exactly what the hon. Gentleman has requested.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Women’s sport has never been more prominent, and the women’s football World cup has opened many eyes and minds to talent in the women’s game. May we have a debate on how we can capitalise on that exposure and success by ensuring that women’s sport is supported appropriately—rather than what happened last week, when the Scottish Professional Football League thought it sufficient to gift the women’s game a few bags of footballs?

Mel Stride: That would be an excellent subject for debate; I say that as the father of three daughters who are enthused by subjects such as women’s football. It is great to see women getting more and more involved in a variety of our national sports.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Teachers, social workers, volunteers and NHS workers are all subject to enhanced disclosure checks, but Members of Parliament are not. I would like us to have a debate on the Floor of the House about why, with all the reputational damage that has been going on, we too are not subject to those checks.

Mel Stride: An Adjournment debate would be an opportunity to interrogate a Minister on that specific issue.

As this is the last question, may I thank Members for all their questions this week? Who knows what will happen next week, but it has been a great pleasure to take all their questions from the Dispatch Box.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that I speak for the House in thanking the Leader of the House for attending to our inquiries and for his customary courtesy, which alike are appreciated by Members across the House.
Detainees

11.30 am

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Government’s approach to the detention and rendition of detainees overseas. Our policy on this issue remains clear: the Government do not participate in, solicit, encourage or condone the use of torture or of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment for any purpose. To do so would not only be wrong and incompatible with the United Kingdom’s commitments under international conventions—such as the United Nations convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, to which this country is a signatory—but it would also be a betrayal of everything that we stand for as a nation, in terms of our promotion of human rights and protection of human dignity.

There is already clear guidance and training for UK personnel dealing with detainees who are held by others. That guidance has been reviewed at the Prime Minister’s request by Sir Adrian Fulford, the independent Investigatory Powers Commissioner, to see how it could be improved further, taking account of the views of the Intelligence and Security Committee and civil society. The Government have accepted Sir Adrian’s proposals in full, as set out by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in a written ministerial statement earlier today.

We have published new guidance entitled “The principles relating to the detention and interviewing of detainees overseas and the passing and receipt of intelligence relating to detainees”, which will replace the current consolidated guidance at the end of this year. The principles will be extended so that they explicitly cover the National Crime Agency and SO15 Metropolitan Police Service.

I would like to thank Sir Adrian for his work. The principles address many of the points raised by the Intelligence and Security Committee in recommending changes to the consolidated guidance. The new document will now be explicitly engaged when there is a risk of extraordinary rendition, rendition or unlawful killing occurring in the context of detention. It will also apply not only when UK personnel are working with Governments but when non-state actors or groups are involved. The principles introduce a formal error reporting obligation and a formal whistleblowing provision, in line with the commissioner’s statutory responsibilities in the Investigatory Powers Act 2016.

These new principles are part of steps taken by successive Governments to understand what happened in the aftermath of the appalling terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and to put in place improved policies and practice. As the Prime Minister said in a written statement on 28 June last year,

“With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that UK personnel were working within a new and challenging operating environment for which, in some cases, they were not prepared. It took too long to recognise that guidance and training for staff was inadequate, and too long to understand fully and take appropriate action on the risks arising from our engagement with international partners on detainee issues. The Agencies responded to what they thought were isolated allegations and incidents of mistreatment, but the ISC concludes that they should have realised the extent to which others were using unacceptable practices as part of a systematic programme. The Agencies acknowledge that they did not fully understand this quickly enough and they regret not doing so.”—[Official Report, 28 June 2018; Vol. 643, c. 41WS.]

It is important to say, however, that the ISC found no evidence to support allegations that UK personnel directly carried out physical mistreatment of detainees.

Lessons have been learned from these challenging events and from the various independent examinations of detainee issues that have taken place over the past 15 years or so. These have included three separate investigations and reports published by the ISC in 2005, 2007 and 2018; Sir Peter Gibson’s detainee inquiry report, published in 2013; related police investigations; and thorough internal reviews by the security and intelligence agencies of their involvement in detainee cases from 2001 to 2010, which the ISC examined in its most recent report.

The position now is very different from the one confronting UK personnel in the immediate aftermath of 11 September 2001. Better guidance and training is coupled with a world-leading independent oversight regime, underpinned by the Justice and Security Act 2013 and the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. This legislation has given the ISC enhanced powers to oversee the activities of the security and intelligence agencies, alongside the statutory role of the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, who reports annually on his remit, including the application of detainee policy. The consolidated guidance and new principles make it clear that Ministers must be consulted if there is a serious or real risk of detainee mistreatment occurring at the hands of others, and of course the ministerial code reflects the overarching duty on Ministers to comply with the law.

I will turn now to the question whether there should be a further inquiry into detainee mistreatment and rendition issues. As I told the House on Monday, in response to an urgent question from my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), since publishing our response to the ISC’s reports on detainee mistreatment and rendition on 22 November 2018, the Government have given serious consideration to the examination of detainee issues and whether any more lessons could be learned and, if so, how. My right hon. and learned Friend, as the then Cabinet Office Minister without Portfolio, told the House on 19 December 2013 that once the ISC had completed its most recent work, the Government would “take a final view as to whether a further judicial inquiry still remains necessary to add any further information of value to future policy making and the national interest.”—[Official Report, 19 December 2013; Vol. 572, c. 916.]

I undertook to give a definitive answer to that question, and I can confirm today that the Government have decided that it is not necessary to establish a further inquiry. There is no policy reason to do so, given the extensive work already undertaken to improve policies and practices in this area. The Government’s position is also that there is no legal obligation. These matters have been subject to a number of police investigations over the years, including Operations Hinton, Iden and Lydd, and a joint panel was set up by the Crown Prosecution Service and the Metropolitan Police Service in January 2012 to consider allegations of UK involvement in detainee mistreatment. None of these police investigations has resulted in further action being taken, although some inquiries are continuing.
Parliament and the public can have confidence in the effectiveness of measures taken since 2010 and the new principles announced by the Government today to strengthen the accountability and oversight by Ministers, Parliament and the independent commissioners of the vital work of our security and intelligence agencies. I commend this statement to the House.

11.38 am

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the Cabinet Office for advance sight of his statement. I always look forward to my debates with the Minister, even if on one recent occasion I was denied that pleasure, as he greatly enjoyed pointing out at the time. Although on that note I should say that if this time next week he ends up on a slow train to the gulag, along with the Chancellor, to be replaced by some “do or die” no-deal Brexiteer, I can tell him that it is 20° and sunny in Siberia today—so don’t knock it till you’ve tried it.

On a serious note, I genuinely hope that the right hon. Gentleman will continue to be a regular fixture at the Dispatch Box. Unlike the new Prime Minister, he always treats his ministerial responsibilities with the seriousness and diligence they deserve—I believe I speak for the whole House when I say that.

On this occasion, I fear there will be little consensus between me and the right hon. Gentleman. I believe the outgoing Prime Minister has made a fundamental error of judgment not to make good on the commitment of her predecessor, not to honour the promises of the former Justice Secretary and now Father of the House, and not to listen to the recommendations of the Intelligence and Security Committee. They were all absolutely clear that the only way to get to the truth on these issues and to learn lessons for the future was for the Government to commission an independent and judge-led inquiry with the power and authority to examine all the evidence, question every potential witness and come up with conclusions to which the Government would be bound.

If the argument in 2010 or 2012 was that the inquiry could not be held at that time due to ongoing criminal investigations, that argument simply does not hold water today. If the long delay and sorely mistaken judgment were the result of a genuine deliberation within Government about the merits of the public inquiry, I could possibly agree to disagree but at least respect the thought that had gone into the decision. However, I do not believe that is the case. Even before the ISC report was published, I believe there was a deliberate attitude on the Government’s part to circle the wagons and avoid any judicial scrutiny or public consultation on the past actions of the intelligence services or the future rules by which they operate, even though it is the intelligence services themselves whose reputation and morale is damaged most by failing to deal with this scandal.

On the new guidance published today, we are told that the views of civil society have been taken into account. Right from the outset, however, we know that the Government were determined to resist those views. If we want evidence for that, just look at the letter written to me and the shadow Attorney General in June last year by the man about to become the next Prime Minister, who, titan of competence that he is, left attached to his letter the background note written by his staff explaining the position they were suggesting he take. This is what they said on the subject of public consultation with human rights groups on the guidance given to security service personnel, designed “to reassure personnel that they are operating in accordance with UK and international law”.

According to the Foreign Office note, they had concluded that “Public consultation...is likely to generate recommendations that we would not be able to implement without damaging national security.”

My first question to the Minister for the Cabinet Office is whether all the recommendations from civil society have been incorporated in the new guidance. Can I ask him specifically whether one of the most important recommendations they made has been adopted? Has there been an express prohibition on Ministers giving the green light to the torture of overseas detainees? If not, why not?

I could talk at further length today about the historical allegations in relation to torture and rendition dating back two decades and about the operation of secret courts, all of which I believe justify the independent judge-led inquiry for which we, the ISC and the Father of the House have called, but in the time that I have I want to make a simple point. If the Government are so confident that all the lessons of the past have been learned, that all the abuses of the past cannot be repeated and that the new laws and procedures, which were, sadly, not strong enough before, are now in place, then what exactly do they have to fear by allowing a judge to look at this issue to examine all the evidence, interview all the witnesses and look at the new procedures and rules, so that he or she can tell the Government whether they are right?

Mr Lidington: May I first genuinely thank the right hon. Lady for her kind words at the start of her remarks? I think it is fair to say that when we have tilted lances at each other we have done so in the spirit of mutual respect, even if it has sometimes been no holds barred in terms of the professional combat in which we have been engaged.

If I can seek to respond to the questions the right hon. Lady posed to me, the Government did listen to the ISC; indeed Sir Adrian’s revisions—incorporated in the new principles, which the Government have accepted today—reflect in many detailed aspects the precise recommendations of the Committee in its two reports of 2018.

Without going into detail about internal matters and procedures within Government, I can assure the House that there was very genuine and very detailed deliberation within Government about the right way forward. While the decision on matters relating to security intelligence always rests with the Prime Minister ultimately, the House would, I am sure, have expected that other senior Ministers with an interest in these matters would be consulted and would have given their advice to the Prime Minister, and that happened.

The right hon. Lady asked me about the views of civil society. I never made any claim in my statement that the Government’s response or the proposals by Sir Adrian reflected in full the views of civil society. What I can say...
is that Sir Adrian, in the course of his review, took great care to consult civil society; he convened meetings where representatives of civil society could make their representations to him and put forward their ideas. The Government have accepted Sir Adrian's recommendations in full, without qualification. If Sir Adrian, in his recommendations, chose not to reflect everything that particular civil society organisations wished to see, that was a judgment by Sir Adrian, and it was right for the Government to rely on the independent commissioner to be the prime source of advice to us on these matters.

The right hon. Lady asked, in particular, about the idea of an express prohibition on Ministers. As she will have seen, in his report Sir Adrian did say that he looked at whether extra duties should be imposed on Ministers, and he considered that that was not part of what he should be proposing. However, as I said in my statement to the House, it is already the position that Ministers are bound by the law and by the ministerial code. The ministerial code requires Ministers to comply with the law in all their actions as Ministers, and we include in the definition of compliance with the law compliance with the United Kingdom's international treaty obligations. Those duties on Ministers are very clear already, and that is reinforced by the fact that the civil service code, which operates on the basis of comparable principles, is grounded in statute, so it is straightforwardly a breach of that statute for civil servants to act in any way, professionally, that would breach the law.

I would just say to the right hon. Lady that the Government were as open as we could possibly be during the various inquiries and investigations that have taken place. For example, the Intelligence and Security Committee had access to the Government material that was presented to the Gibson inquiry and to the agency chiefs' responses to the 27 themes and issues identified by Sir Peter Gibson in his preliminary report, and the Committee was provided with the Intelligence Services Commissioner's views on the current compliance with those aspects of the consolidated guidance that he is responsible for monitoring. We therefore tried to be as open as possible, within the limits of what it is possible to discuss openly, about the issues we are debating today.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. These are extremely important matters, but I intend to move on from this statement absolutely no later than 10 past 12 and to dispose of, in the parliamentary sense, the business of the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on the Select Committee statement by absolutely no later than half-past, so economy is of the essence.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I welcome much of what my right hon. Friend has said, and the Intelligence and Security Committee greatly welcomes what he said about the consolidated guidance. It has said since 2010 that the title "guidance" is itself misleading. It is not guidance, but a framework which sets the boundaries, and we are pleased that the Government have now openly acknowledged that. We are also pleased that the principles reflect the important changes that we recommended, including specific reference to extraordinary rendition alongside torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, the application of the principles to joint units and non-state actors, and regular review—which is of the utmost importance, because it had not been taking place regularly in the past. We are also pleased that the agencies must follow the spirit of the principles, not just the letter. All those are, in our view, major steps forward. I greatly welcome them and thank the Government for their positive response.

The second issue concerns the inquiry into what happened during the period which has given rise to the disquiet expressed in the House and elsewhere. When the ISC was asked to carry out an inquiry, we were assured that we would have access to all the evidence that we needed in order to complete it, and thus to provide the necessary public assurance to bring closure to this matter. However, as my right hon. Friend well knows, we were unfortunately denied access to certain individuals who would have given oral evidence before us, and we therefore concluded that we must bring our inquiry to an end and publish the material that we had. A judge-led inquiry would undoubtedly have presented another opportunity for that full transparency.

Leaving aside policy or legal reasons, the one point that I would make to my right hon. Friend is that even when problems have been remedied, there is sometimes a good policy reason for bringing about closure. The simple question that I pose to him is whether the decision that has been taken will enable that closure to take place.

Mr Lidington: I am grateful for my right hon. and learned Friend's welcome for Sir Adrian's report and the new principles that the Government have accepted. I was expecting him to express disappointment about our decision with regard to a judge-led inquiry.

I do not want to spend too much time going over old ground, but, as I said in response to the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), the ISC was given access to all the material that the Government supplied to the Gibson inquiry and in relation to other matters. I understand that the Committee took more than 50 hours of oral evidence, reviewed 40,000 original documents, and devoted more than 30,000 staff hours to its inquiry.

The one point of difference concerned the Committee's request to take evidence from junior officials. The Government attempted to find a compromise that would enable some of them to appear, but we were unable to reach agreement on that. It is a long-established principle that junior staff are not required personally to answer to parliamentary Committees. That is recognised in the Government's memorandum of understanding with the ISC, which permits the Committee to take oral evidence from Ministers, agency heads and senior officials. A number of those whom the Committee wished to interview had been junior officials at the time of the events in which the Committee was interested.

Let me now respond to my right hon. and learned Friend's direct question. One of my concerns about the judge-led inquiry is that it would give rise to expectations about closure, but would not be able to deliver them. By definition, the sort of material that we are talking about could not be discussed openly without risk of harm to the national interest. Apart from the fact that we see neither a legal nor a policy reason for resuming a judge-led inquiry, I fear that the offer of closure would...
eventually be seen as a grave disappointment by those who are arguing for a such an inquiry because of the necessity for secrecy.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement and agree with others that much of it is to be welcomed. However, like others I regret the decision not to hold an independent judge-led inquiry. The arguments that the Gibson and ISC investigations obviate the need for an independent judge-led inquiry do not hold water, because, as the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) said, the ISC’s investigation took place under such severe Government restrictions that, as the Committee itself states, it was left unable to conduct an authoritative inquiry or produce a credible report. As a result, the ISC chose to classify its report and its conclusions as provisional and warned that it must not be taken as a comprehensive account. Does the Minister not see that the only way to take the work of the ISC forward and properly address what went wrong is to establish an inquiry with the necessary powers to follow the leads that the ISC could not? Obviously, some aspects of that inquiry could not be held in public, although others could, and the right model for this is an independent judge-led inquiry with the full powers of such a judge-led inquiry in relation to the production of evidence and the attendance of witnesses, along with the independent ability to assess all the evidence and make a determination as to what cannot be published for national security reasons. Does the Minister not see that such an inquiry would not be required to start from scratch? It could take the ISC findings as a base, and they could provide a clear road map for a future investigation. A judge-led inquiry could focus on answering the unanswered questions, reviewing the unexplored cases and examining the evidence the ISC was not able to see. With such considerations in mind, can the Minister not see that there is unfinished business here, and does he think that the incoming Administration might reconsider this decision, having regard to the points I have made?

Mr Lidington: I cannot speculate about what an incoming Administration might or might not do. I am grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for her welcome for the principles, but I disagree with her on this point: I do not see that a revived judge-led inquiry would add anything to the actions that have already been taken. The Government and the agencies have accepted that things were done wrong, for various reasons, between 2001 and 2010. As a result of internal investigations, the ISC’s reports and the commissioner’s recommendations, significant improvements have been made to the internal training of staff in the agencies. There is much greater clarity and rigour in the guidance that officers are given, and the accountability of officers to Ministers in cases where there might be a risk of torture or inhuman treatment has been highlighted in the guidance and the training.

In the light of those changes, it is our view that no new policy decision would arise out of a further judge-led inquiry, nor do we believe that there is a legal obligation on the Government to hold such an inquiry. The police have had access to all the material they wish to access about individual cases, and, as I have said, they have concluded a number of investigations without need for further process, while a few investigations are continuing. So I think all necessary steps have been taken.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I will resist the temptation to reply to the failure to provide a judge-led inquiry in four words; those words being, “See you in court,” because it is quite plain that this decision will face a judicial review and that will take even more time and give less closure.

My right hon. Friend asked us to accept that the Government have solved the problems, and ironically he cites as evidence of that a number of ISC reports from some years ago that are now understood to have got the answer wrong because they were misinformed. The current ISC report—much better, much higher quality—was of course limited, as we heard from its Chairman, by the restriction on witnesses.

So the Government are asking us to allow them to mark their own homework. If we want a real coruscating comment on that, we need only look back at the Binyam Mohamed case and the remarks of Judge Neuberger on the Government’s and agencies’ handling of it throughout. The Government should simply not be allowed to mark their own homework.

On the point that the Government have solved the problems, I am afraid that that is plainly and demonstrably not true. That is illustrated most clearly in the point raised by the shadow Foreign Secretary that there is no prohibition on Ministers approving torture. My right hon. Friend the Minister says that they are required to obey the law, but they were required to do so in 2002 when the law was precisely the same in terms of international convention, so that does not apply either. We have evidence from one month ago, Mr Speaker, when you allowed an urgent question in this Chamber to the Ministry of Defence, which had produced internal policy documents that explicitly conceived of Ministers approving co-operation with states that had used torture to acquire information. So, plainly, the Government have not learned their lesson yet. There are a number of reasons for having an inquiry—Judicial, reputational, operational, closure and the simple one of keeping the promise we gave—and I am afraid that the Government will eventually be forced into that position.

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend has been pursuing these issues for quite a long time now. He has always been absolutely consistent in the position he has taken, and I respect that position even though the Government disagree with his views.

Going back to the question about witnesses at the ISC, the offer was always there for agency chiefs, senior officials and Ministers to speak on behalf of officers who were or had been junior at the time of the events complained of. That is the way in which the Government respond to every Select Committee of Parliament, with the seniors in a Department or agency taking responsibility for the decisions made by junior staff.

In respect of what my right hon. Friend said about the Ministry of Defence, he will find when he looks at the principles that they apply expressly to members of our armed forces. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has issued a written ministerial statement today in which she says that the Ministry of Defence accepts the principles in full and has already begun work to update its internal guidance accordingly.
Mr Lidington: I understand the argument that my right hon. Friend is making, but I repeat the point that it is a long-established principle, reflected in the memorandum of understanding with the ISC, that it is senior officials, agency chiefs and Ministers who are accountable to the Committee, rather than junior officials.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): The Government accepted all the major recommendations of the ISC and that will lead to real change, but there is one that they have not accepted, which is on emergency authorisations. The Committee recommended these should not be used where there is a serious risk of torture, and if they were, that they should be escalated to the appropriate level of authorisation. Why has that not been taken on board?

Mr Lidington: If the right hon. Lady looks again at the principles that have been published today, she will see that, where there is a real risk of torture, there is a requirement that that must be escalated to Ministers, even if that carries an increased risk of, for example, a terrorist attack succeeding. I am happy to write to the right hon. Lady to set out the detail, but that is my very clear understanding.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I, for one, welcome the improved guidance and the more robust oversight of the work of our security and intelligence agencies. May I ask the Minister: is it the case that the UK is one of the very few countries in the world publicly to set out its approach on the detention, treatment and interviewing of detainees overseas?

Mr Lidington: It is, and I think we can take some pride in the fact that the arrangements that have been put in place in recent years are seen as an example elsewhere in the world.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Government are wrong to reject a judge-led inquiry, which was the only way to find out if the lessons have been learned. Given the Minister’s statement, will he commit to two measures: first, legislation to provide redress for victims of extraordinary rendition; and, secondly, an immediate review of guidance should it become clear that UK personnel are still at risk of breaking the law?

Mr Lidington: It is very clearly our view that if an officer in any of the agencies or someone in the armed services is complying with the principles, they should not be at legal risk. I will take advice on the final question the right hon. Gentleman put to me and write to him. Clearly, issues to do with legislation will have to be a matter for the incoming Administration.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my concern at the apparent lack of appropriate ministerial oversight in the early years of this century? What has been done to ensure that the intelligence agencies are properly accountable to Ministers?

Mr Lidington: It is clear that things did go wrong—and seriously wrong—in the aftermath of 9/11. What has happened since then is that we have given enhanced powers to the Intelligence and Security Committee, and we have established the independent commissioner on a statutory basis so that he is seen to be completely independent of the Government.
Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Would it not be a source of reassurance for the Government to have an independent inquiry that would ensure the new principles are watertight and give the British public absolute confidence in our overseas engagements?

Mr Lidington: The problem with what the hon. Lady suggests is that, because so much of the information and documentation would have to remain secret for good security reasons, that could not provide such reassurance. It is the independence of the commissioner and the Committee that is the best and most compelling assurance we can give people.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): If matters are escalated to Ministers, will they be prohibited from authorising action that carries a real risk of torture?

Mr Lidington: I cannot see any circumstance in which a Minister of the United Kingdom would authorise action that was contrary to the law.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Is it not in everybody’s interests to get to the bottom of what went wrong here? Given that the Intelligence and Security Committee said that it could not produce a credible report, we surely do still need that judge-led inquiry.

Mr Lidington: No. Any judge-led inquiry would have to conduct many, if not most, of its proceedings in secret, so it could not provide the kind of assurance that the right hon. Gentleman seeks.

Governance of Official Statistics

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
Select Committee statement

Mr Speaker: In a moment, Sir Bernard Jenkin will speak on his subject for up to 10 minutes—there is absolutely no obligation on him to take the full 10—during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Sir Bernard Jenkin to respond to them in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions and should be brief. Members of the Front-Bench teams may take part in questioning. As signalled earlier, I intend that we move on to the next business no later than 12.30 pm.

12.10 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Following a thorough inquiry, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee has published its latest report this morning entitled “Governance of official statistics: redefining the dual role of the UK Statistics Authority; and re-evaluating the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007”. Our main finding is that UKSA’s dual role of both producing and regulating official statistics has compromised its ability to ensure that statistics serve the public good. We therefore recommend that UKSA is split into two separate bodies: the Office for National Statistics and the Office for Statistics Regulation.

This may seem a rather dry and obscure topic, but the reality is that pensioners, students and rail commuters pay the price of dodgy statistics. Public confidence in the Government’s policies and the political debate also suffers as a result. In 2014, when our predecessor Committee exposed how police officers were manipulating the collection and interpretation of police recorded crime to make the situation look better than it was, UKSA withdrew its “official statistics” designation of approval for police recorded crime. In 2013, UKSA did the same to the retail prices index, because it has for some time been regarded as an unreliable indicator of movements in retail prices.

RPI and UKSA’s role in the governance of statistics is used as a case study in our report. UKSA has not made itself sufficiently independent of the Government, particularly from the Treasury, and is therefore shying away from its responsibility to be accountable to Parliament and the public. For almost a decade, there has been concern about the discrepancy between the consumer prices index and UKSA and the ONS’s calculation of RPI, but UKSA has refused to account for its RPI figure. As a result of overestimated RPI, commuters face higher rail fares and students have to pay higher student loan interest rates. In January 2019, the Economic Affairs Committee of the other place reported that by failing to fix RPI, UKSA risks breaching its statutory duties. The report recommends that UKSA demonstrates more proactive, quicker responses to concerns about the accuracy and misuse of statistics and should more clearly demonstrate its independence from key stakeholders, such as the Treasury, when it has significant disagreements with producers of statistics.
The good news is that, on the whole, the UK has a world-class statistical system, and we should commend the statisticians and people who work in the ONS. When UKSA was first established, it was a huge step forward, but it must improve. Its governance must improve, and its board must improve. The fundamental problem of UKSA’s conflicting roles can only be resolved in the end through fresh legislation creating two separate bodies, but action can be taken immediately to improve the situation. At present, the Office for Statistics Regulation is separately identified, but is not given the autonomy and independence it needs. We question why the OSR has never called out the Government for continuing to rely on the flawed RPI. We recommend it immediately makes clear what is necessary to correct the calculation of RPI and that the non-executive directors of UKSA take charge of supervising the OSR, to underpin its operational independence. For example, it should have separate premises.

The UK Statistics Authority was created in 2008 as a statutory body to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics, and UKSA was given the dual function of being both the main provider of national statistics and the regulator. The report recommends that the Government introduce legislation to divide UKSA into two separate bodies: one for production and one for regulation. However, the Committee recognises that early legislation is unlikely, and that other steps need to be taken.

UKSA’s statutory objective commits it to “informing the public about social and economic matters” and “assisting in the development and evaluation of public policy”. However, our report finds that it should do those things much better. UKSA does not have a complete understanding of who uses statistics, what they use them for and what statistics are in demand. Our report concludes that “with only a modest sense of how the public uses data and no evidence of the unmet needs, UKSA is not delivering public good as required under the legislation.”

The Committee recommends that UKSA should lead cross-Government research to build an evidence base for how statistics are used in practice, taking into account cross-Government research to build an evidence base as required under the legislation.”

The report outlines how technology and innovation should make statistics more robust and more accessible to decision makers and the public. UKSA is doing many such things, but we want its work to accelerate. However, the Committee heard that Government progress to capitalise on data innovations has been slow and that significant work remains. The Committee also calls on UKSA to take a stronger leading role across technology, data science, data ethics and influencing improved sharing of data. I commend the report to the House.

**Mr Speaker:** We are extraordinarily grateful to the hon. Gentleman.

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** Statistics are obviously absolutely vital if this country is to develop good policy on a whole range of different subjects, not least medicine. However, statistics are sometimes used by scurrilous politicians trying to purvey a particular version of events that is a long way away from the official version of the UK Statistics Authority, and we have seen recent instances in which it has told off Ministers and others. Did the Committee consider any means of punishing offenders who have tried to muddy the waters with false facts?

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** It is difficult to envisage how that could be done without conflicting with the right of free speech. After the referendum, there was a discussion about whether there should be some regulation of what official campaigns actually say, for example, but that is difficult to do in the rough and tumble of politics, elections and referendums. Calling people out in public and being ready to do so is an important power that UKSA has through the Office for Statistics Regulation, but the Committee thinks that it could do that much more readily and proactively. Indeed, I have been personally critical of it for not doing so; it sometimes seems rather capricious in the targets it selects. This all suggests that the OSR should be a separate body with a far greater sense of its own purpose, rather than being part of the organisation that also produces all the statistics.

**Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind):** As a member of the Select Committee, I was very pleased to participate in the production of this report and to heartily support its conclusions and recommendations. I also support the hon. Gentleman, the Chair of the Committee, whose strong leadership on this and other reports has made a mark for our Committee. My concern all along has been rather wider than the report—the level of statistical understanding of the general public. As someone who formerly taught statistics, I suggest to Ministers, particularly in the Department for Education, that we ought to address the poor level of statistical understanding among the general populace and the poor levels of numeracy, so that the public are less prone to being bamboozled and manipulated by the dodgy statistics that the Chair so eloquently spoke about.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his work on the Committee; as our resident statistician, he contributes greatly to our scrutiny of statistics. I agree that we need a higher level of debate about statistics. UKSA has made big strides in how it presents statistics online, but we still think that the website could improve. His question underlines how important it is that there is commentary and explanation of statistics so that people understand, and indeed, that the media understand what they are reporting when they report statistics. That is a very important part of what the UK Statistics Authority should be doing.
Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I suspect that a number of my constituents will be very interested in the Select Committee’s report, not least because each recent census has significantly under-reported those of the Jain or Zoroastrian faith in the UK, making it harder for both faith groups to win recognition for their communities both in Whitehall and across key public services, from the NHS to the BBC. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in urging the Office for National Statistics to review its decision not to allow a clearer opportunity in the 2021 census for Jains and Zoroastrians to register their faith adherence?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am sure that the powers that be who design the census will have heard the hon. Gentleman’s question. We have not started scrutinising preparations for the next national census, but I will bear his point in mind.

Mr Speaker: I do not have any indication that the Front Benchers wish to participate in the questioning on this matter—I do not think they do. Sir Bernard, we are deeply grateful to you.

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill
Consideration of Lords amendments

Clause 3

12.22 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I beg to move manuscript amendment (a) to Lords amendment 1.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:
Lords amendment 1, and Government motion to disagree.
Lords amendments 2 to 18.

Hilary Benn: I support Lords amendment 1, which very sensibly provides for when the reports required under the Bill should be made to the House and provides an opportunity for the House to debate them. In other words, it provides a context in which we can discuss what is contained in those reports by requiring them to be made and requiring a motion to be presented to the House.

Given that other matters, which we debated at some length last week, have been added to the Bill since it was originally published—and have widened the scope of the Bill considerably beyond the original purpose solely relating to elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly—it seems to me even more important that we have the provisions in Lords amendment 1 in the Bill. But there is a problem that my amendment seeks to fix if the House is not sitting—for example, because it has been prorogued—on the dates by which the reports have to be made, and the crucial dates are 4 September and 9 October. My amendment simply seeks to make provision for the House to be recalled in those circumstances to allow the opportunity for us to consider the reports and debate the motions that arise from the Bill if Lords amendment 1 is accepted by the House.

I should say at this stage that probably not every Member of the House is entirely familiar with the provisions of the Meeting of Parliament Act 1797, but the most important thing to recall is that section 1 is still on the statute book. It has been used, most recently in section 68(10) of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 and in section 28(1) of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004—indeed, the Civil Contingencies Act makes specific reference to the Meeting of Parliament Act 1797.

In other words, this amendment does not—I emphasise this—seek to establish a new constitutional principle. It simply seeks to use previous practice to make sure that Parliament is sitting when it needs to be sitting to debate these matters. As I hope the amendment makes clear, it would do so by requiring that Parliament be recalled on a specified day within the period in which compliance with subsection (2B) of Lords amendment 1 is required. In other words, the Minister would have to lay the report and the motion in neutral terms would have to be moved within the period of five calendar days, beginning with the end of the day on which the report was made. If my amendment is carried, we would be sitting in order to ensure that we had the
chance both to consider the report and, crucially, to debate the motion that has been presented. That is the single purpose of my amendment. It would be rather odd—would it not?—for the House to legislate to provide for these reports and motions on specified dates, only to find itself not being here to consider the reports and to debate the motions because of some other action, namely the fact that we might not be sitting.

My final point is this: everyone in the House is well aware that Brexit has significant implications for the country as a whole, but it will have particular implications for Northern Ireland, which the Exiting the European Union Committee has reported on and many Members on both sides of the House have spoken of. I suppose that this amendment has a secondary effect: to ensure that the House would be sitting at a crucial time for our country, as I believe the country would expect us to be. I do not think that we could accept circumstances, if I may coin the phrase, in which we were sent missing in action, and I hope that the House will support the amendment.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I rise simply to support the remarks made by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and to explain why I added my name to amendment (a).

As the right hon. Gentleman concluded on the position of Northern Ireland—the springboard for the amendment—the implications of every decision taken by the United Kingdom in relation to Brexit are highly significant both for Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. For us to be in the run-up to 31 October without those considerations being before the House seems genuinely very difficult, as it does when we go beyond that and consider that the House might not be sitting during the run-up to the date itself to consider all the other things. If we have felt under the weight of any pressure up to now, I venture to suggest to the House that that will be as nothing compared with the days leading up to 31 October if it is not clear where the country is going, either because a deal has been agreed or because the consequences of no deal have been sufficiently spelt out that everybody has been able to take a view. The idea that we might not be here to reflect those concerns and to take our own view on what the circumstances might be seems to me not only highly unlikely, but undesirable and preventable.

I have added my support for amendment (a), which strengthens the Anderson amendment agreed to in the other place and makes sure that we will be here to reflect the views of our constituents. Amendment (a) does not suggest how the House would vote when presented with a choice between a deal and no deal; it makes absolutely certain, in the absence of assurances, that we will be here then.

I commend to the House the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central.

12.30 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I rise to support the extremely sensible cross-party amendment so ably moved by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). It looks like a technical measure, and in many respects it is. We are dealing with circumstances that I thought I would never face as a Member of this House; the unwritten constitutional norms that we have all accepted in our time in this place are being openly played and challenged by two people, one of whom will be an occupant of Downing Street by the end of next week, having been elected Prime Minister in an extremely mini poll of an extremely narrow number of people.

During the many hustings and debates in that election, the question has been posed of whether this Parliament should be prorogued—sent away—in an effort to get past the issue of its having three times voted against leaving the EU without a deal. The thought that Britain, a great democracy that helped to forge the post-war international rules-based system, should think of getting out of its treaty commitments by simply ripping them up and walking away, and turning its back on negotiation, would never have occurred to most of our predecessors in this place. Certainly, during the referendum, the idea that there could be no deal was not on the agenda; in fact, it was so off the agenda that it was not talked about at all. Those telling us that we should vote to leave the EU said that the deal would be the easiest in history. Nobody mentioned the phrase “no deal”.

Today, we see what the Office for Budget Responsibility—an independent economic forecasting outfit appointed by the Government—believes the economic consequences of no deal would be. It does not take a genius, or even someone with a degree in economics, to see from a quick look at the report how disastrous that would be: Britain would enter a recession, and our GDP would be 3% smaller, even in the initial phases.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): My hon. Friend has a degree in economics and a degree in politics. From her knowledge of political history and the constitution of this country, would she say that it would be an outrage if a Prime Minister sought to thwart the will of the House by proroguing Parliament?

Ms Eagle: I could not agree more. My hon. Friend and I were establishing our economic and political credentials at university at the same time. His judgment has only improved and matured over the years.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Lady agree that it is an outrage that this debate, which is supposed to be on the Northern Ireland Executive’s formation, is being hijacked and turned into something to do with Brexit, and to do with every issue under the sun except the formation of the Executive, which now looks more unlikely as a result of this legislation?

Ms Eagle: The hon. Gentleman is right to be somewhat miffed about what he calls a hijack, but what I call a situation in which needs must. This is the longest parliamentary Session since the civil war, because the Government, who effectively have no majority, dare not prorogue Parliament, as they would then have to have a Queen’s Speech, and they do not have one handy because the work has not been done. No Government Front Bench knows whether they will be on the Front Bench next week. Some know that they definitely will not; I hope that that will free them up when they are in the voting Lobby a bit later. The lack of a chance to use a legislative vehicle to establish Parliament’s rights has led
us to this pass, so I understand the hon. Gentleman’s feelings, but when a legislative vehicle passes, and it is the only one in a desert, and we desperately need to clamber aboard, then needs must.

Ian Paisley: You accept that this is an abuse.

Ms Eagle: I did not say that it was an abuse; I said that needs must. I understand the hon. Gentleman’s irritation with the situation, but as this is the only legislative vehicle in sight, it is quite legitimate to try to use it to assert Parliament’s rights on this matter.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend’s speech. This is very much the right thing to do, and as she says, needs must. We face a serious crisis in this country, and it is right to bring forward amendment (a), however difficult that might be for some colleagues.

Ms Eagle: I thank my hon. Friend for agreeing with me. Perhaps this should happen more regularly; perhaps we should try to get more agreement across the House, rather than having some people in one group and others in another, in little newly forming tribes, as hate and division take root in our society. I am one of those who think that compromise is a good idea.

The amendment is trying to put into law, albeit in a clumsy way, the constitutional convention that Parliament should decide matters of great import. It should not be sent away artificially by a Prime Minister with no electoral mandate whatever, and possibly no majority whatever, in order for them to accomplish one of the most far-reaching and controversial things in modern politics—our leaving the EU without a deal. That would entail a huge loss of legitimacy, which would divide the country much further still.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): Does the hon. Lady feel, as I do, that when people look back on this debate and on this measure, they will find it quite extraordinary that we needed to have this discussion about whether the Parliament of the United Kingdom should be in session when the events of which she speaks are likely to occur?

Ms Eagle: I could not agree more with the right hon. Gentleman, and I commend his attempts, and those of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), to ensure that Parliament was not in that position, by seeking to prevent a no-deal crash-out.

If we had a future Prime Minister who respected the rules and lines of our unwritten constitution and who did not wish to drive a coach and horses through them in the most controversial way possible, perhaps we would not have had to resort to this. If the future Prime Minister was conservative, and was interested in conserving the traditions and rights of this place, he would, in the first item of his leadership bid, rule out a no-deal Brexit by Prorogation of Parliament. Alas, not only has he not done that, but as the Tory leadership campaign has gone on, his rival has been dragged towards using Prorogation as a tactic to send Parliament home so that it cannot have a view.

Finally, I have already said that this is the longest Session of Parliament since the English civil war, and we are contemplating a new Tory Prime Minister who seems to believe that he can behave like a Stuart king. It did not end well in the century of the civil war, and I warn the next Prime Minister that it will not end well if he tries to do the same thing in the 21st century.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. There are other colleagues who wish to speak. It would be a considerable discourtesy for anybody to speak for longer than five minutes, given that others also wish to contribute.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill is all about making sure that democracy works for the people of our country whom it serves. That is why I very much support it. However, it goes wider than that in practice. This country finds itself in a time of crisis—we all know that. Many people listening to this debate will be wondering why we are even having a summer recess and going away on holiday when there are so many unresolved issues in relation to Brexit. The simple act of passing the amendment to make sure that we do indeed sit as normal during September and October is, therefore, common sense and the House should get behind it. In no way does it try to curtail decisions that a Government or a Parliament might want to make—quite the reverse: it seeks to ensure that our parliamentary democracy can simply function as normal.

We should all reflect on the fact that this debate is even necessary in our country. What has Britain come to when we have to table amendments to ensure that Parliament can still operate? To those who say that shutting down Parliament is somehow a viable approach, I simply say: you do not win a debate by closing down the main Chamber in which the views of the people of this country are aired, and you do not unite a country by muzzling the people whom those communities have democratically elected to come here to represent them.

There are other practical reasons why we should support this common-sense amendment. We all know that this is a time of global political and economic instability. Are we really saying that this House would not be there to debate issues that might arise, just in case it had its say on the hugely important issue of Brexit or spoke with one voice about the Government’s proposed course of action? It is entirely untenable—indeed, it is dangerous and extremely short-sighted—to shut down this Parliament at a time of so much uncertainty.

I will finish by saying that the amendment has to pass. If it does not, I fear that we will inadvertently cross the Rubicon for our parliamentary democracy. That would mean that if a Government ran up against an issue and were worried that the elected House of MPs might decide to stand up against them, they would just close it down. That is not in Britain’s DNA. The rest of the world looks on and admires our democracy because it is such a fundamental part of how this country has developed. For that reason alone, we should get behind this amendment, which is about protecting the right of ordinary people up and down this country to have their MP come here and do their job of representing them, for good or for bad.
Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I want to get back to the Bill’s original purpose. Representatives from Northern Ireland and our constituents have forcefully made the point that it is very disconcerting that a Bill that extends two dates to allow for talks, which are already under way, has been, in the words of my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), hijacked for other purposes. Some of the debates are not even on issues that directly affect Northern Ireland, such as the change to the definition of marriage and the massive change on abortion, an issue on which there are strong feelings across the board—cross-party and cross-community—in Northern Ireland. Those views differ from those of the proponents—

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Ind) rose—

12.45 pm

Nigel Dodds: No, I do not have time. I only have five minutes, and everyone who wishes to speak will get a chance to do so.

Sadly, when it comes to Northern Ireland debates, the Chamber fills up and people take an interest only when it serves their purposes. I would like to see as many people take an interest in Northern Ireland affairs when we are debating issues that really affect and have a practical impact on the constituents whom we represent. The time devoted to discussing the substantial issues introduced in Committee and in the other place has been woefully short, given their gravity and impact.

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 has provisions for consultation. If the Government introduced measures that sidestepped that, there would be outrage on the Opposition Benches and, indeed, on the Government Back Benches and on ours. All that has been cast aside, however, because the end justifies the means. Every parliamentary norm and every norm of consultation, consideration and the principle of devolution has been set aside.

People say that this place has a right to act constitutionally and legally. Of course it does, but the reality is that they are being very selective. We are legislating on some of the most contentious and divisive issues, on which there is no consensus, and have a practical impact on the constituents whom we represent. The time devoted to discussing the substantial issues introduced in Committee and in the other place has been woefully short, given their gravity and impact.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is correct. I am exercising some latitude from the Chair. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) is a very committed parliamentarian and she is opining on these matters, and I am very content that she should do so. I am equally content to take the opportunity to assert that this is a very serious situation and it is very difficult to comprehend it. Many people are outraged and very frustrated that this House has acted in this way. Of course it has the right to do so, but given the lack of time, consideration and consultation, to take such drastic steps on a matter of such import and concern, on which there is cross-community consensus on the need to take a more careful and different approach, is completely wrong.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I rise to oppose the totally new Lords-amended clause 9. If the amendment is agreed to, Northern Ireland will have the most permissive abortion law in the British Isles.

The way in which the issue of abortion and, indeed, the Bill has been handled has been, I believe, unconstitutional, undemocratic, legally incoherent and utterly disrespectful to the people of Northern Ireland, yet the Government are pressing on today with just a derisory one hour’s debate. That is despite the fact that abortion is a devolved policy area and a hugely controversial issue, and despite the shamefully limited scrutiny time we have already had.

The decision to fast-track the Bill was considered contentious even in respect of its limited original purposes. The Lords Constitution Committee recently discouraged the use of fast-tracking in the context of Northern Ireland legislation, except for urgent matters. The amendments to change the substantive law on abortion and, indeed, marriage were outside the scope of the Bill and should never have been debated in this place. What are the constitutional implications for the respect of scope for future parliamentary Bills? It is well known that these matters are of particular sensitivity in Northern Ireland.

Nick Boles: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you know, I am a relatively new Member, but I thought that the determination of what was or was not in scope was for you, Sir, not for us.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is correct. I am exercising some latitude from the Chair. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) is a very committed parliamentarian and she is opining on these matters, and I am very content that she should do so. I am equally content to take the opportunity to assert that there is nothing disorderly whatsoever about these proceedings. I have exercised my judgment and responsibility in the way that I think fit in order to facilitate the House. There is nothing—I repeat: nothing—unconstitutional or improper about that, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman.
Fiona Bruce: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to put my opinion on the record in respect of the way the Bill has been extended beyond what I believe was its original intention. Indeed, I spoke to that effect when it was discussed in the House only a few days ago.

As I say, the laws in this subject area are of great importance to the people of Northern Ireland, many of whom celebrate the fact that 100,000 people are alive in Northern Ireland today as a result of the abortion laws there being different from those here. There has been no consultation with the people of Northern Ireland or their elected representatives on this issue. The democratically elected representatives in Northern Ireland voted not to change the abortion law there in any way as recently as 2016. As such, Northern Ireland’s primary legislation in this policy area enjoys a more democratic recent sanction than that in any other part of the UK: 100% of the Northern Ireland MPs present voted against attempts to change the abortion law just a few days ago.

Yesterday, I had the privilege to deliver personally a letter to the Prime Minister from Northern Ireland MPs, peers, MLAs and 17,000 other residents of Northern Ireland. I have a copy of it with me, and it asks for the withdrawal of this Bill, which the Northern Ireland Attorney General has said is “unclear and inconsistent” with regard to human rights issues. There is a covering note from Baroness O’Loan—I pay tribute to her and the speech she made in the other place on this issue—in which she says:

“Please do not ignore the concerns of so many, articulated in a couple of days”—the signatures were gathered in just a few days—“in response to the fast-tracked NI Bill.”

The letter requests that the Bill be reconsidered.

I understand that what has actually happened following the original amendments to the Bill on the issue of abortion is that rather than moving to minimise the constitutional concerns expressed in this place about those changes and the way that Parliament had treated the people of Northern Ireland just a few days ago, Government representatives have met sponsors of the out-of-scope amendments—it is my opinion that they are, Mr Speaker—and worked with them to enhance the efficacy of the provisions.

So much for respecting the human rights of the people of Northern Ireland in terms of their freedom of expression, speech and belief. Let them decide on such sensitive issues. We talk here about the importance of not being colonial, but what is this? Is this what the new colonialism looks like? I will not support clause 9 and I will not support the Bill with clause 9 in it.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to say what the Government should have done, which was to preserve the integrity of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, respect the Sewel convention and uphold the integrity of the Bill in its intended limited format.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I rise simply to support the amendment; however, like others, I regret the need for it. It is needed because of the position adopted by one person—the person who will be our next Prime Minister, who, if I recall correctly, did in fact campaign for parliamentary sovereignty but is now dangling the threat of abolishing Parliament over our heads. Even dictators in banana republics are reluctant to deploy that threat. It is shameful.

Mr Speaker: Has the right hon. Gentleman concluded his oration?

Tom Brake indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: He has. We are deeply grateful to him.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I have considerable sympathy with the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) and, indeed, with my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who both expressed their concern that the House is legislating on Northern Ireland matters. As we have set up a devolved Assembly and Executive, many of the matters with which we are concerned today now are, or should be, the province of that Assembly and that Executive, but good governance cannot exist in the condition of paralysis. Indeed, what we have seen with the passage of this Bill is that this House—very properly, because it is our duty—is paying some attention to the vacuum that exists in the Northern Ireland context, not only in wanting to see an Executive set up but in looking in the meantime at areas where there are concerns about, for example, the law as it currently exists. It is an imperfect way of doing it, but it is not an illegitimate one now.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP) rose—

Mr Grieve: Before I give way, let me just add that the House should be perfectly aware that I abstained on the amendments concerning abortion and same-sex marriage precisely for that reason, but I do not think that it is illegitimate of Members of this House to feel that the time has come to express a view in the absence of an Administration.

Let me turn to the issues relating to Lords amendment 1, which I support, and the amendment to it proposed by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). We face an extraordinary situation. To do its business, the House has to sit. It is perfectly normal for the House to assert that it wants, at various times, to be able to consider issues, particularly in the Northern Ireland context, in which the situation changes rapidly. Yet we have been confronted with a most unusual situation: there is a suggestion that there would be periods when, for other reasons, we would be prevented from sitting. We are responsible for ensuring, or trying to ensure, good governance. I think that is why we have the portcullis as our symbol: we are supposed to be the protectors of the nation.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I hope my right hon. and learned Friend might be willing, particularly as he is a former Attorney General, to join me in stating specifically, for Pepper v. Hart purposes, that the intention of those who have been involved in the preparation of the amendment is uniformly to ensure that it absolutely and explicitly blocks the use of the prerogative power to prorogue our Parliament.

Mr Grieve: Yes, I am entirely happy to make that assertion, because when I realised that it was an issue, I also realised that it was a threat to the good governance of this country and, indeed, to the good governance of Northern Ireland in the run-up to setting up the Executive, which I very much hope will come into being very quickly. That is precisely why we have endeavoured to
do it in a manner that is wholly compatible with the Meeting of Parliament Act 1797, as was pointed out, while making it clear that, in the particular context of this legislation, this House wishes to emphasise that Prorogation is not a reason why it should not be meeting to consider these matters on the day appointed.

For those reasons, I commend this amendment to the House, and I shall be supporting it. I also agree with what has been said by others that, if we do not make such an assertion in the light of the extraordinary statements that have been made about how our business might be conducted, our role as that protector of our democracy will be seen to be shot to pieces.

1 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): This Bill is an outrage. It is an outrage to common decency in Northern Ireland; it is an outrage because, so far today, with the exception of my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) and the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), no one has actually debated its clauses with regard to Northern Ireland. Instead, the Bill has been hijacked and used as a vehicle for every other subject under the sun and every other fancy that Members have with regard to their own pet subjects, important though they are. It is wrong that Northern Ireland will now be subjected to serious and perverse changes to its laws without proper scrutiny, without proper negotiation and without proper regulation.

Some 66% of the people of Northern Ireland have rejected the fact that Parliament should have a say on the matters that are under discussion in clause 9. In fact, they have said that they should be left to the Northern Ireland Assembly. The fact of the matter is that the Bill makes it less likely that a Northern Ireland Assembly will actually be put in place to negotiate, to debate and to legislate on these matters. As has already been said, 17,000 people have signed a letter opposing what is being done today. If we read that across to the British mainland, that is the equivalent of 500,000 signing a petition in a matter of four days.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend share my view that those who say that we must have some governance for Northern Ireland have interfered not only in the devolution settlement, but in a way that makes the law on abortion in Northern Ireland even more draconian than that in the United Kingdom? That is the one part of the United Kingdom where people do not want to see changes in the law on abortion.

Ian Paisley: The changes that are being proposed and that will affect Northern Ireland are the most extreme laws that will ever affect anyone in the whole United Kingdom with regards to abortion. Those laws will allow the termination of life at the point of birth—[Interruption.] Yes, they do. Those laws will allow the termination of life on a point of disability; and those laws will allow the termination of life based on the sex of the child—laws that are prohibited in this part of the United Kingdom, but that Members will inflict on their part of the United Kingdom to make a cheap political point. How cheap do they hold life? They appear to hold it very low indeed.

I think of the life of a young girl called Grace in Northern Ireland whose parents were told several weeks before her birth that, because of a chromosome disorder, her life should be terminated. That child is 15 years of age. She is a remarkable young woman, one of the highest achievers in her school—indeed, beyond that, she is a high achiever in life itself—yet today this House wants to destroy her life and would like to destroy the lives of hundreds of thousands of other unborn lives.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I am one of the signatories to amendment (a) and am therefore rising to support it and the Lords amendments. This is, in fact, the first time that I have spoken on Northern Ireland matters in 14 years in this House, but let me put on record my huge affection for Northern Ireland. I have many friends who live in Northern Ireland and I regularly visit. In fact, let me put it on the record that I bought my first ever lottery ticket on the day of the lottery launch in Ballymena. As Culture Minister, I have visited Belfast many times, not least the Titanic Quarter which has become a fantastic creative hub for Northern Ireland and is where “Game of Thrones” was filmed.

I should also put it on record that it is a matter of profound regret to me that in the past eight weeks of leadership hustings, the two leadership candidates have not visited a single museum, art centre, theatre, architecture firm, design company or film studio, or indeed barely mentioned the fantastic success of the creative industries not only in Northern Ireland, but in the whole of the UK.

One reason why this is the first time I have spoken on Northern Ireland matters is that of course Northern Ireland matters are meant to be devolved. I therefore have enormous sympathy with the points that have been made by the members of the Democratic Unionist party and, indeed, by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), but the fact remains that there is no Executive in residence in Northern Ireland, and there has not been for some considerable time, which is why we are debating Northern Ireland matters—[Interruption.] I wonder whether I have got something wrong, given Mr Speaker’s expression. On the issues of abortion and, indeed, of equal marriage, I have to say to my friends in the DUP that if these matters do come up for debate in this House—and they were conscience votes and free votes—they should not be surprised at all if English Members and Members from other parts of the Union express a view. We also know that those amendments have been put down in such a way that no legislation, no change to the law, will happen if a devolved Executive return to Government.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Although the right hon. Gentleman references that there is no devolved Assembly currently in Northern Ireland, what we do know is the will of that Northern Ireland Assembly. Up until this point, the Northern Ireland Assembly has never voted, across all the parties, to liberalise abortion laws in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the right hon. Gentleman that he should not require more than another couple of minutes.

Mr Vaizey: Mr Speaker is exactly right. Having just dealt with the points about abortion and equal marriage in about 30 seconds, let me use the final 30 seconds of my remarks on amendment (a).
I am sure that my friends in the DUP will welcome the fact that we are amending this legislation to ensure that, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) mentioned, in the fast-moving environment of Northern Irish politics, where we stand as friends to good governance in Northern Ireland, we want to ensure that this House is ready and able to sit to debate these matters. That is why it is vital that we support this amendment. Those who say that this Bill has been hijacked by Brexit have, in fact, missed the point of the amendment, which is to ensure that we continue to debate these important matters in the months ahead.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I rise to offer the SNP’s support for both Lords amendment 1 and the amendment tabled to it by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

President Tusk asked the UK not to waste its time. Instead, this Government have been self-indulgent, focusing on internal machinations and the leadership election, all while this zombie Parliament is left cooling its heels instead of getting on with the job of dealing with Brexit.

The UK Government’s own analysis shows the catastrophic impact that a no-deal outcome would have, yet some on the Government Benches are still quoting no deal. The default should be to revoke article 50, not to impose a no-deal Brexit. There would be a democratic constitutional crisis were the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) to prorogue Parliament last week. I said that, given the fact that a clear majority of MPs are opposed to the UK leaving without a deal, the Prorogation of Parliament to facilitate a no-deal would be unconstitutional, undemocratic and entirely untenable. The fact that the Prime Minister in waiting, only elevated to office by Conservative party members, refuses to rule this out tells me that he is unfit for high office.

The Government’s own assessment shows that no deal could leave the UK economy up to 9% smaller after 15 years and that two of the worst hit areas economically in a no-deal scenario would be Scotland with an 8% hit to GDP and Northern Ireland itself with a hit to GDP of over 9%. Mark Carney, and pretty much everybody else if we are honest, refuted the unsubstantiated suggestion of the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip that the WTO—general agreement on tariffs and trade—arrangements would enable the UK to avoid EU tariffs in the event of a no deal. David Watt, lately of the Institute of Directors, said:

“Frankly, it’s difficult to imagine a policy that inflicts more economic harm on the UK and Scotland. The fact that we’ve inflicted this on ourselves simply beggars belief.”

The chief executive of Make UK, representing British manufacturers, said that “it would be the height of economic lunacy to take the UK out of the EU with no deal in place.”

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gavin Newlands: Sorry, but I do not have time to give way.

The Chancellor himself said that leaving with no deal would mean “Higher unemployment, lower wages and higher prices in the shops”—[Official Report, 13 March 2019; Vol. 656, c. 347.] That is not what the British people voted for in June 2016.

It is clear that neither contender for Conservative leader fully understands the implications of Brexit, or perhaps they simply do not care. Scotland has repeatedly demanded a separate course of action in every vote since the referendum, but this Government have ignored us at every turn. The Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government will not ignore the people of Scotland.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I will begin by making a central point about the Northern Ireland nature of the Bill. The UK Parliament, in the absence of a devolved Assembly, cannot ignore its constitutional duty to act on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland. Let me also say to the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) that to accuse women like Sarah Ewart and Denise Phelan of being part of a cheap political stunt is outrageous and unworthy of this House.

Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I say many things in this House, but I have not said the words that have been attributed to me from the Labour Front Bench and that should be withdrawn.

Mr Speaker: I do not recall what the position was, but if a Front Bencher, like any Member, has erred, it is incumbent on that Member to make the appropriate correction.

Tony Lloyd: Mr Speaker, I will check the record, and where appropriate I will apologise to the hon. Member for North Antrim. However, he certainly cast aspersions about cheap politics in his remarks. Let me make some progress because we have very little time.

The remedy for all these things lies in the hands of the Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly. When that Assembly decides to meet and the Executive are reformed, they can take the power to abrogate the bulk of what lies on the face of the Bill. This House has made that very clear commitment to the system of devolution and to the people of Northern Ireland.

I commend the words of the noble Lord Duncan, the Minister in the other House, who has talked about the need to make progress on the question of historical institutional abuse, saying:

“There is urgency... I will commit, in the absence of a sitting Assembly, to the Government introducing primary legislation on historical institutional abuse before the end of the year”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 15 July 2019; Vol. 798, c. 138.]

That is a very welcome commitment by the noble Lord on behalf of the Government.

I will confine my last few remarks to Lords amendment 1 and the manuscript amendment in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). This is a massively important constitutional issue. In a parliamentary democracy, no Parliament can abrogate both the right to sit and to take action, particularly against the constitutional challenge that a no-deal Brexit would pose and especially in the light of the fact that there will be a Prime Minister who will have a mandate not from the public in general but from a very narrow base within one political party. It is simply unconscionable that this House would not sit.
I say very firmly to my friends in this House from Northern Ireland that they have to recognise that there is nowhere in this United Kingdom of ours that will be more affected by a no-deal Brexit than Northern Ireland. I hope the Minister will respond to my next point, which is that if we are moving to no deal as we get towards October, the Government will have to introduce direct rule in the absence of a functioning Northern Ireland Assembly to effect the legislation to allow for that no-deal Brexit to take place. In that sense, this House must be in a position to meet to transform the law to protect the people of Northern Ireland against the possibility of that no-deal Brexit. This is not grafted on to Northern Ireland legislation; it is absolutely fundamental to the future of the people of Northern Ireland. That is why Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition will be supporting the manuscript amendment in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and any consequential amendments.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): I agree with the comments made by a number of colleagues on both sides of the House that this was originally a very simple three-clause Bill to change just two dates, and it is now garlanded with baubles; it is a Christmas tree with tinsel, twinkling lights and a honking great star on top to boot. That said, the Government are willing to accept most of the Lords amendments requiring reports to be laid before Parliament on progress towards a whole host of important issues such as transparency, political donations and loans, gambling, suicide prevention and much else.

1.15 pm
I do not propose to go in huge detail through all the various amendments being accepted, other than to respond to the leader of the DUP here, the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), who specifically asked whether we will end up with some sort of gap in the legal coverage around the abortion amendments—a matter that, as we all know, is an issue of conscience. I reassure him that he is right to say a number of other statutes will persist, notably the Criminal Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 1945, which he mentioned. The Government will try to ensure that we bring forward the new regime as quickly as possible to minimise any gaps that might occur, to create a seamless transition and to issue guidelines and advice to medical professionals and others to minimise any problems. We look forward to working on and discussing that with him and other people in Northern Ireland in depth, as necessary, to ensure that we come up with a safe transition from today to the intended outcome.

On Lords amendment 1, I have two narrow but important constitutional criticisms and a broader comment. I will start with the narrow criticisms. I appreciate that constitutional niceties and procedures are not everybody’s cup of tea, but it is worth pointing out that parts of this amendment had already been defeated in the Commons and the rest was ruled out of scope before it even got here. And yet, here we are—being asked to include it because the unelected Lords decided that we should. I urge colleagues on both sides of the House to send a respectful but firm message that we appreciate the Lords views and will have nothing further to do with it on this occasion.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

John Penrose: I have very little time. I will take one intervention, from my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), but I will then have to make progress.

Mr Baron: May I just remind the Minister that this amendment has been tabled by those who voted to remain? Speaking as someone who voted to leave and is in a minority in this place, I can assure the Minister that we on our side of the referendum debate would in no way countenance a Prorogation of Parliament, so in many respects these people are tilting at windmills.

John Penrose: I will come to broader comments about the background politics in a second, but my hon. Friend has made his point.

I should also point out that, alone among the various amendments that we are discussing, this one has little to do with Northern Ireland and everything to do with Brexit. All the other amendments deal with important issues specific to Northern Ireland: same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland; abortion in Northern Ireland; suicide prevention in Northern Ireland. But not this one.

Geraint Davies: Will the Minister give way on that point?

John Penrose: I am sorry, but I do not have time.

This amendment attempts to bind the UK Parliament for a UK-wide issue. That breaches a pretty important precedent: that we try, at least, to work on a cross-community consensual basis when it comes to Northern Ireland because the sensitivities and the risks are so great, so significant, that it would be irresponsible and dangerous to play political games in such a charged arena.

Furthermore, in this case the Bill stands a decent chance of never becoming law, if the Stormont Assembly restarts before Royal Assent: I am delighted to report that the talks were ongoing yesterday and I believe that they are continuing today. I am sure that everybody here wishes them every success. If the Stormont Assembly restarts before Royal Assent, not only is the amendment dangerously partisan—weaponising a Northern Ireland Bill for Brexit in a way that we usually, rightly, try to avoid—but it could easily put us through all that grief for no good reason at all if it fails to become law. The change would set a constitutional precedent that could last for centuries whether we intend it to or not. We should not do it like this—not in this Bill, and not in this way.

I have directly opposed the specifics of the amendment; I now come to a broader point about the politics behind it, which should inform all of us as we decide how we will vote in a minute. I am sure that we are all democrats here: first, last and always. Even though I and many others originally voted remain in the EU referendum three years ago, I have since become, like many others, a strong and doughty backer of the democratic decision to leave. Many of us would far prefer to leave with a sensible deal, but if that is not possible and it comes down to a choice between no deal and no Brexit, then,
reluctantly but firmly, I choose no deal. [Interruption.]
I do not have time to give way; I am down to my last 90 seconds.

Many colleagues on both sides of the House, including a couple of signatories to the amendment, now feel the same way. We have been going at this for three years. The country sent us all a very clear message at the polls in May that they want this done. We have reached a narrowing funnel where our choices are getting fewer and fewer, and we are running out of road. The time, and voters’ tolerance for our failing to address that central issue, is running out. For many of us, the problem with the amendment is not about more or less democracy; it is that it is pretending to be democratic but in reality it is trying to prevent the democratic referendum decision from ever happening at all.

I have a challenge for the backers of this amendment; it will be hugely reassuring to moderate, former Brexiteers such as myself. If it finally comes down, this autumn, to the stark and simple choice between no deal and no Brexit, which will you choose? Will you promise to honour the democratic decision or will you not? If you cannot make that commitment and that pledge, I am afraid that voters will conclude that this is a stitch-up—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The House must come to order.

John Penrose: Voters will conclude that this is a clever piece of procedure that pretends to care about democracy, but in reality is trying to prevent a decision that has already been taken from ever happening at all.

1.22 pm

One hour having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on Lords amendments, the debate was interrupted (Programme Order, 8 July).

The Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83F). That amendment (a) to Lords amendment 1 be made.

The House divided: Ayes 315, Noes 274.

Division No. 436] [1.22 pm

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<td>Leslie, Mr Chris</td>
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</table>
Tellers for the Ayes:
Thangam Debbonaire and Nic Dakin

NOES
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias

Ephelnicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike

Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Griffiths, Andrew
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca

Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Head, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoey, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobose, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
Javid, rh Saijd
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Amendment (a) made to Lords amendment 1.

The Speaker then put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83F).

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1, as amended.—(John Penrose.)

The House divided: Ayes 273, Noes 315.

**Division No. 437**

[1.40 pm]

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Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill

Tellers for the Ayes: Mark Spencer and Jeremy Quin

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Heidi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Bebb, Guto
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana (Proxy vote cast by Mr Gavin Shuker)
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Boles, Nick
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brine, Steve
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Burt, rh Alistair
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon

Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, rh William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martin
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tammanjeet Singh
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, rh Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Fellowes, Marion
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Forbes, Lisa
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
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Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
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Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leslie, Mr Chris
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Marxen, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Masterton, Paul
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Siobhan
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Meams, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Graeme
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
Om, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pitchcock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma (Proxy vote cast by Mr Pat McFadden)
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Ryan, rh Joan
Sandbach, Antoinette
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheeraman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Soubry, rh Anna
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Thewill, Alison
Thomas, Garett
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Tigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Yasmin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Thangam Debbonaire and Nic Dakin

Question accordingly negatived.
Lords amendment 1, as amended, agreed to.
Motion made, and Question put, That this House agrees with Lords amendments 2 to 18.—(John Penrose.)
The House divided: Ayes 328, Noes 65.

Division No. 438]  

[1.56 pm

**AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Heidi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
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Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana (Proxy vote cast by Mr Gavin Shuker)
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Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
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Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
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Chapman, Jenny
Charalamous, Bambos
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Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Collins, Damian
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Cooper, rh Yvette
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**Sheerman, Mr Barry**
Shelbrooke, Alec
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skidmore, Chris
Skinner, Mr Dennis
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Wishart, Pete
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zahawi, Nadhim
Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Ayes:**
Mike Freer and Matt Warman

**NOES**
Braverman, Suella (Proxy vote cast by Mr Steve Baker)
Bridgen, Andrew
Bruce, Fiona
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cash, Sir William
Points of Order

2.10 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I think convention says that a Bill that has got this far in both Houses is rightfully the property of Parliament rather than the Executive. Both Houses have spoken very clearly about the constitutional nature of this Bill, and you have ruled that it is completely in order. However, there are rumours—perhaps fallacious—that the Government are thinking of pulling the Bill. Can you confirm, Mr Speaker, that that would be unconscionable and unacceptable, and that you would not be supportive of any such move?

Mr Speaker: I think that it would be quite extraordinary, but I have no expectation of it, and I am fortified, reinforced and encouraged in my view by the clear sedentary head-shaking of no less a figure than the Patronage Secretary, aided and abetted by the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose). They are both signalling that the Government have no intention of abandoning the Bill, and the Chief Whip, having shaken his head, is now in a position, if he so wishes, to nod his assent to the proposition that I have just made.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Bill that we have just debated contains clauses inviting the Government to make progress towards the implementation of a “severely injured” pension for victims of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. There has been considerable distress in Northern Ireland because of concerns about the criteria, and a report has suggested that terrorists who went out to murder and maim and ended up injuring themselves may be eligible for such a pension. Unfortunately, we have not had an opportunity to debate those issues today owing to the nature of the proceedings. While I welcome the comments of Lord Duncan in the other place, may I ask whether there will be any opportunities—perhaps next week—for these matters to be aired, debated and hopefully answered in this House? I should be very much obliged.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) is satisfied. I thank the occupants of the Treasury Bench.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Bill that we have just debated contains clauses inviting the Government to make progress towards the implementation of a “severely injured” pension for victims of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. There has been considerable distress in Northern Ireland because of concerns about the criteria, and a report has suggested that terrorists who went out to murder and maim and ended up injuring themselves may be eligible for such a pension. Unfortunately, we have not had an opportunity to debate those issues today owing to the nature of the proceedings. While I welcome the comments of Lord Duncan in the other place, may I ask whether there will be any opportunities—perhaps next week—for these matters to be aired, debated and hopefully answered in this House? I should be very much obliged.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. Lady for her point of order, to which the answer is yes: there could well be such opportunities. The hon. Lady would not expect me to commit myself now—on the hoof, if you will—in respect of the form that such an opportunity might take, but we have four sitting days next week before we rise for the summer recess. This is a matter of the utmost importance, and, indeed, considerable sensitivity. In the short time during which I have come to know the hon. Lady, I have come to be aware of how dexterous she is in the use of parliamentary time, and if she wishes to take her opportunities, I think that she will not be disappointed.
Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It concerns the decision that the House has now taken to decriminalise abortion in Northern Ireland by repealing sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. This means that the abortion law in Northern Ireland will be more liberal than in England and Wales. Women will no longer be subject to criminal sanction in Northern Ireland, but, of course, the law has not been repealed for women in England and Wales, who remain subject to the criminal law. If, for example, they buy abortion tablets on the internet, they can still face prosecution. I wonder, Mr Speaker, whether the Government have given any indication that they will make a statement to the House next week to ensure that women in England and Wales are treated as fairly now as we hope they will be in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: I have not yet received any such indication, but, as I indicated in response to the previous point of order, there is time for these matters to be aired. There could be a Government statement, but in the absence thereof, there are other ways in which to secure parliamentary time. I think I would command the assent of the House if I said of the hon. Lady that the word “indefatigable” could have been invented to describe her campaigning zeal. I am very confident that if she wishes to raise the matter in the Chamber next week, she will be able to do so.

If there are no further points of order—and I thank colleagues for their interest, attention and patience—we will now come to the Back-Bench motion on the Bishop of Truro’s report on the persecution of Christians overseas. We are already having to start this debate later than any of us would have liked. The occupant of the Chair who succeeds me will do his best to protect the time for it, and it would be appreciated if colleagues who wish to conduct conversations on other matters would leave the Chamber quickly and quietly, so that those who wish to get on with this important debate can do so unimpeded and with appropriate attention.

Backbench Business

Persecution of Christians Overseas

2.16 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House deplores the persecution of Christians overseas; supports freedom of religion or belief in all countries throughout the world; welcomes the work undertaken by the Bishop of Truro in this area; and calls on the Government to do more with the diplomatic and other tools at its disposal to prevail on the governments of countries in which persecution of Christians is tolerated or encouraged to end that persecution and to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief.

I thank, especially, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for their work in securing the debate. I congratulate the Bishop of Truro on his report, which was published 10 days ago. I also thank Open Doors and Aid to the Church in Need for their tireless work on this issue.

Around the world, there are horrifying stories of Christians being attacked and often killed, of churches being destroyed and of Christians being persecuted and prevented from worshipping. This is happening on an industrial scale in multiple countries. Often, the Governments in those countries turn a blind eye, or are even responsible for the persecution themselves. Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world. The International Society of Human Rights says that 80% of religious persecution in the world is against Christians. Open Doors estimates that 245 million Christians around the world—one in nine—face persecution. Here are some examples.

In April 2017, a young Nigerian woman, Dorkas Zakka, was murdered, along with 12 others, simply for attending an Easter mass. Local priest Father Alexander Yeycock said that Nigerian military units stood by and did nothing while the murders took place. In November 2017, in Mina, Egypt, a mob surrounded a Coptic church threatening worshippers inside, many of whom were also physically attacked. Local Coptic leader Anba Macarius said that the Egyptian authorities had done nothing to bring those responsible to justice.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is describing very accurately what is happening to Christians across the world. Given the involvement of the authorities in the two countries that he has mentioned, and in many other countries—countries to which we give considerable aid in the form of money, expert advice and so on—does he believe that the Government could put more pressure on them by withholding that aid, or at least threatening to do so?

Chris Philp: Yes, I completely agree with that point and will discuss it shortly. We give lots of money to countries where the Governments themselves are turning a blind eye to, or even themselves actively encouraging or carrying out, persecution, and we should be attaching conditions to the aid we give and in extreme cases even withdrawing it entirely; I therefore agree completely with the point that the right hon. Gentleman makes.
In Pakistan, Christian woman Asia Bibi was sentenced to death for blasphemy in 2010. She is now in safety in Canada, but the very cell in which she was incarcerated now holds Shagufta Kausar, a Christian 45-year-old mother of four who was sentenced to death for blasphemy in 2014; the very cell that Asia Bibi was held in now contains another Christian woman, also under sentence of death.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I welcome what my hon. Friend is saying. He mentioned the issue of Asia Bibi and Pakistan. Many in this House have said from the very beginning of that case that Asia was being persecuted for her faith and that countries around the world, in line with their religious belief and commitment, should have offered her asylum. The United Kingdom should have done that; we did not. Does my hon. Friend agree that after this report our foreign policy must change, so that rather than hiving off our responsibility on religious freedom to Canada and other countries, we should offer asylum to those being persecuted like Asia Bibi?

Chris Philp: That is a question that requires very serious consideration, and of course there are many persecuted Christians from countries such as Iraq and Syria who might wish to seek asylum as well.

Last year, again in Pakistan, Sunee Saleem was beaten to death by a group of doctors—a group of doctors—in the Services hospital in Lahore when he protested about the anti-Christian abuse his heavily pregnant sister had suffered at the hospital. The US State Department says that the Pakistani Government themselves have “engaged in or tolerated systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom”.

Yet, just a few weeks ago Pakistan’s Foreign Minister speaking in Brussels dismissed concerns as being “whipped up” by “western interests.” His attitude is not acceptable, especially bearing in mind that the UK Government send £463 million a year in aid to Pakistan—it is the single biggest recipient of UK overseas aid, but we do not attach conditions about ending persecution of religious minorities.

The litany of persecution goes on. In May 2017, two churches in Sudan were destroyed on the orders of the Government. In June 2017, some 33 Christian women in Eritrea were imprisoned by the Eritrean Government simply for taking part in prayer. And in India, 24,000 Christians were physically assaulted last year. Prime Minister Modi dismissed that as “imaginary fears”: he is wrong and we should say so.

Chris Philp: The hon. Lady is right. Of course, the first place that we should champion and protect religious freedom is here in the United Kingdom; that is of course our first duty as Members of Parliament, but let us not forget the duty we also owe to persecuted minorities around the world—to stand up and protect them as well.

In Saudi Arabia, public places of Christian worship are banned. There are regular crackdowns and raids on private Christian ceremonies, and Christians in Saudi Arabia are regularly imprisoned. Saudi Arabian schools use textbooks that teach hatred against Christians and Jews, and the country’s Grand Mufti recently said that Christianity is not a religion.

Christians are often a target for religious extremists. The terrible attack in Sri Lanka at Easter this year saw 259 people murdered by Islamist extremists, and on Palm Sunday in Egypt in 2017 ISIS bombers murdered 45 Coptic Christians. In Pakistan the year before, again at Easter, the Taliban murdered 75 Christians. These are just a few of the terrible examples of the persecution and murder that Christians around the world are suffering.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case, and the Bishop of Truro’s report is a very strong one, but I am sure that my hon. Friend would also recognise that there are terrible cases of persecution against other religions elsewhere in the world, of which that against the Muslim Rohingya in Burma is one of worst recent examples. Does he agree that there are cases about religions in general that the Foreign Office should also be considering in its policy?

Chris Philp: Yes, of course the Foreign Office should take a strong position on the persecution of any religious minorities, and of course the persecution of the Rohingya Muslims in Burma is a particularly egregious example. I am certainly not saying that we should ignore other examples of persecution, but I am drawing the House’s attention to the fact that 80% of religious persecution around the world is committed against Christians, and we should be mindful of that.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I completely agree with what the hon. Gentleman is saying about this situation, which is deeply horrific. I, too, spoke on an Open Doors panel, at the Labour party conference last year. He mentioned Saudi Arabia and Pakistan; does he accept that there is a fundamental problem here in that we have a series of alliances and relationships with these countries, but often turn a blind eye to the fact that they are persecuting Christians and indeed other religious minorities? Does he also agree that there is another problem in that we often do not know how many Christians are even in those countries, because people are fearful of stating what their religion is in the first place?

Chris Philp: I agree with both points—not knowing how many people are affected and the fact that we have quite close relationships with some of these countries.

For western Governments to fail to act makes us in many ways complicit in some of these outrages. As the noble Lord Alton has argued many times, failing to stand up to protect minorities simply serves to encourage the persecutors. Lord Alton has often referred to the fact that the world’s indifference made possible the slaughter...
of 1.5 million Christian Armenians between 1915 and 1917. He makes the point that ignoring some of these atrocities encourages even worse atrocities to be perpetrated in the future. Lord Alton has made that point very powerfully on many occasions.

Against that backdrop, the Bishop of Truro’s work has never been more important, and I fully support his report. The bishop finds that the persecution and murder of Christians around the world is “the most shocking abuse of human rights in the modern era.” In particular, I support the bishop’s call for a UN resolution stating that those countries that are responsible for tolerating or encouraging the persecution of Christians and religious minorities must instead protect them.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I am afraid I have seen instances of Christians killing Christians; obviously, I am referring to Bosnia, where I witnessed that. So it is not just other religions having a go at Christians; it is actually Christians on Christians—almost blue on blue.

Chris Philp: I am aware of my hon. Friend’s military service in Bosnia and the fact that he was in the country when the Srebrenica massacre of 1995 took place, and we should be mindful of those sorts of atrocities as well as the other ones we are talking about today.

I also support the Bishop of Truro’s call for the Government and the UN to impose sanctions on those countries who fail to protect religious minorities, and I also support his call for British diplomatic staff to be trained on this issue and for it to be made a priority of British foreign policy to put pressure on Governments who are turning a blind eye to this.

There is even more we can do. As the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) suggested in his intervention, many of the countries where the persecution of Christians is tolerated or even state-sponsored receive direct foreign aid from the United Kingdom. Many of those countries will wish to secure trade and investment deals with us and many of them also buy arms from the UK, which requires a UK Government export licence. I would like to see the UK Government do more to link overseas aid, trade and arms exports to real progress in tackling the persecution of religious minorities. Why should we send British taxpayers’ money to a Government, or indeed sell them arms, when they allow or encourage the persecution of religious minorities? Ideally, we should ensure that these steps are taken on a multinational basis, together with our European Union and United Nations partners, but if that cannot be secured, the UK should be prepared to act alone. The UK Government cannot and must not simply mouth platitudes; we must take real action. By approving the motion today, this House will make clear its view. The Government should then act.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There is a four-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches. I ask Members to be very strict about this; otherwise, some are going to drop off the list and I do not want that to happen.

2.30 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), who made a very thoughtful speech. Mention has been made of the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Glasgow East (David Linden), and I want to thank them for their representation in this House and for their tireless campaigning work in this area. Above all, I think we would all wish to thank the non-governmental organisations, including Open Doors, that have kept these issues in our consciousness for years. We must also thank our constituents who have kept Members across the House informed, and I would like to thank the members of the Penycae Neighbourhood Church of the Nazarene who have kept me informed of meetings that have been happening.

Freedom of belief is a basic human right. It is not a western construct; it is a basic fact of being human. Article 18 of the United Nations universal declaration of human rights makes it clear that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes a person’s freedom to change their religion or belief and the freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest their religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

I commend the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the work that the Bishop of Truro has done in looking at the specific issue of persecution against Christians, simply because of the scale of it. Open Doors is now saying that extreme persecution has increased from being found in one country to 11 countries over five years. There has been a rise in hate speech in state media and by religious leaders. This House, the European Parliament and the US House of Representatives have declared that ISIS atrocities against Christians and other religious minorities—for example, against the Yazidis and Shi’a Muslims—met the tests of genocide. I would like to see that recognised by the UK Government.

However inconvenient it might be for politicians from western democracies, we must recognise that part of that universal declaration includes the right to convert or to change religion or belief, including the right to have no belief, which is a fundamental part of religious freedom. This is not about western values; it is about universal human values, and any extreme form of nationalism that does not allow for conversion goes against that fundamental tenet.

Mention has rightly been made of the Commonwealth, which has a real role to play in this. The blasphemy laws in Pakistan are a total obscenity. They are not somehow loosely based on the codification of laws in the 1860s. Since the 1980s, crimes under these laws have increased, prejudicing religions including certain types of Islam and Christianity, and that is a disgrace.

I would also like us to reflect on an issue of general concern—the death penalty. We have seen an increased use of the death penalty, and the Centre for Social Justice in Pakistan has stated that its use has increased for people accused of blasphemy. In the United States, 39 states still use the death penalty, including some that still use a firing squad. It is simply unacceptable to those of us in the west who wish to advocate on this issue that the US still has the death penalty, and I urge the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to challenge it. I also urge everyone in the US who cares about the persecution of Christians to question the use of the death penalty in that country. Lastly, I think we must all take responsibility. I do not want to be partisan, but...
when people describe Muslim women wearing burqas as looking like letterboxes, that is irresponsible, wherever it comes from. We have to protect these freedoms.

2.35 pm

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): As the Bishop of Truro’s local MP, I am pleased to be able to speak in this debate in support of his excellent report. It has become a custom in this House to give a voice to the voiceless. This enables us to ground our debate in the real-life experiences of our constituents and draw on their expertise. I want to use the short time I have available today to give voice to the bishop himself, as he cannot speak in this debate. I had planned to read out his personal introduction to his report, but time allows me to refer only to a few extracts from the six reasons for the review.

First, to understand why the review is justified, we have to appreciate that today the Christian faith is primarily a phenomenon of the global south, and that it is therefore primarily a phenomenon of the global poor. Western voices that are quick to speak up for the world’s poor cannot afford to be blind to this issue. Secondly, this particular focus is justified because Christian persecution, like no other, is a global phenomenon. Thus Christian persecution is not limited to one context or challenge. Thirdly, Christian persecution is a human rights issue and should be seen as such. Freedom of religion or belief is perhaps the most fundamental human right, because so many others depend on it. If freedom of religion or belief is removed, so many other rights are put in jeopardy, too.

Fourthly, this is not about special pleading for Christians, but about making up a significant deficit. In that sense it is an equality issue. If one minority is on the receiving end of 80% of religiously motivated discrimination, it is simply unjust that that minority should receive so little attention. Fifthly, this is also about being sensitive to discrimination against, and persecution of, all minorities. Because the Christian faith is perhaps the one truly global faith, it has become a bellwether for repression more generally. Renewing the focus on Christian persecution is therefore a way of expressing our concern for all minorities who find themselves under pressure.

Finally, historically and theologically, the Christian faith has always been subversive. “Jesus is Lord” is the earliest Christian creed, and those were not empty words. Rather, they explain why the Christian faith attracted persecution from the earliest days. To say “Jesus is Lord” was to say that Caesar was not the Lord, as he claimed to be, so from its earliest days the Christian faith presented a radical challenge to any power that made absolute claims for itself. The Christian faith should make no absolutist political claims for itself, but it will always challenge those who do. Indeed, the Christian faith’s inherent challenge to absolutist claims explains why it has been such a key foundation stone of western democratic government, and why we should continue to support it vigorously wherever it is under threat. The focus of the review’s recommendations is clearly on guaranteeing freedom of religion or belief for all, irrespective of faith, tradition or belief system, and taking full account of the scale, scope and severity of its abuse in various contexts. We must seek freedom of

Ruth Jones: I agree completely with the hon. Lady when she says this is about ensuring that people can practise their faith, whatever it may be. As somebody who comes from a Muslim faith and whose father, grandfather and uncles were all imams, I know that Islam itself says, “La iqra ha fiddin”: people should be able to practise their faith, whatever it may be. As somebody who has written to me asking me to speak in this debate on this important issue. I thank all those—Christian and non-Christian—who have written to me asking me to speak up for them in this debate. We must, as the bishop notes, recognise that this is not a western problem, that many of the poorest in our world are Christians and that they need our solidarity and support. It is easy to brush this off, but there are people living in fear, people living with often devastating consequences and people who need the British Government to stand up for them. This need to stand with them is why it is so important that the British Government get to grips with this.
Of course, it is not just us; we need to work with our partners in the Commonwealth of Nations, to raise these issues in the Security Council at the United Nations and, whatever happens with our relationship with the European Union, to work with Europe, too. I know that the Foreign Secretary may not be in his place next week—who knows, he could be in No. 10—but I hope that, whoever steps into the role next week, he or she will maintain an interest in and focus on these really important issues.

I welcome the 22 recommendations in the bishop’s report, particularly the focus on working together with our international and regional partners and allies. We must ensure that civil society plays its role in shaping views and protecting minorities. We have seen what happened with the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and with the Christians in the middle east and other places. The British Government can and should become a leader in defending freedom of expression and of faith, too.

Like my constituents back home in Newport West, I was struck by a quote in the report of William Wilberforce saying in this very Chamber in 1791 that “you may choose to look the other way, but you can never again say you did not know”.

Our task in this Chamber and in our communities is to ensure that we do not look the other way, and that we do not walk by on the other side either.

2.42 pm

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): I do not know whether I should start by declaring an interest in that I am a Christian who has newly found faith, but it is really exciting to see so many Members of all parties in this House wanting to take part in this debate. It is a shame that we are limited to such a short time today, and there are so many MPs who want to get in and make their points.

First, I want to pay tribute to the Foreign Secretary for his work in bringing about this important report. There was that old adage in No. 10 Downing Street that “We don’t do God”, but that was in a previous Administration. Christians in this country have often thought that there was a stiffness about Christianity. All too often since I have found faith, I have heard the words “Oh, they’re do-gooders”, and a Church of England vicar sent me an email about “Jesus freaks”. We seem to do down Christianity in this country somewhat, and it is important that the Foreign Secretary has put this front and centre of the work of the Foreign Office.

We are a multicultural and multi-faith society, and we should embrace and champion that, but when we see that 80% of all religious persecutions around the world are persecutions of Christians, it is important that we as a nation stand up and say that we will not accept this and are going to come to the aid of those Christians around the world. In the same way that we deplore it and speak out when the Rohingyas are persecuted in Myanmar, the Yazidis in Iraq and the Uyghur Muslims in China, so we must, with all our might and all our voice, speak out in defence of Christians around the world.

It touched me recently when, at the church that I attend in Uttoxeter—the Renew Church—we had Open Doors come and present to us one Sunday. The scale at which Christian persecution around the world is taking place is scary, as is the speed at which it is increasing.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I very much thank my hon. Friend for what he is saying. Does he agree that we should approach all this in a real spirit of humility, because we ourselves in this country have seen religious persecution over the centuries? However, we know what it is to put that behind us, and the advantages it brings to our society when we do not do it any more. I myself come from a Huguenot background: we fled to this country because of religious persecution elsewhere. British people have had to flee to the low countries—the Netherlands—because of persecution here. We need to approach this in a spirit of humility, as well as of upholding the name of Jesus Christ.

Andrew Griffiths: I absolutely agree with what my hon. Friend says. He is a true example of somebody who is living a Christian life, and he is absolutely right when he says that the UK was the first country to establish human rights such as freedom of religion. It was we who established this, and spread it around the world—to America, and to Australia and New Zealand. It was in 1547 that the freedom to read the Bible in public was first established, and it was 1559 when we first had the freedom to interpret the Bible without Government interference. There are centuries of examples of Britain leading the way in protecting religious freedoms of all kinds, and certainly in standing up for Christianity.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): At the outset, my hon. Friend mentioned that we had cross-party support for this motion. May I gently add that that support is not only cross party but multi-faith among the Members of Parliament here?

Does my hon. Friend agree that Britain has a significant role on the global stage—we are a permanent member of the UN Security Council, head of the Commonwealth and a major economic power—and that we use our influence on the global stage for a whole variety of reasons and causes, and should ensure that the protection of Christians is put high on the list and that we use our influence for that purpose as well?

Andrew Griffiths: My hon. Friend speaks with great common sense, as always. I am very proud to represent a multicultural, multi-faith community. I have some 7,000 Muslims in my community, and they make a massive contribution to my society and it is a joy to be their Member of Parliament. He is absolutely right that we have this historical connection and historical influence with which we can do good. We can use that for the benefit of Christians, for the benefit of religious freedoms and for the benefit of democracy around the world.

In many respects, because of our history, we almost shy away from confrontation. Because of that colonial past, we are often too afraid to be seen to be interfering in the business of other independent nations. Actually, as we heard in the magnificent opening speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), whom I commend for securing this debate, we see that effect on a global scale, and it is only right for Britain to stand up and take its responsibility seriously.

I pay tribute to the Bishop of Truro for his brilliant, incisive work, but I hope that this is just the first step towards the Government standing up and taking religious persecution and the persecution of Christians very seriously. A bit like a stick of Blackpool rock, I want this to run...
through the middle of all our Foreign Office policy, aid and trade. We have the levers to change behaviour and save lives. When people are being victimised, persecuted, murdered, stabbed and bullied simply for reading the Bible and worshipping Jesus Christ, we must act. The Bible states that Christ said:

“And ye shall be hated of all men for my name’s sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved.”

I absolutely believe that this motion is an important step forward in ensuring the safety of Christians around the world.

2.49 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I begin by adding my congratulations to the Bishop of Truro on the publication of his excellent report and by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and the hon. Members for Croydon South (Chris Philp), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing today’s debate. I also put on the record my appreciation for the work of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief in promoting the right of people of faith or none to have the freedom to pursue their beliefs. I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in sending our best wishes to Catherine Thane, who until recently was the operations director for the APPG and who was married to George on Saturday.

I thank all those people for being such a powerful voice for persecuted Christians around the world because, sadly, that voice is necessary now more than ever. No matter where one looks in the world right now, anti-Christian discrimination and persecution is on the rise.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Brendan O’Hara: I will not give way, because of the time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): No, you will be all right. You will get an extra minute.

Brendan O’Hara: Okay. I will give way.

Emma Little Pengelly: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the most important aspects of this report is that right across the United Kingdom, including within churches, there is still significant ignorance and a lack of knowledge about the sheer scale of the persecution of Christians right across the world? One of the things that we can do as Christians and as Members of Parliament is raise that awareness through the likes of this report and these debates.

Brendan O’Hara: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. As Christians in this country, we have become very comfortable in our freedom to believe as we do, and we should always have at the forefront of our minds that our brothers and sisters around the world are not in such a privileged position. His Holiness Pope Francis said recently:

“It might be hard for us to believe, but there are more martyrs today than in the first centuries. They are persecuted because they speak the truth and proclaim Jesus Christ to this society.”

Increasingly, however, society’s response to those speaking that truth is to imprison, torture, kidnap or murder them. As we have heard, the Open Doors charity publishes an annual watchlist of countries where it believes persecution to be extreme, very high or high. One country was on that list five years ago: North Korea. Today, no fewer than 11 countries are considered to be in the extreme category, and we have all watched in horror the systematic attempt to eradicate all traces of Christianity from the ancient middle east homeland that we all love.

Of course, many charities and NGOs are working hard and doing some great work, and I pay tribute to the work done by Aid to the Church in Need, which funds over 5,000 projects in 140 countries each year, helping to support persecuted Christians live out their faith and provide practical and spiritual support to millions of people. In January, I was privileged to join Aid to the Church in Need on a visit to Lebanon and the Syrian border to see that practical and spiritual support and action for myself. We met Christian families who had fled Syria, Iraq and other places in the middle east to seek refuge in Lebanon and who would be destitute were it not for the day-to-day support and pastoral care provided by ACN.

On the feast of the Epiphany in January, in the town of Zahlé on the Syrian border, we went to a food centre called Saint John the Merciful Table, where ACN, along with the Melkite Greek Catholic archdiocese, provides 1,000 people with a hot meal every single day. It was a small but wonderful example of how Christian organisations are helping those fleeing persecution.

However, given the number of people in need, the situation cannot be left to charities and NGOs, which is why I commend the Bishop of Truro’s report. I sincerely hope that the Government take heed of what it says and act upon its recommendations. In particular, I urge the Government to heed his words about the UK being a global leader when it comes to championing the freedom of religion or belief across the world. I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Member for Croydon South that the UK Government must be prepared to impose meaningful sanctions against perpetrators who abuse the religious belief of others.

Finally, as the chair of the all-party group on the Yazidi people, as we approach the fifth anniversary of the genocide, I highlight the bishop’s recommendation that the Foreign Office should take a lead role in pursuing the prosecution of the perpetrators of sex crimes against Yazidi and Christian women, and not only as terrorists.

2.54 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): On 31 May 2014, The Times newspaper had an editorial headlined “Spectators at the Carnage”. This was a charge against western politicians—we in this Chamber and others throughout the western world—who have not taken this issue sufficiently seriously. I am very grateful to my friends who have brought this debate to Parliament.

Like many others, I follow what Open Doors says. We know from its report that some 245 million Christians are at high, very high or extreme risk of persecution. That figure is rising—only a few years ago, there were 200 million, so the situation is getting worse. In China, over 1,000 Christians have been detained without trial.
or have been unfairly arrested and hundreds of thousands of Uyghur Muslims are being interred or the families are being separated. In Nigeria, 3,731 Christians were killed and 131 churches were destroyed. In Chad, 225 Christians lost their lives, and in Cameroon 114 Christians were killed, with 10 churches destroyed. This is happening on a very large scale. William Wilberforce said to this House in 1791 that

"you may choose to look the other way but you can never...say that you did not know".

That is as relevant now as it was then.

Rehman Chishti: My hon. Friend has put forward a concerning picture from around the world. On addressing that challenge, does he agree with the former Bishop of Rochester, Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali, who said that the greater use of our aid for persecuted Christian communities around the world is something that we should seriously consider? He gave the example of supporting the Iraqi Christian homes on the Nineveh plains and listed a number of others. As a passionate supporter of international development aid, I ask my hon. Friend: should that now be targeted to support persecuted Christian communities around the world?

Andrew Selous: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend’s point. I will illustrate the sort of thing that is going on by quoting Bishop William Naga of Borno, who said of some of the refugee camps in Nigeria:

“When the care of the camps was handed over to other organisations, the discrimination started. They will give food to the refugees, but if you are a Christian they will not give you food. They will even openly tell you that the relief is not for Christians. There is an open discrimination.”

It is really important that DFID, if it is involved in helping those refugees, makes sure that British aid is going to everyone who needs it, regardless of their faith, and that that sort of discrimination is not allowed to happen. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we need to make sure that where overseas aid, trade and arms exports are concerned, they should be subject to requiring robust action on dealing with persecution.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. Like him, I pay tribute to the work of Witney-based Open Doors for its powerful advocacy on this very serious issue. He mentions Nigeria, and one of Open Doors’s other points is that progress should be pursued in areas where progress has already been made. Perhaps if the Foreign Office were to engage alongside the Government of Nigeria, as they already have, great progress will continue to be made.

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, and I am grateful to him for putting it on the record.

This is a harrowing debate—rightly, because we need to bring these matters into the public domain, and to keep doing so until things get better. However, I end my speech by drawing the House’s attention to examples of one people group or faith coming to the aid of another that is being persecuted. In the second world war, when Jews were being rounded up into railway trucks for deportation, the Patriarch of Romania, in full ecclesiastical dress, came to the station and quoted the words of Ruth from the Old Testament:

“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.”

We need more of that type of intervention.

In Pakistan, about which we have heard quite a lot today, on the Sunday a week after the Peshawar bomb, Muslims formed a human chain around some churches to protect Christians who were going to worship. In Oman, a Muslim country, it is possible for Christians to worship openly in the Jesus the Good Shepherd church in Muscat; I have been able to worship there myself. That is an example that other Muslim countries should follow. In Mandera in Kenya, Muslims stood up for Christians who were being attacked, saying, “You kill all of us or you kill none of us.”

As I say, this is rightly a grim debate, because these facts deserve much greater circulation, and we all want follow-through from the Government. However, it is important to look at how we can do things differently and to look at signs of hope and examples of people from one faith standing up against the persecution of people from another.

I thank the Foreign Secretary for commissioning this excellent report. He has taken a bold and important step in opening the Government up to challenge. He did that for good reason. We all look forward to the Government following through on the recommendations, as they very much need to.

3.1 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I follow on from my dear friend the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) in giving a big thank you to the Foreign Office. I also thank the Bishop of Truro for conducting this investigation, and the hon. Members who managed to get this debate. Of all the excellent organisations that have been name-checked, I particularly praise Christian Solidarity Worldwide. I have made two visits abroad with it. The first was to Nigeria, where I witnessed the words of the Bishop of Jos, whose wife was raped by extremists. He gave a graphic account of what things are like in northern Nigeria.

I also visited Pakistan, where I met the inestimable Shahbaz Bhatti, who was the Minister for Minorities. He was slaughtered for his beliefs. I hope that in due course the Catholic Church will recognise what that wonderful man has done. Pakistan is an interesting country; it has people of all persuasions in its Government, but Shahbaz always knew that he took the risk of losing his life, though he carried on nevertheless.

I spend a lot of time worrying about Sudan. It is obvious what is going on there. I got very interested in it because of the religious divide, but when I learned more about the situation, I found that it is not just Muslims against Christians; the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) talked about Christians sometimes fighting
[Dr David Drew]

Christians, and sadly that happens in southern Sudan. Also, religion is used as a franchise, and people of extreme views use those views to maintain power. I ask the Government to keep a very close eye on the Christians who remain in the north in Sudan, of whom there are many millions, and to try to bring peace to the south.

In the two minutes remaining to me, I will concentrate on a couple of points in the bishop’s report that are worthy of emphasis. First, it is very important that our embassies and those who advocate on behalf of the British Government recognise the importance of freedom of religious belief are properly trained and look out for it. That is an important recommendation from the bishop, and I hope that the Minister will take it up. Often there are other connected issues, such as sexuality and gender. It is important that we tease away what may be a veneer of religion and look below the surface.

At the end of the day, we are talking about the mass exodus of Christians from many places in the world. That is unacceptable and we as Christians have to do something about it. We must talk about it in this place and represent those communities. Of course, this is not just about Christians. The Ahmadis have already been mentioned, and the Baha’is are another religious group who are heavily discriminated against in many parts of the world.

In conclusion, the one blemish—I was sad about this—is that the bishop was called in by the Israeli ambassador to be admonished about the fact that he chose to mention Israel and Palestine as a reason why Christians have left the middle east. It is important that we stand with the bishop and make it clear that, whatever the discrimination, those who may not be openly discriminatory are still, none the less, covertly allowing such things to go on. We should stand with the bishop in what he has said and done, and in how we follow up on it.

3.6 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Just a few months ago, this Chamber stood shocked in the aftermath of the appalling Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka. It is so sad to have heard in this debate that that was just one of the most recent of a whole series of terrible atrocities committed against Christians in many parts of the world.

I was struck by the quote from The Times that the Bishop of Truro put at the start of his report:

“Across the globe, in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, Christians are being bullied, arrested, jailed, expelled and executed. Christianity is by most calculations the most persecuted religion of modern times. Yet Western politicians until now have been reluctant to speak out in support of Christians in peril.”

That is a pithy summary of the terrible injustice on which we are reflecting.

Christian persecution is a global phenomenon with multiple drivers. It is very important to remember that Christianity is not just a religion of the west—it is a genuinely global faith. The victims of persecution are, in the main, from some of the poorest and most deprived communities on earth. Open Doors has identified in a succession of “World Watch List” reports the worrying phenomenon that, where Christians are in the minority, they are increasingly portrayed as somehow western or alien, despite the fact that their communities date back hundreds of years in their home countries.

That is a particular problem in the middle east. Christians have been living in the middle east since the earliest days of the faith. They have an unbroken presence of 2,000 years in the middle east, yet they are under pressure in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen; and, of course, horrific atrocities have been committed against them in the region, including gender-based violence.

The situation is so severe that the very survival of Christianity as a living religion in the middle east is now in doubt. A century ago, 20% of the population was Christian, but now, according to the report, the figure has fallen to 5%. It is distressing to read the Bishop of Truro’s finding that some of Christianity’s “oldest and most enduring communities” are facing what he calls “decimation”. There are tragic parallels with the situation of the Jewish community, whose connection with that region goes back just as far and who were largely forced out—800,000 of them were forced out—in the years between 1948 and the 1970s.

My terrible fear is that history is repeating itself.

In responding to the Bishop of Truro’s report, the Foreign Secretary acknowledged that the efforts made to tackle the problem of attacks on Christians around the world has not matched the scale of the injustice perpetrated. I welcome that frank acknowledgement. I hope that the Bishop of Truro’s report marks a turning point where that inadequacy begins to change. We cannot just stand by and let this continue to happen.

The Open Doors website quotes 1 Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 26:

“If one part suffers, every part suffers with it.”

We have a responsibility to act. As the bishop’s report says, the vague language of general condemnation must be replaced by action to address the specific problem of Christian persecution. A key task is to spread that message to Governments around the world. The editorial in The Times that I quoted at the start of my speech said:

“We cannot be spectators at this carnage.”

This has been a powerful debate on a hard-hitting report that I hope will change the direction of UK foreign policy in a profound way.

3.10 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Boko Haram has been persecuting and killing Christians for more than 10 years. In a decade, thousands have died. I am going to focus on the story of just one woman.

Saratu’s home was one of those targeted. She saved her family as her village burned, making sure they got away. They hid together in the forest, but she knew she would have to go back. They had nothing to eat and she could not let her children die of hunger. She was spotted, chased, captured and beaten. Saratu was taken to a holding camp with hundreds of other women and children; they were held like animals. She feared the worst. She had heard the stories of rape, torture and murder; and of forced conversion, forced marriage and slavery. But her spirit was not broken. She was determined to get back to her children and save the other women with her. Two nights later, she escaped with more than 20 women and children.

Twenty thousand Nigerian Christians have been killed, and many more have endured kidnapping, forced conversion and torture. The kidnappings have not stopped. Christians across the middle belt of Nigeria still live in fear and the
violence has spread to neighbouring Niger. Just last month, Boko Haram kidnapped a woman from the city of Diffa, in an area that has provided refuge for the tens of thousands fleeing the attacks in Nigeria. They used that woman to send a message of terror—a letter saying to all in Diffa: “Leave within three days or be killed.” Many Christian families have fled in fear, but others simply cannot afford to leave and remain at risk. It may become yet another story of religious cleansing and murder.

TheDiffa region has already seen what Boko Haram will do: 14 people were killed and 37 kidnapped in two separate 2017 attacks. Soon afterwards, the daughter of the region’s Christian pastor was taken as well. The persecution caused by Boko Haram is extreme. Some 8,000 children have been used as soldiers, targeted because of poverty and vulnerability, and exploited, lied to and manipulated. Many are orphans, and some had been abandoned to the streets by parents who could simply no longer look after them. In 2018, according to UNICEF, 48 of those children were used as suicide bombers—48 children died to murder others. In that year, they were mostly girls. In 2017, the number was 135. The campaign of religious violence has not stopped, and less than a month ago three children were used as a weapon in a communal hall; 30 were murdered and 40 injured. Religious differences have been exploited to create this violence. Christians—the minority in the north of Nigeria—have been made scapegoats. Hatred has been created and fuelled.

President Buhari has made clear commitments to improve security, including for Christian communities in Nigeria, but frankly such promises have been made before. I want to know what the Government are going to do to work proactively with Nigeria, Niger and others to make that basic promise of security a reality.

3.14 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is an honour to take part in this important debate, and particularly to follow the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown). I am sure none of us have been anything but moved by the accounts we have heard. I pay tribute to the Bishop of Truro for his excellent report. The persecution of Christians has been raised many times in this House since I have been elected, but never have we had such a comprehensive and well put together report, which really presents a picture of what is taking place in the world. I draw attention to the fact that, in the report, the bishop included a quote from William Wilberforce, from one of his first speeches in this House against the slave trade. He said:

“You may choose to look the other way but you can never again say you did not know.”

That is what the report does to this House—never again can we say that we do not know what is going on in our world today. It is therefore down to us to decide what we do with the information with which we have been provided.

Like many other Members, I wish to pay tribute to the many organisations that work tirelessly to raise the issue of the persecution of Christians. They even put their own lives at risk to work for the protection of those who are persecuted for their faith. I have had the pleasure of working with Open Doors and Christian Solidarity Worldwide, and I thank them for the amazing work they do.

The persecution of Christians is nothing new. Right from the very beginning, the Christian Church faced persecution, but I am sure that if we spoke to those first early Christians and told them that more than 2,000 years later, the persecution of Christians for their faith would get worse, they would have struggled to comprehend how that could possibly be the case. None the less, that is the situation in which we find ourselves. As other Members have highlighted, the vast majority of people—some 80% of them—who are persecuted for their faith around the world are Christians. The persecution of Christians can be seen as a bellwether of the broader persecution of other faiths. Often, how a country behaves towards its Christians is a test of how other religious minorities will also be treated, which is why it is important that the Foreign Office, through this report from the Bishop of Truro, has chosen to focus on the persecution of Christians around the world.

It is often difficult for those with no faith to understand exactly what it is like for someone to find that their right, or their freedom, to worship, to practise and to express their faith is taken away. It is as if their identity has been taken away. To take the right of freedom of faith away from anyone is the ultimate violation of human rights.

We must never take for granted the freedom that we have in this country. Like the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who is no longer in her place, I have been horrified by some of the abuse that Members here have experienced over the past week or so simply because they followed their conscience and voted in a particular way in this House. We should all make it absolutely clear that there is no place for that in this country and that people should be free in this House to vote in the way that their conscience dictates. That is an ultimate freedom that we should defend and never lose sight of.

3.18 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate. I also thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) and the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for joining me to present the case to the Committee. I thank, too, the Minister for Europe and the Americas and the Foreign Secretary for their commitment to this issue—the Foreign Secretary has been much committed to this issue—and the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Truro for his efforts in carrying out the review of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s work to support persecuted Christians.

In the past year, 100,000 Christians will have been murdered because of their faith and 200 million will have been persecuted because of their faith. Some 2 billion people live in what is referred to as an endangered neighbourhood. That is the magnitude of this issue and why it is so important to have it before us in the House today.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene. As he praises the victims, several Members of this House, may I just pay tribute to the work that he does in his role as chair of the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief. He represents
incredibly well our party, our constituents, and, I think, all those of faith who believe that we have more to do, so I thank him.

**Jim Shannon:** My hon. Friend is most generous. I have been working to raise the issue of the persecution of Christians, people of other faiths and people with no faith.

**Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP):** I have a sister who is a missionary in Africa. Her team encounter persecution on a daily basis and have faced particular difficulties in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Some of this persecution has sometimes been called tribal violence. It is not tribal violence; it is tribes rising against Christians, and it has been covered up by the world media. We also need to highlight that issue.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) said that it is the job of Members of this House to raise awareness, and she is right. But it is also our job to speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves.

**Emma Little Pengelly:** May I pay tribute—I am sure that my hon. Friend agrees with me—to the absolutely sterling work done by organisations such as Open Doors? Although I have attended church throughout my entire life, before I came to this place I was completely unaware of the sheer scale of the persecution of Christians. This issue is incredibly important to us all. We talk to each other, and most people in the Chamber have read the report and know the scale of the situation, but there is still a huge amount of work to be done out there. It is our duty not only to speak in this House, but to go out and speak to our constituents on our social media accounts and through the media to ensure that everybody is aware of the plight facing many millions of people right across the world—people of the Christian faith in particular, as that is the subject of today’s proceedings, but also people of other faiths. We should also make people aware of the incredible work that the APPG does in trying to raise awareness across all faiths.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank my hon. Friend for her very kind intervention.

There are some 80-plus churches in my constituency. I write to them and let them know what is going on, and this debate will go out to every one of those 80 churches of all faiths across my constituency next week when the girls in the office get the work done.

As the APPG noted in our published statement, all religious or belief communities throughout the world face violations of article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights, and protecting one group requires protecting all groups. I visited Pakistan last year, and it was poignant and emotional to see the position of Christians there with respect to education and qualifications, job opportunities, the right to worship and the right to convert. In fact, we are well aware of the issues across the whole middle east.

In Syria, 1.5 million Christians have left their country. There are only a quarter of a million Christians left in Iraq and fewer than 100,000 in Iran. In Colombia, Christian peasant farmers have been persecuted, tortured and murdered by Government forces and paramilitary groups. There are similar situations in Libya and in Nigeria, which the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) mentioned, where Boko Haram has carried out murders to a large degree. The Easter massacre in Sri Lanka is all too real in our lives. In eastern Ukraine, where Russia has influence, Baptist pastors have gone missing and churches have been destroyed. And then there is North Korea, where people cannot even mention the word “Christian” without being put in prison right away. There are also unbelievable abuses in China, as has already been mentioned today.

FORB is a hugely important issue. Indeed, the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation published its analysis on the same day as the launch of the report. I would strongly encourage any future UK Government of any colour to take this issue very seriously. The Minister knows that I am fond of him and he always responds well to our questions, so I look forward to his response. I have a couple of questions for him today. Has he initiated any action under the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 against FORB violators such as the generals in Burma? Have we ever needed reminding how much the Rohingya in Burma have been butchered, violated, murdered, raped, abused and burnt alive, or that their babies have been killed almost at birth? Those generals need to be made accountable. I look to the Minister to see what we can do in that regard. What discussions has he had with the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence to ensure that they can also be part of the changes that are needed? I commend the charities—Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Open Doors, Release International, the Barnabas Fund and Aid to the Church in Need—for all they have done.

I commend the Bishop of Truro for his efforts with this review. Will the Minister ask a Select Committee to assess the review to determine lessons learned and provide support and guidance for future reviewers? Recommendation 22 of the review states that in three years there should be a review to assess the Government’s progress in implementing the recommendations of the report. Will the Government also consider asking the Foreign Affairs Committee to carry that out?

3.25 pm

**Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con):** The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has an enormous heart and often speaks from it. I admire, respect and have affection for him.

I welcome the final report of the Bishop of Truro and thank him for it. I commend the depth of research in it. I want to speak rather technically about some of the recommendations, but before that—and more briefly than I would have liked—I want to affirm what colleagues have said. It is so important to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief; when it is encroached on, that so often also involves the violation of other human rights, including the right to life, the right to be free from torture, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment, the right to freedom of assembly or association, the right to freedom of expression and many more.

That recognition must be clearly visible in the strategy of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Protecting the right of freedom of religion and belief is so important
because its violation is often the root cause of so many other human rights violations across the world, as we have heard today.

Jeremy Lefroy: I praise my hon. Friend for all the work she has done, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and others in this House.

Most countries in the world have signed the universal declaration on human rights. That is there—it is a commitment that they have made. All who have signed it, including the United Kingdom, need to be held accountable. Every year, the United Nations needs to hold to account all the nations that have signed the declaration but are not living up to it. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Fiona Bruce: Absolutely. I commend the report’s recommendation that the UK engage better with international human rights mechanisms, but I do not think that the recommendation for a universal periodic review will help enough. A review conducted every three or four years is not enough to enable us to address some of the freedom of religious belief-related issues.

As my hon. Friend said, we need a solid review plan for a rolling oversight of the FCO’s obligations under the universal declaration of human rights and the international covenant on civil and political rights—international standards—so that we can monitor the situation of the affected communities, tailor the FCO’s response and oversee implementation. For that reason, I am somewhat sceptical about the suggested introduction of a diplomatic code. Actually, we have the international standards; we should be judged against those.

I commend the recommendation for the UK to champion the call for other countries each to have a special envoy position for freedom of religious belief—something that I emphasised in my communications with the independent review. I stress that we need to strengthen the mandate of our own Prime Minister’s special envoy on freedom of religious belief, to ensure that he has all the resources and powers that he needs to be effective. I am not sure that that is the case at present. I see the good work that Lord Ahmad is doing, but time and again I see how stretched he is. I wonder whether the role should be distinct from that of a Foreign Office Minister, so that action on many of the review’s recommendations can be held to account independently.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): My hon. Friend is right to echo the call in the report for the United Kingdom to become a champion of freedom of religion or belief, but does she share my concern about the deterioration of tolerance towards Christians in this country? I point to the example of the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who has been subject to the most intolerable feedback in relation to her vote of conscience last week.

Fiona Bruce: I agree—we must call out criticism of those in this place and elsewhere who simply want the freedom to express their biblically-based beliefs. My hon. Friend is right. Along with many others in this place, I have been the subject of some really unpleasant attacks during the past week, particularly on social media, simply for speaking out in this place and voting on biblically-based beliefs on abortion and marriage.

I turn to the issue of genocide. I welcome the recommendation in the report that the Government should introduce mechanisms...to facilitate an immediate response to atrocity crimes, including genocide through activities such as setting up early warning mechanisms to identify countries at risk of atrocities, diplomacy to help de-escalate tensions and resolve disputes”.

I have spoken about this issue many times in this Chamber, raised questions about it and put forward the Genocide Determination (No. 2) Bill, which would help to deal with it. I commend the Bishop of Truro for highlighting the issue.

It is important to point out that the FCO does not have appropriate mechanisms to consider mass atrocities and determine whether they amount to genocide. When asked about genocide, the Government’s usual response is that such a determination is not for politicians to make, but for the international judicial systems. That needs to be reviewed. The FCO needs to review its long-standing policy of outsourcing the determination of genocide to the international judicial systems, which often do not exist. We need to introduce an FCO-based team focused on genocide and religious persecution to consider situations, identify red flags and inform the FCO response. We also need to ensure that the FCO works closely with other Departments, such as the Home Office and the Department for International Development, to ensure that we are applying the principles in this report internationally and at home.

Finally, I welcome the recommendation about improved religious literacy training. The FCO has a FORB toolkit, but as the Bishop of Truro has said, barely anyone applies it in their work or takes notice of it. We need to improve that.

3.32 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I congratulate the Members who helped secure today’s debate on this very important matter. The persecution of Christians around the globe is felt by many both within and outside the Church, in my constituency and further afield. Leaving Christians overseas vulnerable to persecution would be a gross abdication of the global responsibilities that this country has worked ceaselessly to uphold over many years.

The very birthplace of Christianity is under threat. Christians in countries across the middle east find themselves driven from their homes and imprisoned, tortured or killed on the basis of the faith that they hold or the texts that they follow. Daesh in Iraq and Syria, and the continuing spectre of Boko Haram in central Africa, present a real existential challenge for the free practice of religion in those regions. The presence of Christianity in more and more parts of the world faces nothing short of complete extinction, while Governments fail to provide a bulwark against the tide of attacks.

Christians in communities across the world under oppressive Governments, or who are the target of militant groups, take little comfort from warm words. For a child left parentless after her family was executed for attending church, condemnation provides no solace. For a pastor standing in the ruins of his church, statements of support ring hollow. We can do more, and we must do more, to help bring the persecution of Christians to an end.
I welcome the Bishop of Truro’s recommendations, which show the clear steps that this Government can take. I am encouraged by the words of many colleagues, which demonstrate the constructive spirit in which we all are willing to work. The challenge that faces us all in ending discrimination and violence against Christians is monumental, but this report leaves me optimistic about the future of religious freedoms. This review makes concise, achievable recommendations that draw on the talents of our unparalleled diplomatic network. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has immeasurable experience in helping some of the world’s most vulnerable people when they need it most. Now is the time to use that experience and influence to protect Christians, who face the most unimaginable treatment for following their faith. I congratulate the Government on their unequivocal support for defending the rights of Rohingya Muslims in Burma, because that demonstrated the impact and reach that our country can have when we lead international responses to protect those suffering from religious persecution.

The systematic denial of freedom of religious belief is becoming entrenched by extreme nationalism and militant extremism in all corners of the world. We cannot afford to hesitate. The Government have shown that they are able and willing to lead an international response to tackle these injustices. The responsibility now rests with the Government to agree a strong collective response that has freedom and tolerance at its heart.

3.35 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and my friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). When I think of those two Members, I think of the line from Paul’s epistle to the Romans, chapter 1, verse 16:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ”.

The speech delivered by the hon. Member for Strangford reminded me of the famous saying of St Francis of Assisi:

“Preach the gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words.”

The emotion behind what he said was very powerful.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary for commissioning the report—it is a measure of that particular Member of this House that he felt the need to commission it in the first place. I also thank the Bishop of Truro for the work that he has done to highlight the scale of Christian persecution around the world. It is an excellent report, and I hope that its conclusions and recommendations will be studied carefully, and accepted and acted upon. I cannot truly convey the emotions I felt when reading the report, because the scale of Christian persecution that it describes is truly shocking and horrific. Nobody should be persecuted because of how or who they worship. It is a fundamental part of the spiritual DNA of many Members of this House that everybody should have the basic human right of freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

I fully support the Bishop’s recommendation that freedom of religion or belief should become the underpinning of the operation of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, I endorse the need for a diplomatic code. I think that some of our diplomats need to have a clear direction on the appropriate response to the persecution of Christians, because I feel ashamed that so many Christians have been persecuted around the world and we have done so little to stop it, or even to speak out about it. It is right that we have spoken out to condemn violence against other minority groups, but it is wrong that at times we have been too restrained—or indeed silent—in condemning the persecution of Christians.

I also agree with the Bishop that calling out the persecution of Christians is neither imperialistic nor a case of white privilege. As my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) noted, the bishop said that it is not about special pleading for Christians, but about making up for a significant deficit, because Christian persecution accounts for 80% of all religious persecution around the world.

Our county must act. We have a special responsibility—a moral responsibility—because of our privileged status in the world, and with our Head of State being the head of a Christian Church, to speak out and protect Christians around the world. Renewing a focus on Christian persecution, as the bishop said, is actually a way of expressing our concern for all minorities who find themselves under pressure. Ignoring Christian persecution might well mean ignoring other forms of repression.

May I make a plea to the Minister that we will use our soft power to exercise as much influence as possible in speaking up for persecuted Christians? It is high time we escalated the role of the Prime Minister’s special envoy on freedom of religion or belief. We need to follow the American example by having a dedicated ambassador at large for international freedom of religion or belief, with a formal structure of support, engaging with faith leaders at home and abroad and articulating recommendations for cross-Government action on this.

3.39 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): As others have done, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), who opened today’s debate. He eloquently set the scene for what has been an excellent debate that, as some of us predicted, has been squeezed due to time. Alongside the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), I appeared before the Backbench Business Committee in support of the application for the debate. Both Members have been serious champions for the persecuted Church in this House. I know I speak on behalf of everyone when I thank them for their pursuance of this issue.

I have the privilege of winding up today’s debate on behalf of the Scottish National party, which endorses the report and the recommendations made by the Bishop of Truro. We extend our grateful thanks to Philip and his team for doing so much work in such a short period of time. It was great that the Foreign Secretary committed to the review being undertaken. The relatively tight timescale for the report to be conducted and produced has raised some eyebrows, but we are where we are. It is important that the next Foreign Secretary is as committed to this issue as the current office holder.

Over the course of the afternoon, we have had no fewer than 15 contributions from the Back Benches, from the hon. Members for Croydon South, for Clwyd...
South (Susan Elan Jones), for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), for Newport West (Ruth Jones) and for Blyth (Andrew Griffiths), my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), the hon. Members for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and for Stroud (Dr Drew), the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), and the hon. Members for West Ham (Lyn Brown), for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), for Strangford, for Congleton, for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) and for Stirling (Stephen Kerr).

For my own part, one of the most powerful images I have ever seen was from Egypt’s Tahrir Square in 2011. That scene, of Christians forming a human shield around Muslims who were on their hands and knees praying, is one that will never leave me. For me, that kind of solidarity and fellowship is the very essence of freedom of religion and belief. However, freedom of religion and belief is not just some romantic idea. It is enshrined in the UN universal declaration of human rights:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

The review is to be warmly welcomed, and it is especially welcome that it has a very specific focus on the persecution of Christians. Whether it is a subconscious post-colonial guilt or not, there is sometimes a feeling that the persecution of Christians is often ignored or given less attention. That is alarming when we consider the sheer scale of the persecution of those of us who follow Jesus Christ. We know that Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the whole world. Indeed, in 2016, the Pew Research Centre found that Christians were singled out and persecuted in 144 countries across the world. That was up from 125 the previous year. We know from the excellent work done by organisations such as Open Doors that a quarter of a billion Christians in the top 50 countries for persecution still suffer intolerable levels of persecution and risk simply for following Jesus Christ.

Others have already done justice to the report by going through its recommendations, and the Foreign Office should absolutely give them serious consideration. I want to focus on where we go now and how the British Government interact with other countries in the years to come. At the moment, I am particularly concerned about persecution of Christians in Latin America and southern Asia.

Alarming, we saw India shoot up the world watchlist this year, entering the top 10 countries for persecuting Christians. That is particularly worrying, because the hostility towards Christians has grown enormously in just five years or so. Put simply, the persecution in India can be attributed directly to Prime Minister Modi’s Hindu nationalist movement. India is the world’s largest democracy, yet we are still hearing of prayer meetings being disrupted by Modi’s thugs and Christians being beaten simply for gathering to study God’s word and to pray.

Moving from India over to Pakistan, we are reminded of those paying the price twice: first, for being female; and, secondly, for having the temerity to have a different faith. In Pakistan, Christian women are particularly vulnerable to abduction, rape and forced marriage. It is estimated that 700 girls are vulnerable to that every single year.

I want to turn now to Latin America, which is in the Minister’s brief and which he is familiar with. There are a number of factors in play in Latin America, and we know that the main driver of persecution is a depressing cocktail of cartels, state authorities and rival human rights claims by indigenous groups. In Mexico, for example, murder is a regular occurrence, with the Roman Catholic Multimedia Centre reporting the murder of 45 priests and one cardinal between 1990 and 2017. Even today, Mexico is still considered one of the most dangerous places on earth to be a Catholic priest.

Earlier in the year, I wrote to the Minister about the situation in Chile and he, in his usual courteous but robust style, disputed that it was a place of hostility for Christians. However, in recent years, we have seen a co-ordinated campaign of arson attacks on churches, both Catholic and Protestant, so I would be grateful if, in summing up, he specifically referred to Chile and the latest situation there.

The reason I mention some of these countries and not the typical ones, such as Iraq and North Korea, is that they are ones with which we seek to have a good relationship in the context of global Britain; indeed, the Government actively want to do post-Brexit trade deals with them. I guess my main ask today is that human rights and freedom of religion and belief are not overlooked in some mad scramble to do a post-Brexit trade deal. As with any negotiation, there are trade-offs, but turning a blind eye to the persecution of Christians cannot be one of them.

That brings me rather nicely to the final thing I want to quote, which is the Bishop of Truro’s last words in the report:

“Perhaps the most dystopian aspect of George Orwell’s 1984 is the existence of the ‘Thought Police’ and the possibility of prosecution for ‘thought crime’. The freedom to think for oneself and to choose to believe what one chooses to believe, without fear of coercion, is the most fundamental human right, and is indeed the one on which so many others depend: because if one is not free to think or believe how can one order one’s life in any other way one chooses? And yet everywhere in our world today we see this right questioned, compromised and threatened. It is a grave threat which must be resisted—both because it is an evil in itself, and because it threatens so much else. It is on the basis of that conviction that these recommendations have been formulated. And those who find these recommendations unpalatable should simply ask themselves this question: what exactly would be the consequences of inaction? And how grave does this situation have to become before we act?”

3.46 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I thank the hon. Members for Croydon South (Chris Philp), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing this important debate. I also thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East for his summing-up. The hon. Member for Strangford, in particular, has done some excellent work as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief to highlight the persecution of Christians and, indeed, of those of other faiths and none. I commend him for his passion for the subject. Yes, sometimes it is emotional, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that.
We have heard 15 excellent speeches from hon. Members, and the representation here has been impressively cross-party and multi-faith. Genuine action on the persecution of Christians is long overdue; many people have been trying to draw the world’s attention to the deeply worrying scale of Christian persecution for many, many years. Like other Members, I was shocked to hear that 80% of religious persecution globally is against Christians. Clearly, there is a serious problem here that needs urgent action from all Governments.

The report rightly highlights that persecution for one’s religion or belief is not limited to Christians or indeed to any one religious or non-religious group. The unfortunate reality is that countries that do not respect religious freedom, or indeed the right to no belief, invariably do not respect other basic human rights. The persecution of Christians often goes hand in hand with the persecution of other religious groups and minorities. For example, we might look at India, where the rise of Hindu nationalism affects millions of Muslims, Sikhs and Christians, or at Pakistan, which is about 95% Muslim and 2% Christian, and has some of the harshest blasphemy laws in the world, including a mandatory death penalty for insulting the Prophet Mohammed.

The case of Asia Bibi was particularly concerning. While we are all relieved that Asia and her family have now settled in Canada, it was a real shame that our Government could not confirm at the time that they would offer her asylum in the UK. I had numerous conversations on the subject with the then Minister for Asia and the Pacific; and each time he urged caution in making the case too public. Now that the current Minister is in a position to comment on Asia’s case without jeopardising her move, can he clarify whether it is correct that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office vetoed the suggestion that she be allowed to move to the UK?

I very much welcome the Government’s initiatives to put the persecution of Christians centre stage globally. However, human rights groups and others are concerned about whether they will maintain the momentum. In July 2018, the Prime Minister took the very welcome step of appointing Lord Ahmad as her special envoy on freedom of religion or belief. One way to alleviate the concerns of human rights groups would be to make the role of the special envoy permanent, providing appropriate resources and an ability to work across Departments, and I hope the Minister will be able to confirm today that the Government will do that.

The Bishop of Truro said in his review that we must be prepared to consider imposing sanctions on perpetrators of serious human rights abuses against religious minorities, including Christians. Such a measure to hold nations to account over their human rights violations could be a very significant step and would be a real statement of intent, showing that the Government were committed to protecting religious minorities. Another potential measure is to include human rights clauses in future trade agreements. EU trade policy is increasingly incorporating human rights considerations. Can the Minister give an assurance that the significant work of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on the persecution of Christians can be mainstreamed through new trade agreements?

The Bishop of Truro also recommended that the Government seek a Security Council resolution urging all Governments in the middle east and north Africa to protect Christians, and other persecuted minorities, and allow UN observers to monitor the necessary security measures. That too would be a welcome step, and I hope that the Minister will comment on it, but I suggest that we need to go further. Rather than monitoring situations, we need to actively pursue progress on the persecution of Christians. That could start with countries with which we have good relationships, such as Nigeria. The report notes the internecine violence between Muslim herdsmen and Christian farmers across Nigeria’s middle belt. If the Foreign and Commonwealth Office were to work with the Nigerian Government to prioritise engagement on freedom of religion and belief, investing the necessary resources, a real difference could be made over time.

It is true that the conflict in Nigeria is not simply religious, but is also driven by climate change and a rapidly growing population. It is clear that more needs to be done to promote reconciliation between religious communities. I hope that the Minister will clarify how the UK will work with other Governments to support freedom of religion and belief. Numerous options are available to the Government to show that they are committed to protecting religious minorities, and many of them are contained in the Bishop of Truro’s review. I am sure the whole House looks forward to hearing from the Minister which recommendations the Government will be implementing and what specific action they will be taking in the light of this review.

3.53 pm

**The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):** I am grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Croydon South (Chris Philp) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and to the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing the debate. The Minister for the Middle East, my right hon. Friend, Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), would have liked very much to be here to respond to the debate, but he is currently engaged in a parallel debate, so the honour falls to me.

I am grateful for the contributions of all Members. This really has been a most dignified and passionate debate. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford. I have only a day or two left as a Minister—by choice; or perhaps, anyway—and I have to say that in my three years as a Foreign Office Minister, I have responded to many, many Westminster Hall debates, and without exception, when any topic involving human rights, religion, persecution of international justice is being discussed, the hon. Gentleman has been unfailingly present. I shall miss him, if not all Westminster Hall debates.

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** You can still turn up.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** Thank you for the offer. There are not many saints in this House, but the hon. Gentleman is about as close as anyone gets to being one.

On Monday 8 July, the Foreign Secretary welcomed the publication of the Bishop of Truro’s independent review of the persecution of Christians worldwide, and I would like now to set out in more detail the response of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.
The world is an increasingly challenging place for people of faith, and in some parts of the world for those of no faith. In the past two years, appalling atrocities, as we have heard today, have been committed against the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and the horrific shootings in two Christchurch mosques shocked us all, but there are so many other stories of suffering that gain far less news coverage, and the statistics tell us, as we have heard again today, that Christians suffer more persecution than any other religious group in the world, yet we hear far less about this than one would expect. We are too reticent about discussing Christian persecution, and we must overcome this mindset; the evidence justifies a much louder voice.

As the Bishop of Truro states in the introduction to his review, the majority of Christians are found in the global south and among the global poor, and the review takes case studies from China, India, Nigeria and Sri Lanka, where persecution stems from state oppression, terrorism and ethnic or nationalist conflict. As Christianity is perhaps the most truly global of religions, the persecution of Christians often indicates wider violations of the rights of all minority groups, and the report notes the large body of evidence for this. In some places the persecution of Christians is closely linked with poverty and social exclusion, and elsewhere it is compounded by discrimination against women, so increasing the attention given to Christian persecution does not dull but sharpen our focus on human rights for all.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Foreign Office has taken the lead on this, but the Minister will know that a number of hon. Members have argued that there needs to be a cross-Government approach for the very reason he has just set out: that this touches on so many areas. May we have a strategy across the whole of government to address this alarming persecution?

Sir Alan Duncan: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend, and in fact he is making my point for me: this is not just a Foreign Office thing. Indeed, it is not just an envoy thing; it is an everything thing, which means that all Departments, all the Government, and all Government policies must bear this in mind. And in doing so we should not be timid; we should be bold and articulate our goals and give guidance to our diplomats on how to reflect these values. We already engage on freedom or faith-based persecution.

Fiona Bruce: Does the Minister also agree that if we are to call this out internationally, we must also call out criticism of those in this country who feel inhibited perhaps and unable to speak out on issues as a result of their religious views? That is wrong.

Sir Alan Duncan: We cannot have one set of standards for abroad and a different set of standards for our own domestic life; they all have to be consistent, and in that sense my hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Freedom of religion or belief is already a fundamental part of Foreign Office work; in accordance with article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights. We have a team here in London dedicated to this agenda, and our overseas network promotes and supports freedom of religion on a daily basis. Over the past year, we have spoken out about the rights of the Baha’i in Yemen, Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia, the Rohingya in Myanmar and religious minorities in the middle east.

However, belief is a sensitive issue where more can sometimes be achieved through quiet persuasion and discreet negotiation. Sensitive cases often depend on strong diplomatic relations. With this in mind, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has been tackling religious persecution on three levels: first, we work with the United Nations and other global organisations to create international consensus to support freedom of religion or belief; secondly, at country level Ministers and officials raise individual cases with their hosts and lobby on behalf of the United Kingdom against practices and laws that discriminate on the basis of religion or belief; and thirdly, the Government, through the FCO, fund and support projects that promote respect for all people of faith and those of no faith.

The UK argues strongly for civilian and refugee protection, for humanitarian access and for the improvement of the effectiveness and funding of the international response across the world. We support efforts to ensure that Christians can return to their homes in areas of Iraq liberated from Daesh, and we are leading global efforts to bring Daesh to justice for their crimes. Two years ago, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted the UK-drafted Daesh accountability resolution 2379, which called for the establishment of an investigative team to collect evidence of Daesh’s crimes. Last year, the Prime Minister appointed my noble Friend Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon as the first special envoy on freedom of religion or belief. Lord Ahmad has worked tirelessly on this issue to offer our support to those who suffer. Good work is being done, but we must of course reflect on whether there is more we can do to protect Christians who are persecuted on the basis of their religion.

The report suggests that there is more to be done, and I am pleased to announce—in answer to the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes)—that the Government have decided to accept every recommendation in full. The following list of commitments is not exhaustive, but I hope that it illustrates the scale of our ambition.

We will put freedom of religion or belief at the heart of FCO policy, culture and operations. We will publicly articulate our goals and give guidance to our diplomats on how to reflect these values. We already engage on freedom of religion or belief in a range of international forums, but we will strengthen our approach with an advocacy strategy. We will carefully examine whether adopting the label “Christophobia” would better inform FCO policies to address the problem.

We will strengthen our data on freedom of religion or belief, and we already have the Magna Carta project that is investigating ways to improve the data. We will also work with the Department for International Development’s freedom of religion or belief programme to look at how better data can inform the development of international policy. We will respond immediately to any atrocity, including genocide, and we will continue our work to impose sanctions on the perpetrators of religious or faith-based persecution.

We will encourage arms-length bodies and partners such as the British Council to develop appropriate policies on freedom of religion or belief. To promote religious literacy, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, all Foreign Office
staff will undergo mandatory training where this is relevant to their job. We will create a clear reporting framework to formalise how we engage with minority and religious leaders on the ground, and we will use the recommendations to tailor responses to violations. We will ensure that human rights reporting mentions faith-based persecution wherever relevant.

To improve co-ordination, we will investigate whether new Whitehall structures could strengthen cross-Government thinking. We will initiate regular themed discussions with civil society representatives, and convene Ministers across the Government to give a consistent international approach. At the United Nations, we will explore how best to deliver a new Security Council resolution urging all Governments in the middle east and north Africa to protect Christians and to allow UN observers to monitor the necessary security measures. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will follow up on the recommendation that this report should also inform the work of other public authorities through a future full Cabinet meeting. Finally, we recognise the importance of measuring the impact of our work, so a review will be commissioned after a suitable length of time.

We warmly recommend this review for helping to give the worldwide persecution of Christians the attention that it demands. The review provides us with new evidence and raises concerns to which we must respond. I hope that Members here today will agree that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is demonstrating its firm commitment to addressing the recommendations of the review and to improving freedom of religious expression around the world, and I am more than happy that my final words in this House as a Minister should be in support of such a worthy cause.

4.4 pm

Chris Philp: This afternoon’s debate has been a really excellent one. I would like to pay tribute to all the Members who have contributed to it, but in particular to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his emotional and powerful contribution earlier. I strongly suspect that the final words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) in the Chamber will not be those he has just spoken. I look forward to hearing his words for many years to come.

I strongly welcome the response we have just heard. It is fantastic news that the Government are accepting all the recommendations in the Bishop of Truro’s report, and I feel delighted we have heard that announced in the House this afternoon. It is very important that all of us in this House and in the Government take responsibility for protecting and promoting human rights around the world. Just because atrocities are happening across the oceans or across the seas does not make them any less serious. We should never pass by on the other side.

I hope this afternoon’s debate will provide the Government with the motivation to redouble their efforts—not just in adopting the recommendations in the report, but in going further and looking at the ways we can use aid, trade and other tools in the Government’s toolbox to protect the rights of religious minorities, particularly Christians, around the world, where persecution occurs. Today’s debate has been an excellent one, and I hope action results. Once again, I thank everybody for participating in it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House deplores the persecution of Christians overseas; supports freedom of religion or belief in all countries throughout the world; welcomes the work undertaken by the Bishop of Truro in this area; and calls on the Government to do more with the diplomatic and other tools at its disposal to prevail on the governments of countries in which persecution of Christians is tolerated or encouraged to end that persecution and to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief.
Non-invasive Precision Cancer Therapies

4.6 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House recognises the vital role that radiotherapy plays in cancer treatment across the UK with an estimated one in four people needing that treatment at some stage of their life; notes that there is a significant body of expert opinion that up to 24,000 people may be missing out on the radiotherapy they need, resulting in many hundreds of unnecessary or premature deaths; further notes that the UK spend on radiotherapy as a percentage of the overall cancer budget is approximately five per cent which compares badly with most other advanced economies where the percentage varies from nine per cent to 11 per cent; notes that the current commissioning system for radiotherapy is sub-optimal as exemplified by a tariff regime which discourages NHS Trusts from implementing advanced modern effective radiotherapy; calls on the Government to provide an immediate up-front £250 million investment in the service, an ongoing extra £100 million per annum investment in personnel and skills and IT, and to introduce a sustainably, centrally and fully funded rolling programme for Linac machine replacements; and further calls on the Government to appoint a single person to oversee the commissioning and implementation of radiotherapy services.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee and its Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), for granting this debate, and all the Members on both sides of the House who supported the application. I must declare an interest as one of the vice-chairs of the all-party group on radiotherapy, and also as a cancer survivor—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Thank you. Thanks to early diagnosis, I was successfully treated with both chemotherapy and, crucially, precision radiotherapy.

I want to point out to the Minister that there is currently a crisis there is no other word for it—in the management and funding of radiotherapy in the United Kingdom. Indeed, the charity Action Radiotherapy estimates that as many as 20,000 people across the UK may be missing out on the radiotherapy they need. Many of these patients will die prematurely or unnecessarily as a result of this shortfall. Given that one in four people receives some form of radiotherapy during their lives, and that almost half of us in the United Kingdom will be diagnosed with cancer at some point in our lifetimes, I hope the Government will realise just how important it is that we invest in modern and, importantly, accessible cancer diagnosis—and not just in diagnosis, but in cancer treatments.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I am very proud to have the Christie Hospital in my constituency of Manchester, Withington. It has a fantastic proton beam therapy unit, which is going to be the future of cancer treatment. However, when I speak to the staff at the Christie, their biggest worry is the workforce. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that the challenge is not just funding for treatment, but actually investing in our cancer workforce as well?

Grahame Morris: Absolutely, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing that out. Indeed, that is one of the four basic requirements, as the all-party group, the charity Action Radiotherapy, and Action4Life have pointed out. That is clearly demonstrated in the “Manifesto for Radiotherapy”, which I commend to the Minister and to all hon. Members.

I appreciate that the Minister will want to refer to chapter 3 of “The NHS Long Term Plan”, particularly paragraph 3.62 on more precise treatments using advanced radiotherapy techniques. In anticipation of that, I would like to say, on investment, that the Government have promised to complete the £130 million investment in radiotherapy machines and, as my hon. Friend has just mentioned, to commission the proton beam machines at University College Hospital in London and the Christie Hospital in Manchester. However, I respectfully point out to the Minister that that is not a new announcement of additional resources, but the recycling of previous announcements. The money has already been spent or committed, so it is not part of the comprehensive 10-year plan for radiotherapy that we advocated for in the “Manifesto for Radiotherapy”.

The £250 million for proton beam facilities, while welcome, will only treat 1,500 patients a year. I accept that many of them will be children with brain cancers, but the number represents only 1% of patients needing radiotherapy. As indicated in the manifesto, we recommend that the same sum that was spent on proton beam facilities—a relatively modest sum given the size of the budget as a whole—is all that is needed to renew radiotherapy centres and to ensure that all patients, not just those who live in London or near to major conurbations, can receive treatment within the recommended 45-minute travel time. I know that other hon. Members will say a little more about that.

We are also asking for an additional £100 million a year, increasing the cancer funding for radiotherapy from the current 5% a year to 6.5% a year, to ensure sufficient funding for workforce planning, including ensuring that there is suitable training, and ensuring that there is an effective IT network, equipment upgrades and a rolling programme to ensure that all radiotherapy machines across the UK are up to date. According to analysis of freedom of information requests made by Action Radiotherapy, more than 40% of NHS trusts in England—all bar six responded to the requests—that provide radiotherapy have machines that are past their recommended lifespan, leading to less efficient and effective care.

The current system of commissioning for radiotherapy often incentivises trusts not to use their most modern precision radiotherapy machines to their full capability. That means that some patients are treated more often and less effectively, even though there are modern stereotactic ablative radiotherapy machines that could treat them more effectively. Precision radiotherapy is needed to cure 40% of cancers, and all that we want is to ensure that all patients can get to a radiotherapy machine and that the professionals are allowed to switch on the machines and provide the appropriate treatment. However, chronic underfunding and the complications of radiotherapy commissioning and delivery are preventing that from happening.

Radiotherapy receives only 5% of the cancer treatment budget. At £383 million a year, that represents 0.025% of the total NHS budget, and I want to compare that with the cost of just two cancer drugs. The NHS budget for Herceptin—an effective drug that is used to treat about 15% to 20% of breast cancer patients—is £160 million. A recent UK trial showed that only six months, not 12 months, of adjuvant Herceptin may be needed for adjacent therapy, which is when the drug is needed.
used in combination with radiotherapy. In financial terms, the NHS could therefore save up to £80 million a year, offsetting much of the additional radiotherapy costs.

It is time to put radiotherapy back at the top of the NHS agenda, and we need someone to advocate for that. We are urging the Department to appoint a radiotherapy tsar who will ensure that the NHS has a world-class radiotherapy service. Many other MPs want to speak in the debate, so I will keep my remarks short. I am pleased that the Government have accepted that advanced precision radiotherapy is more effective and has fewer side-effects.

In summary, I want to see a modest increase in the budget for advanced radiotherapy, rising from 5% to 6.5% of the cancer budget. That would enable large numbers of cancer patients to live longer and more fulfilling lives and would achieve better outcomes and more positive economic benefits. I am keen to ensure that Members have an opportunity to participate in the debate. There are many issues that we need to highlight, including in relation to commissioning, workforce planning and IT networks, so I will leave it at that to allow others to participate.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I will try to manage without a formal time limit. If everybody takes around five minutes, everybody will have the opportunity to speak.

4.15 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris). Half of everyone in the UK will develop cancer at some stage in their lives and a quarter of us will receive radiotherapy treatment. Radiotherapy is highly effective, especially when compared with other therapies, given that survival rates improve by 16% compared with just 2% with other therapies such as chemotherapy. That is important because the UK has the second worst survival rates for lung cancer in Europe and we lag behind the European average in nine out of 10 cancers. We know that our population is ageing and that, more and more, our lifestyle choices are detrimental to our health. This means that over the next six years, cancer rates are expected to increase by a quarter, so ensuring that we get cancer treatment right is of fundamental importance.

The Government are making progress in this area. Since 2010, rates of cancer survival have increased year on year. It is thought that 7,000 people are alive today who would otherwise not have been. The NHS long-term plan has set out a way to ensure that future radiotherapy treatment will be faster, smarter and more effective. Although it is a welcome strategy, we in the all-party group on radiotherapy have been looking into the detail and have highlighted some pressing issues, which we look forward to publishing in due course.

As has been mentioned, there are serious workforce shortages; for example, radiotherapy clinical scientists have a current vacancy rate of 8%. We need to take swift action to address that, and specifically, to support the education and training programmes that feed the pipeline of talent. There are only 10 therapeutic radiography degree programmes in England and that will soon reduce to nine, as one very close to me in Portsmouth is due to close soon.

Since 2016, entry-level training for this industry has fallen by 23% since the loss of the bursary; last year, only 240 students undertook this training. I therefore hope that the Department for Health and Social Care and the Department for Education will review the impact of terminating the bursary programme and consider how to attract students to this profession. The Society of Radiographers recently developed an apprenticeship standard at degree level to provide another entry point to the profession. I believe that that is exactly the right approach, whereby the next generation of industry professionals can learn and earn on the job. Sadly, however, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education offered a funding band of around £19,000 for the programme’s delivery, but given the high-tech and expensive infrastructure needed to support it, the level of funding was insufficient. I urge the institute to carry out a review of the scheme and ensure that we have the right funding requirements.

During evidence sessions for the all-party group on radiotherapy, the current tariff system came up again and again, including the fact that the tariff is paid per fraction. Clearly, if we have new technology that will reduce the number of fractions, there may be a perverse incentive that would discourage the use of it. Earlier this year, the all-party group visited Elekta in West Sussex, which is pioneering the future of advanced radiotherapy technology, including the MRI LINAC—linear accelerator—machines. Ironically, West Sussex does not have a single LINAC machine—neither the MRI version nor even the standard version—so many of my constituents are travelling as far as London and Brighton for their treatment. Time and again, I have heard from them, and from charities including CancerWise, which is based in Chichester, just how gruelling these daily journeys are. Many adjacent counties have this capability, and I started this journey to make the case for having that capability for my constituents.

It is worth highlighting that £130 million was invested in 2016-17, and that upgraded and replaced machines right across England’s cancer centres. It was the largest investment for 15 years, so we thank the Department of Health and Social Care for it; it was very welcome. However, we are concerned that in the long term, the equipment may not be maintained unless there is a rolling fund. The way we budget for this seems stochastic. We know that the equipment has a life span. As it is all new, perhaps we can now plan for when it is old, and ensure that there is a rolling budget in place. We have mentioned IT. It is vital that we have the latest network, to ensure that all the constituent parts are interconnected.

Radiotherapy is the most incredible resource, and is involved in 40% of cancer cures. It is a cost-effective treatment, taking up just 5% of the cancer budget while treating 50% of cancer patients, but it needs a bigger voice, and I am grateful to my colleagues on the APPG for securing this debate and allowing us to give it that voice.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the NHS staff across our country who deliver this phenomenal service. The changes that we are discussing could save
many more lives. Britain has always embraced innovative technology, so I have no doubt that advanced radiotherapy and integrated IT networks will be the standard in the future; the question for all those suffering from cancer is merely when.

4.21 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friends the Members for Easington (Grahame Morris) and for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), who are vice-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on radiotherapy, of which I am honoured to be the chair.

Many of us know too well the pain, hardship and heartbreak that cancer causes. As my hon. Friend the Member for Easington said, it is widely accepted that half of us will get cancer in our lifetime. While I am on my feet, there will be people getting their diagnosis and families coming to terms with it, and lives turned upside down. Most of us have been affected by cancer in some way; cancer took my mum, far too young. But increasingly cancer is a condition to be overcome, not a death sentence. Advances in medical science mean that there are often a host of possible treatments when the diagnosis comes.

Perhaps the form of treatment of which we hear the least is radiotherapy. It is widely accepted that 50% of those who suffer from cancer will require radiotherapy at some point in their treatment. However, in its recent radiotherapy specification, NHS England reduced the figure for cancer patients needing radiotherapy to 40%. It reached that figure on an interpretation of the Malthus model; if only 40% of cancer patients need radiotherapy, then the current level of investment will be just about adequate, as everyone who could benefit from radiotherapy would receive it, so we might as well conclude this debate and go home—only that figure is wrong, as NHS England has had to admit.

The APPG on radiotherapy recently held a number of evidence sessions, in part to get to the bottom of this inconsistency. We heard from a wide range of experts, including one of the authors of the Malthus model, who explicitly stated that NHS England’s interpretation of the model underestimates the number of patients requiring treatment, because it takes into account only those patients whose initial treatment is radiotherapy, not those who need it after the initial point. When pressed, NHS England accepted that, acknowledging that the 40% estimate was not accurate and fell shy of the true figure. This matters, because the real figure is roughly 50%, which means that NHS England is not commissioning sufficient radiotherapy treatment to meet the needs of cancer patients. The Government must plan on the basis of true demand, not of a figure discredited by the experts and now disowned by NHS England. The Royal College of Radiologists has confirmed that this combination of factors means that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Easington said, 20,000 people in Britain are not receiving the radiotherapy that they need.

The major issue in my patch is access. Those needing radiotherapy across our communities in south Cumbria have to travel to the Rosemere unit in Preston. That unit is excellent. The staff are wonderful and the kit is brilliant. There is only one thing wrong with Rosemere: it is far too far away. The National Radiotherapy Advisory Group has said that it is bad practice for people normally to have to travel more than 45 minutes to receive radiotherapy treatment. I drove Kate from Kendal to her treatment in Preston the other week; it was a three-hour round trip. She had been doing that every day for six weeks. For those living in Garsdale, Langdale or Coniston, those trips could be five or six hours, or far longer on public transport, every day for weeks. Those are ludicrous distances to travel to receive vital treatment, and that is why we want a satellite of the Rosemere unit to be based at Westmorland General Hospital.

I spoke to one lady over 80 years of age who was recommended a course of radiotherapy. She decided to forgo that treatment because of the distance she would have to travel. She did not have the option of a shorter journey, so she has instead taken the option of a shorter life. And she is not alone.

A group of leading UK professionals at the British Institute of Radiology met to discuss their experience of setting up satellite centres. They calculated an average 20% uplift on top of the projected figures for those using the service, while the centres of which they were satellites saw no decline in numbers. That means that in areas such as mine, where access to radiotherapy is poor, 20% of people who should be getting radiotherapy are not getting it, but if a satellite centre was built, they would get that treatment. This is not about convenience; it is about saving lives.

My hon. Friend the Member for Easington has already raised the problems with commissioning. I will simply say that 100% of radiotherapy centres in the UK are equipped with SABR—stereotactic ablative body radiotherapy—technology. That is the best technology, giving the most focused and concentrated treatment that is most effective at killing cancerous tissue and causing the least damage to surrounding healthy tissue. That means fewer treatments, fewer side-effects and better results. The scandal, however, is that only 25 of those 52 centres are commissioned to use it.

Is it any wonder that cancer survival rates in this country are among the worst in Europe? We have the second lowest survival rate for lung cancers and below average survival rates for nine of the 10 main cancers. Do not hear me wrong—I know that radiotherapy is not the only solution. Surgery is vital, as are drugs and chemotherapy. We are very proud of the battle we won to deliver chemotherapy to Kendal—countless people have benefited from that—but when chemo improves survival by 2% whereas radiotherapy improves survival by 16%, we need to think carefully about the disparity in investment.

The simple fact is that radiotherapy lacks the financial backing to be heard. Drugs companies lobby passionately and legitimately for the treatments they provide. Radiotherapy has no such lobby. The all-party group has been struck by the realisation that we are the entire UK radiotherapy lobby, along with those people who work in the industry. Radiotherapy has become a Cinderella service because it lacks a champion. We invite the Minister to become that champion.

Finally, enthusiastically we welcome the Government’s focus on earlier cancer diagnosis, but earlier diagnosis will increase demand for radiotherapy. When tumours are spotted earlier and are smaller, they will need more precise and focused treatment—they will need radiotherapy. Twenty thousand people a year are missing out on
radiotherapy already, but if we do not invest now, as more and more cancers are diagnosed earlier, that figure will rocket and this secret scandal will become painfully public.

Our cancer survival rates are distressingly low. Radiotherapy is, after surgery, the most effective cure for cancer—far more so than drugs. It has been left behind in terms of investment for many years under many Governments. This is the moment when that shameful state of affairs must end. People should have the best treatment for their cancer, and where at all possible they should have it close to home—because shorter journeys equals longer lives.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Hon. Members have done well on six minutes, but can we please now aim for five minutes? I am sure that people want to hear what the Minister has to say in response. There is no point in asking questions if there is no time for the Minister to answer.

4.28 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris). There is not one Member in this House whose life has not been touched by cancer. My late partner, John, suffered from it and, sadly, lost his battle two years ago, despite excellent treatment from the Royal Blackburn Hospital. I know and sympathise with many constituents struggling through treatment. Major breakthroughs have been made in radiotherapy in the past 10 years, with modern advanced radiotherapy being more precise, curing more patients and producing fewer side effects to the point where patients can continue to work normally; but when comparing cancer services on a global scale, we see that only one quarter of people in the north-west believe that the NHS offers the best cancer care.

Like John, 47,000 men a year in Britain are found to have prostate cancer, and more than 11,500 a year die from the disease. Last October, the University of Birmingham published an article about a breakthrough in treatment. Previously, it was unclear whether there was any benefit to treating the prostate directly with radiotherapy if the cancer had already spread. The research helps to answer the question and has implications beyond prostate cancer. Clinical trials for the disease found that advanced radiotherapy boosted survival rates by 11% for men whose cancer had spread to nearby lymph nodes or bones. The result is likely to change the care given to around 3,000 men every year in England alone, and could benefit many more around the world.

I am conscious of the time, so I am going to shorten some of my points, but I still feel that they are important. Until now, it was thought that there was no point in treating the prostate itself if the cancer had already spread because it would be—I have heard those words—like shutting the stable door after the horse had bolted. However, the study proved the benefit of prostate radiotherapy for those men. Unlike many new drugs for cancer, radiotherapy is a simple and relatively cheap treatment that is readily available in most of the world. However, there are two main issues with access—the tariffs and the availability of modern radiotherapy machines.

As other Members have said, the current tariff disincentivises trusts from saving money because their income depends on the number of treatments. NHS research has shown that treating prostate cancer patients with 20 treatments, rather than 37, was better for patients and would save the NHS in excess of £20 million a year. I hope the Minister will let me and others know when the current situation will stop. When will NHS England allow trusts to use the radiotherapy equipment that they already have to move to even shorter periods of treatment? A period of five treatments has gradually been adopted around the world for large numbers of prostate cancer patients.

Preston is our nearest radiotherapy centre. It is a very short journey from Blackpool to Preston, but Preston is really struggling with workforce, funding and a shortage of oncologists. At least four of the seven machines there are in the second part of their life. There needs to be funding to provide, sustain and maintain the machines. In October 2016, NHS England announced a £130 million investment to spend on upgrading radiotherapy machines. It was welcome, but that money was merely the underspend from the drugs budget. Of the 260 machines in use, approximately 90 needed replacing by the end of 2017. We must ensure that the machines have a sustainable future.

Finally, I want to echo the asks in the “Manifesto for Radiotherapy” for a one-off £250 million investment and an estimated sustained additional £100 million a year to catch up and provide the advanced, modern radiotherapy and IT networks currently needed in the UK. Experts, charities, clinicians and patients are calling for urgent investment in radiotherapy services. Please, Minister, listen, and support the motion before the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): That was a very courageous speech by the hon. Lady, and I am only sorry that she had such a short time in which to make it.

4.33 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I completely concur with what you just said, Madam Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) made a very warm and touching speech, which only reinforces the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) that so many people have been touched, in many cases very painfully, by cancer.

My anxiety is that a growing crisis in cancer care is coming in this country. The worst of it is that we may not spot it, because our cancer survival rates are, of course, improving, which is brilliant. Doctors and scientists—pathologists and so on—have done an amazing job in recent years in managing to keep many more people alive, and in this country in particular we have done well, but frankly we started from a very low base compared with other countries in Europe and around the world. I am painfully conscious of that in relation to Wales.

I make no partisan point here, but I will criticise what we are doing in the Welsh NHS at the moment. I do so not out of partisan anger, but simply because we need to get this right. The truth is that cancer survival rates will improve, but not as well as they could do if we managed to get several things right. We have to persuade
more people, particularly from poorer backgrounds, to go to the doctor when they have suspicions about their condition. We must also persuade more doctors, particularly those in poorer backgrounds, to refer people on when they think there might be a suspicion of cancer. It is still worrying that, in my patch in south Wales, we still do not refer on enough people, so that they end up being referred much later, when they are in the later stages of cancer. The most galling thing of all for anybody is when they hear, “Well, it’s just a little bit late. If only you had come six months, three months or even four weeks ago, you would have been at stage 2 or stage 1.”

The truth is that we are failing at the moment in the UK, and particularly in Wales. The diagnostic teams in Wales are in far worse nick than they are in Australia, Poland, Scotland, the best area in England, which is the north-east of England—ironically—and the worst area in England. Nine out of 10 consultant radiologist vacancies in Wales have been unfulfilled for more than a year. We need 105 more radiologists by 2023 if we are to meet the growing demand for CT and MRI scans, which has risen by a third in the past three years. Thirty-six per cent. of Welsh consultant histopathologists are over 55—that is much higher than in the rest of the UK—17% of whom are locums, which means that we are paying agency staff over the odds and therefore wasting NHS money.

UK-wide, only 3% of path labs believe that they are adequately staffed at the moment. This is not to attack the Government in any way, but simply to say that we have to recruit more people. In relation to radiotherapy, the Velindre Cancer Centre in South Wales, a wonderful centre, has a target of seeing and treating 98% with radical radiotherapy within 28 days, but that has not been met in any month in the past year. In January, the figure was just 63%. Why does all this matter? It is because time is of the essence when it comes to cancer. Long waits for biopsy results are absolutely terrifying for the individual, but they may also mean that the treatment is delayed, which makes it less effective than it might be. We could save more lives if we had more people working in these services.
Of those of us born in the UK after 1960, almost half of us will be diagnosed with cancer at some point in our lifetime, and around a quarter of us will receive some form of radiotherapy. These are scary statistics. Radiotherapy is not some obscure treatment that is easy to ignore because it only happens to someone else. Statistically, every fourth person in this room will have had or will at some point need radiotherapy. If nothing else, from a purely self-preservation perspective, it is in all our interests to ensure that the provision of radiotherapy is exemplary.

Although the UK has a long history of being active in radiotherapy research due to having a much higher radiotherapy machine capacity and a larger workforce than elsewhere, access to radiotherapy in many parts of northern Europe is now superior to that in the UK. Radiotherapy need in the UK is expected to rise by a further 25% by 2025, but as things stand and as has been demonstrated today, the provision of radiotherapy across the country is patchy at best. Indeed, it is widely held by the experts that up to 24,000 people may be missing out on the radiotherapy they need, resulting in thousands of unnecessary and premature deaths each year. This is simply not good enough.

The advanced radiotherapy techniques of today are the standard techniques of tomorrow, and we need to invest in ensuring that these treatments are easily accessible for all patients across the country as soon as possible. There have been major breakthroughs in radiotherapy in the last 10 years. Technological advances have made radiotherapy treatments safer and more effective, improving cure rates with fewer short and long-term side effects—often to the point where patients can even continue working during the course of their treatments.

Advanced radiotherapy is now an extremely effective treatment in curing cancer when the disease is detected early enough and for palliating symptoms when a cancer has spread. However, this advanced radiotherapy is not currently available across all the UK, with many advanced radiotherapy techniques available at only a small number of centres, as the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale pointed out.

Radiotherapy centres across the UK are unevenly distributed, and although it is estimated that radiotherapy is needed to treat more than half of all diagnoses of cancer, access to it in England varies between 25% and 49% of cases, depending on the region. The charity Action Radiotherapy reports that patients understandably want to be able to access the best-quality radiotherapy as close to home as possible. Only 57% of the people surveyed said that they would be willing to travel as far as was necessary to get the best radiotherapy treatment available, with many opting for shorter travel times and convenience over quality. It is vital, therefore, that we ensure that the best possible treatment is available consistently across the UK, so that every patient is able to access the best high-quality radiotherapy for their individual cancer, without needing to worry about the added stress and inconvenience of lengthy travel times and distances and the associated costs.

However, tackling barriers to access is not only about travel and distance. Having radiotherapy can be very tiring, so greater consideration needs to be given to the quality of support that people receive throughout their treatment—for example, the provision of free parking and accommodation where needed or allowing people to book all their appointments in advance. Different types of radiotherapy techniques are not always available in the UK centres that are willing and able to deliver those treatments, and evidence suggests that some patients are missing out due to a failure of appropriate commissioning of the specific therapies they require.

One story I have heard about is Robert’s. When examining the surgery versus radiotherapy option, Robert was offered the opportunity to take part in a trial that explored whether, by using stereotactic ablative radiotherapy, or SABR—a type of non-invasive therapy—the number of radiotherapy treatments he would receive could be condensed to just five sessions, as opposed to the 20 currently recommended. For obvious and understandable reasons, the chance to have a short course of radiotherapy treatment appealed to Robert, and he underwent five sessions in just one week. It is disappointing, then, that such advanced techniques are available at only a small number of centres, reducing patient access.

As the cross-party “manifesto for Radiotherapy” outlined, £100 million a year is needed to catch up and provide the advanced modern radiotherapy currently needed in the UK. A one-off £250 million would be required to secure equal access for all radiotherapy patients over the next 10 years, with cutting-edge technology. Unfortunately, the commitment that we have from the Government thus far falls far short. As we have heard this afternoon, current spending levels on radiotherapy fall well short of our comparable international partners, and UK cancer survival rates lag behind the European average for nine out of 10 cancers.

As we have heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) and for Rhondda and the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), a further clear and pressing concern is that our current oncology workforce is simply not large enough to meet current demand. There are inadequate plans to increase the workforce to ensure that it will have the capacity for our future needs.

Without drastic and immediate action to remedy the chronic, NHS-wide staffing crisis, we are in no position to deliver the improved radiotherapy treatments that we both deserve and have been promised. Per head of population, the NHS now ranks among the lowest in the western world when it comes to the number of doctors, nurses and hospital beds, according to King’s Fund analysis of OECD health data. Analysis from the Health Foundation showed that the number of personnel leaving the NHS because of a poor work-life balance has trebled in the last seven years.

The NHS workforce remains overstretched, overworked and undervalued. Much like the rest of our NHS, our radiotherapy services and staff need transformative actions, not words, to provide the world-class care that patients deserve. To address that, we would like a national plan for the funding of radiotherapy equipment, to enable every patient to have access to the appropriate treatment. Funding models should act to support innovation and research and should incentivise new and novel ways of working, but the current tariff funding of radiotherapy per fraction is clearly not fit for purpose. It can disincentivise novel ways of working, such as delivering a smaller number of fractions with a more complex technique.
As I said at the start of my speech, as many as 24,000 people are not receiving the radiotherapy they need. That cannot be allowed to continue. We must do more today, to ensure that all those who need it are able to access not only radiotherapy but the best, high-quality radiotherapy available for their specific cancer. With sufficient investment and development, the UK can develop a world-class, patient-first radiotherapy service. I will do all I can to ensure that we achieve that goal.

4.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): I want to begin by thanking the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for introducing the debate and all Members who have spoken today, particularly the hon. Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern), who spoke movingly about her late partner, John. His example lives on through his two beautiful daughters—my beautiful cousins—who, too, have dedicated their lives to public service. I am happy to reassure all Members that I am very happy to meet the all-party group—fingers crossed—and if I fail to address any of the points made today, I will try to address them at that meeting.

Cancer is a priority for this Government, and we have got survival rates up over the last 10 years, but there is a lot more to do. In the long-term plan, we state our aim to have 55,000 more people surviving cancer for five years by 2028. Four in 10 NHS cancer patients are treated with radiotherapy, so clearly radiotherapy is a really important part of the mix. I did not know about that until I met members of the APPG. I want to thank them for the manifesto that they presented to me, which I have read with interest and am happy to respond to.

NHS England announced a £130 million fund, which the hon. Member for Easington mentioned, to start a programme of modernising LINACs and giving patients access to leading-edge technology, regardless of geography. I will come on to the specific point raised by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), because we share Rosemere as a cancer centre.

Since 2016, we have seen more than 80 machines either upgraded or replaced, with the aim of giving cancer patients access to the latest technology, regardless of where they live. The long-term plan specifically promises

“Faster, smarter and effective radiotherapy”,

with an aim of providing curative treatment, with fewer side effects and shorter waiting times.

Members mentioned the facilities at the Christie Hospital. Some of my constituents go there as well. The good thing is that previously some people had to leave the country, but at least now people are able to be treated in this country. The first treatment was last December. Work continues on the University College London Hospitals proton beam therapy centre, which we hope will be opened next year.

Chris Bryant: I commend the Minister for everything she has said, but it is slightly easier to put new kit in and build new buildings than it is to develop new staff. The biggest difficulty is with the number of radiologists and the whole staffing element. I wonder whether she could co-operate with colleagues in Wales, because this is a UK-wide issue.

Seema Kennedy: I will come on to talk about workforce, and I will also talk to my officials about meeting my counterparts in the devolved Assemblies, because that keeps coming up. I cannot say anything from the Dispatch Box because I do not know the protocol on that.

Fifteen million pounds has been committed to evaluate treating patients with SABR. There are 25 providers, and it is to treat early non-small cell lung cancer. I know that there are problems with lung cancer treatment. There are only 25 centres at the moment while there is assessment of emerging clinical evidence. NHS England is investing a further £6 million to support the great work that Cancer Research UK is doing on SABR clinical trials. This is regularly reviewed by NHS England’s national specialised commissioning team and was last reviewed during 2016-17. It is expected that access will be reviewed again over the course of 2019-20 to 2020-21.

Several Members talked about the tariff. Radiotherapy services are funded through national prices, linked to the main to the number of radiotherapy fractions delivered. Any change to the income that trusts receive for radiotherapy would therefore require a change to the national tariff. We must continue to ensure that NHS payment mechanisms support the delivery of the most effective treatments. That is why the long-term plan set out NHS England’s commitment to review the national tariff, in particular to ensure that appropriate incentives are in place to encourage providers to deliver the modern techniques that we all need—the ones of today and tomorrow—and that work commenced this year.

The long-term plan also sets out NHS England’s intention to use its capital settlement, which will be negotiated in the upcoming spending review, in part to continue to replace radiotherapy equipment. I will not pre-empt those negotiations, but I think that shows a clear and ongoing financial commitment to modernising NHS radiotherapy.

We have published specifications for operational delivery networks for adult external beam radiotherapy services. That is about the 11 radiotherapy networks, and I have spoken to the hon. Member for Easington specifically about satellite services. The point is that decisions on cancer services need to be taken locally. The networks have been established—the cancer alliances—so I urge all hon. Members to encourage their local services to engage in those, because that is really what we need.

With regard to the workforce, which is mentioned in every debate on cancer, the interim people plan was published recently. The noble Baroness Harding has met the all-parliamentary group on cancer and is fully apprised of what it is saying. The final people plan will be published later this year.

I will draw my remarks to a conclusion, because I want to leave the hon. Member for Easington enough time to sum up the debate. This has been an excellent debate. I thank the hon. Gentleman for all the work he does with Members across the House. There has been progress, but I know that there is more to do. I am happy to meet the APPG to discuss this further. We need to do more to increase cancer survival rates. We have a very ambitious target. I am happy to work with him and with all hon. Members to ensure that radiotherapy is a vital part of the battle against cancer.
Sanctuary Housing Group

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

5 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and Mr Speaker, for granting me this Adjournment debate and thus providing me with an important opportunity to try to hold the Sanctuary Housing Group, which I regard as a highly dysfunctional organisation, to account. As you will soon hear, Madam Deputy Speaker, my remarks have been born from over a decade of frustration in trying to deal with these people as a local MP. To put it bluntly, I have well and truly had enough.

To begin with, Sanctuary has consistently provided a poor maintenance service to many of my constituents over a period of many years. I have had numerous complaints from Sanctuary tenants about shoddy workmanship, missed appointments and a generally off-hand attitude towards them when they complain. To give just one example, a constituent contacted me a few years ago to complain about a broken lift in one of Sanctuary’s sheltered housing units. My constituent put it in an email:

“I’m writing to complain about the fact that our lift has not been working for the past 10 days, effectively trapping my disabled wife in our first-floor flat. Today, I spoke with the Scheme Manager, who advised me there is no confirmed date for when this problem will be resolved. He also advised me that the service company assessed the lift a month ago and advised Sanctuary of repairs that needed to be done, and the lift broke down three weeks after it was assessed... My wife has been trapped in the lift in her wheelchair six or more times. Sanctuary has known there are issues with the lift and has not responded adequately.”

That is but one example of the poor level of service that Sanctuary provides, but I could spend hours reading very many others into the record. The company’s record is so poor that in March this year it was the subject of an absolutely scathing Channel 4 “Dispatches” documentary entitled, “New Landlords from Hell”. To try to summarise a half-hour documentary in one sentence, I would say that the group’s record is truly shocking. In many instances, it shows a complete disregard for the welfare, or even the safety, of its tenants. Sanctuary’s so-called board of directors should watch the documentary and then hang their heads in shame. Anybody who wants to know more about this organisation should watch the programme. I suspect they will be appalled, just as I was, by what they see.

It is not as if Sanctuary is a small or under-resourced organisation. I have carefully read its latest annual report. It currently has total assets under management in the order of £4 billion. It is one of the largest registered social landlords in the United Kingdom, with about 100,000 properties currently under management. It is, supposedly, a not-for-profit organisation, yet it made an operating profit of just under £200 million, as recorded in its 2017-18 accounts. The group’s record is so poor that in March this year it was the subject of an absolutely scathing Channel 4 “Dispatches” documentary entitled, “New Landlords from Hell”. To try to summarise a half-hour documentary in one sentence, I would say that the group’s record is truly shocking. In many instances, it shows a complete disregard for the welfare, or even the safety, of its tenants. Sanctuary’s so-called board of directors should watch the documentary and then hang their heads in shame. Anybody who wants to know more about this organisation should watch the programme. I suspect they will be appalled, just as I was, by what they see.

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Mr Francois: Yes. By comparison, the CEO of L&Q—London and Quadrant Housing Trust—earns about £350,000 in total; the CEO of the Peabody Trust is on about £279,000, and the CEO of Genesis Housing is on approximately £250,000.

Despite previously asking Sanctuary officials for a meeting, I have not yet been offered an audience with the new chief executive, which is a shame, because the first question I would like to ask him is: “How can you justify a salary over three times greater than that paid to the Prime Minister?” I cannot countenance how someone running, essentially, a public sector organisation could be paid such a vast amount for presiding over such chaos.

To give the Minister some idea of the history of all this, I first came across the group some years ago when Rochford District Council decided to transfer its social housing stock to a new registered social landlord established for the purpose, called Rochford Housing Association. The tenants voted in a ballot to transfer to the housing association, which was then shortly taken over by a regional housing association called Hereward, and then in turn by a national organisation, Sanctuary. So I have been dealing with RHA/Hereward/Sanctuary for over a decade as the local MP.

Crucially, the original manifesto for the transfer ballot contained a commitment to build up to 50 additional units of affordable housing a year to assist the council with addressing its housing waiting list. Specifically, the manifesto—I have a copy here, because I saved one—said the following under the heading, “New affordable housing to meet local housing needs”:

“Tenants and the Council have said they want to see new homes in the area for future generations and the Council is committed to working with Housing Associations to provide affordable housing to meet local needs.

Rochford Housing Association working with Hereward Housing will aim to provide at least 50 new affordable homes each year in the Rochford District.”

That was the promise to the tenants before they voted to transfer. Sanctuary took over that commitment when it absorbed Hereward and promised to honour it when that entity became part of its group, but it has come absolutely nowhere near doing so.

I have had multiple meetings with Sanctuary down the years to try to persuade it to honour that promise, not least to alleviate the considerable pressure on Rochford’s housing list, which has sometimes, unfortunately, meant that the council has had to place families, including those with young children, in highly unsuitable bed-and-breakfast accommodation in nearby Southend.

Sir David Amess: The salaries are absolutely obscene, just like those of senior members of the BBC. My right hon. Friend might be interested to know that someone running, essentially, a public sector organisation could be paid such a vast amount for presiding over such chaos.

Mr Francois: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I will demonstrate, it is difficult, I am afraid, to believe anything that this group now says. As we have a Housing, Communities and Local Government Minister sitting on the Front Bench, I will take this opportunity to absolutely endorse my hon. Friend’s long-standing campaign for Southend to be made a city. I hope the Minister will take that back to the Department.

I have had a number of meetings with Sanctuary’s head of development, Mr Chris Cole, which have taken on an almost ritualistic aspect, with him repeatedly reading out a list of major housing developments that Sanctuary is either going to be involved with or to develop itself, hardly any of which—with the exception of some very small developments and one development at Canewdon—ever come to fruition.

Sanctuary absolutely assured me several years ago that, to make up its backlog, it would bid aggressively for the social housing component of three large developments in the Rochford District Council area known as Hall Road in Rochford, Rawreth Lane/London Road in Rayleigh, and Malyons Farm in Hullbridge. In each of those instances, despite the company’s £4 billion of assets, it underbid and did not secure the RSL element of any of those developments, which would have represented well over 100 houses in each of the three cases. Basically, Minister, these people talk a good game to your face, but then completely and utterly fail to put their money where their mouth is. That is totally unacceptable on their part.

Moreover, Sanctuary has acquired, or sought to acquire, a number of high-profile brownfield sites across the district, which it has been promising to build on for years. However, in the vast majority of cases, it has not laid one brick on top of another to this day. To take just one example, when I met Mr Cole on Friday 10 May in Sanctuary’s local offices in Rochford, he sought to assure me that Sanctuary was “actively on site” on the old Bullwood Hall Prison site, which was closed some years ago and is now a classic brownfield site. Sanctuary obtained planning permission to build there over a year ago. Quite by chance, and unluckily for Mr Cole, I visited the site the weekend prior to our meeting, and I was therefore amazed when Mr Cole attempted to persuade me that the company was actively building houses there. Even when I told him to his face that I knew it was not, because I had been there and seen that it was not, he still tried to tell me that it was. The Minister is shaking his head. I mention this vignette deliberately, because it is absolutely typical of the dismissive way in which Sanctuary treats elected representatives.

Let me say as an aside that I recently spoke to the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), who, for the avoidance of doubt, has not seen my speech and is not party to it. She mentioned to me in passing that she, too, had had unsatisfactory experiences with Sanctuary, but that unfortunately, because of its constitutional status—I shall say more about that in a minute—it was not subject to the remit of the Public Accounts Committee, the most powerful Committee in Parliament. That raises all sorts of governance issues, to which I shall return shortly.

Because of Sanctuary’s appalling record of not keeping to its commitments, the dispute came to a head several years ago when it agreed to sign a “deed of variation, determination and collaboration” via which it undertook to raise its game and make up the considerable backlog of houses to meet the original commitment of 50 a year.
I have here a letter, dated 27 July 2016, from a lady called Emma Keegan, who was at that time Sanctuary’s local managing director. It states, clearly and unequivocally: “At the forefront of Sanctuary’s commitment is to build homes in Rochford. Part of that is a contractually binding requirement for Sanctuary to deliver the 50 homes a year referred to in the original agreement. Taken over the ten years of the agreement, this will require Sanctuary to build 363 more homes. If we fail to do so the local Council will receive £10,000 for each new home below the target figure of 363, up to a maximum payment of £1 million. This reflects our confidence that we will make good this commitment. We have a development team focused solely on this ambition with commercial resources at their disposal.”

I submit to the Minister that that could not be any clearer, but Sanctuary never got anywhere near it. Time after time, it has failed to develop schemes and has given a whole litany of excuses, including desperately trying to blame Rochford District Council for not giving planning permission, suggesting that it was the council’s fault that the houses had not been built and the target—which, incidentally, was due to be met by March 2018, a year ago—had not been delivered.

When I met Sanctuary representatives in May, I raised that issue and was told quite forcefully by Chris Cole that Rochford District Council had “let us off” the payment because the council had admitted that the planning delays were its own fault. I double-checked that with Mr Shaun Scrutton, the council’s managing director, at a meeting in his office on Friday 5 July. He categorically denied that Rochford had been responsible for any major planning delay and absolutely insisted that it intended to pursue Sanctuary for the outstanding amount and was considering legal action. He said to me, “I will be having a meeting with our legal team on Monday morning.” Both those men cannot be right, and, to put it mildly, one of them must at least be badly mistaken, as the two positions are poles apart.

Part of my purpose in initiating this debate was first to shame Sanctuary into coughing up the million quid that it owes my local council, and secondly, as well as arguing for the money, to argue that it should go on to build the affordable houses that it promised to build in that first place. In short, this is a housing association that, incredibly, seems reluctant to build houses, particularly if that will cost it any money. I read in the newspapers that we have a housing crisis in this country. With registered social housing landlords like Sanctuary, is it any wonder? Basically, these people are a joke, but one that is no longer funny, particularly for those who are living in bed-and-breakfast accommodation as a result of their absolute insolence.

Let me give one further example. Sanctuary assured me that it would build up to 100 properties in a site in Rayleigh known as Timber Grove, and that it was actively acquiring the site for that purpose. When I double-checked a few days ago, it had still not bought the site, which has lain undeveloped effectively for several years. That is just another example of it being extremely difficult to believe anything that the company now says based on bitter experience of a decade of repeatedly broken promises; it is that bad.

That brings me on to my wider point about the regulation of housing associations. There are good and bad registered social landlords in this country; for instance, one of the other housing associations active in my constituency is a locally based one called Chelmer Housing Partnership or CHP. If I speak as I find, I personally do not recall ever receiving a single complaint from any of my constituents who are its tenants about the management of a CHP property, although in fairness, the very good new leader of Rochford District Council, Councillor Mike Steptoe, tells me anecdotally that he has had a few complaints about CHP, which has the RSL component at the new development at Hall Road that I mentioned a few minutes ago. In any event, it is a matter of fact that housing associations, some of whose chief executives are extremely well paid—far more than the Prime Minister—are not even subject to freedom of information requests. In short, they are neither fish nor fowl—neither wholly public nor wholly private—and that leads to serious questions about who is really in charge. Partly based on my experience with Sanctuary, I wish to raise with the Minister the serious question of the governance of the sector in general.

There is a lack of an effective regulator to hold housing association boards to account and to make sure their tenants receive the kind of service for which they pay their rent. I would, therefore, like to press the Minister specifically and ask him whether the Department has any proposals to change the governance of housing associations and, in particular, whether it has any plans to bring in any form of new regulator, perhaps focusing on governance and customer service, to try to keep housing associations up to the mark. For the avoidance of doubt, there are some very good registered social landlords in this country, but there are also some very bad ones, and Sanctuary is probably the worst of the entire lot.

This is a sorry tale of an extremely badly run organisation, which does not keep its word, which obfuscates and delays, treats publicly elected officials with open contempt, and threatens to bring its entire sector into disrepute. Just as Persimmon Homes has given the private house building sector something of a bad name in recent years—I do not believe the sector really deserves that and I note in passing that the new chief executive of Persimmon, David Jenkinson, is attempting to do something to address it—I believe that Sanctuary threatens to give the whole housing association sector in this country a bad name. That would be a shame, because many RSLs do very good work to provide decent, affordable homes for our constituents to live in, and it is important to put that on the record.

I very much hope therefore that when the board members of Sanctuary read this debate, as I suspect they may, they will take radical action to address their woeful underperformance. I hope they will sack the hopeless Mr Chris Cole and specifically agree to pay Rochford District Council the £1 million that they owe. I also hope they will redouble their efforts to build the affordable housing they promised to build all along and which my constituents so desperately need.

This rolling farce, perpetrated by a failed and broken organisation, has gone on long enough and we now need action, not words. I have known the Minister for years and, as he knows, I have high regard for him. I am sure he will take my constituents’ concerns very seriously—that would be in his nature—and I therefore look forward with considerable interest to his reply on behalf of Her Majesty’s Government.
5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I do not know about you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I rather enjoyed that contribution from my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois). It is wonderful to see a passionate constituency Member of Parliament in full flow fighting for his constituents on the Floor of the House. We do not see that often enough in Parliament, and I congratulate him on bringing this debate to the Floor of the House with such force. He has a wonderful constituency, and I know he is proud of being in Essex. I just wonder whether he knows quite as much as many others know about his own constituency, so I thought I would increase his knowledge of it before I come on to deal with the debate.

My right hon. Friend may be aware, and all Members will want to know, that next week we will have County Flags Day, on which the Essex county flag will be flying proudly in Parliament Square at the moment of national unity when we see our new Prime Minister installed in No. 10. Of course, Madam Deputy Speaker, other county flags will also be available, if they are registered with the Flag Institute. There will be 51 in total, including the Union flag showing the awesome foursome that makes up our United Kingdom of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am glad that the Minister has clarified that point, but there was no need. As long as he mentioned the Essex county flag, he was doing very well.

Jake Berry: There are others available. The flag of Lancashire will, of course, be proudly flying, and the flag of Staffordshire as well. I also wonder whether my right hon. Friend knows the millennium clock in Rayleigh in his constituency, which was created in a competition for schoolchildren. One of the shields that appears on the clock was designed by no less a person than Sarah Morgan from my private office in the Department, who is currently sitting in the Box. She proudly tells us about it at every opportunity, and she has also said that one of her ambitions is to appear in Hansard. She has achieved that ambition today.

I will now move on to the content of my right hon. Friend’s debate. Importantly, he spoke about Sanctuary Housing and some of the things he said are a real cause for concern. He will understand that many of those contracts are private commercial matters between his local authority and the housing association, and that disputes should, in the first event, be resolved by the parties to those agreements. However, I was extremely concerned, as a Member of this House and a Minister in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, to hear of that organisation’s dismissive attitude towards Members of Parliament who are doing their job by raising the concerns of their constituents. That is completely unacceptable, not just from Sanctuary but from every social housing provider. We are sent to the House to fight for our constituents, and my right hon. Friend is doing a wonderful job this evening. I call on all social landlords, in a positive way, to engage actively with their Members of Parliament, because it is often we who people come to talk to when things are going wrong, and if that route is closed down, Members of Parliament will not be able to do their job and the housing associations and social landlords will also not be able to do theirs.

Many of the points my right hon. Friend raised are matters of real concern, and I hope that Sanctuary will read the Hansard of this debate very carefully. Serious matters have been raised, and they should be dealt with at local level, but it is also a national issue and a matter of concern to us all that people should engage with Members of Parliament with courtesy and respect and that the issues we raise should be taken extremely seriously. If they are not, we are going to see real problems in social housing sector, and I hope that Sanctuary will listen to the comments I make on behalf of the Department today.

On the issues my right hon. Friend raised about the changes we are going to see, particularly with the regulators, his concern is I think shared by all. We have to find a way to put the tenant voice and the tenant experience absolutely at the heart of our social housing providers. He, I know, is aware that the Government have recently concluded a consultation on the Green Paper; in fact, it concluded in November. We were delighted as a Department, but slightly overwhelmed, by the number of responses we had. Many of those responses, particularly in a world post that appalling tragedy at Grenfell Tower, were about how we as a Government can ensure that tenants’ voices are never lost when it comes to social housing. If we think about some of the consequences we saw on that night just over two years ago and about some of the missed opportunities to support the people of Grenfell Tower, I think we would agree that we should all take this extremely seriously. I look forward to the Government responding in detail both to the Green Paper and all the consultation responses, but I want to reassure my right hon. Friend that the tenant voice and the tenant experience will absolutely be at the heart of what we seek to achieve. That may well include changes to the role of the regulator, although I am not in a position this evening to give any further detail on that.

On a more positive note, I think we should take the opportunity of tonight’s debate to celebrate the work of social landlords and the housing sector more generally in building the homes that our constituents need. In his speech, my right hon. Friend talked about CHP, a local landlord with which he has had a good experience. That may not be universally shared, but it is an accolade that he says he has had no complaints about it. I think that shows how, where there is a great relationship between a council, a Member of Parliament, the tenants and a housing association, they can get things right.

The reason why we must celebrate the contribution of this sector is that we need to ensure and to focus on the fact that, by the mid-2020s, we will be delivering 300,000 homes a year. That is what our country needs, and what this Government are focused on. A good portion of those homes will be delivered by the social housing sector. I was delighted that the Prime Minister announced in September 2018 that we are going to make another £2 billion long-term funding pilot available for social landlords, starting in 2022, so they can get on with the job—to pick up on my right hon. Friend’s comments—of building homes, building communities and ensuring that our constituents, each and every one of them, have the opportunity to own their own home or have a home to call their own for which they pay an
affordable rent. That is why I hope my right hon. Friend will join me, the specifics of Sanctuary aside, in celebrating the extraordinary contribution of social landlords more generally.

Question put and agreed to.

5.27 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Monday 22 July 2019

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

House Building

1. Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the time it takes to build new homes. [912074]

19. Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the time it takes to build new homes. [912095]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): More housing was delivered across England last year than in all but one of the past 31 years. We have examined the recommendations of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) on the build-out review, and the Government responded in full at the spring statement earlier this year with a commitment to speed up the planning system and introduce new guidance to encourage diversification.

Scott Mann: May I give the Secretary of State some feedback from architects and planners in Cornwall? The community infrastructure levy is having a detrimental impact due to not only the onerous nature of the number of forms that need to be filled out, but the fact that sites that could be deliverable are not coming forward because of the money. Will he look at that to see whether he can bring forward more sites, because we all want more houses in Cornwall?

James Brokenshire: I thank my hon. Friend for the input from Cornwall, which, as he knows, is where my family hail from, so I take particular interest in it. Small developers can benefit from exemptions for self-build homes and developments of less than 100 square metres. The CIL contains flexibility and some exemptions, and we introduced guidance in July, but I will certainly listen to my hon. Friend and, indeed, other hon. Members about the community infrastructure levy.

Alex Burghart: Does the Secretary of State think that modular building methods could play a bigger role in helping us to increase the supply of housing?

James Brokenshire: I do, in short. Modular building is an essential part of our work to get speedier build out, to ensure diversification of materials, and to get skills for people. It has been good to see how housing associations and the private sector are starting to embrace it. There is more to do, but I recognise my hon. Friend’s point.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is not just about how much time it takes to build a house, but about the types of house being built. Will the Secretary of State further outline whether a scheme is in place to provide smaller apartments close to town centres for elderly widows and widowers and those with mobility issues?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman will know that housing is devolved in Northern Ireland, but I recognise the absence of an Executive and therefore the need to be able to respond to such local issues. However, our policy in relation to England is clear: we want to see diversification and we want to see that local authorities are able to meet the needs of their communities.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (IGC): If we are to tackle the housing crisis, we cannot just focus on the large developers. Small developers used to build two thirds of the new housing in this country, but that has gone away. Instead of just having the Help to Buy scheme, why not have a “help to build” scheme that supports or underwrites small and medium-sized construction companies to get rid of some of the difficulties that they encounter?

James Brokenshire: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman about ensuring that smaller builders are able to play their part, which has implications for localities and for the supply chain. Indeed, funds are available for smaller builders, but it is a challenge to see how we embody that. Councils are also able to use their new flexibilities to borrow to build, and we will continue to champion that, because the diversification that he highlights is critical.

Leasehold Properties: Mis-selling

2. Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle the mis-selling of leasehold properties. [912075]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): I am pleased that the Competition and Markets Authority is investigating mis-selling and onerous leasehold terms and looking at whether such terms are deemed to be unfair, and we will consider further action when it reports. That work supports a strong package of reforms to promote fairness and transparency for leaseholders.

Mark Garnier: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his comments but, despite those efforts, buyers of brand-new properties in Kidderminster in my constituency still believe that they have been misled in terms of leasehold contracts and contracts relating to communal services charges on new build estates. Given that we agree that we need to increase house building significantly across the country, does he accept that the apparent
mis-selling must be properly investigated and brought to an end once and for all before the scandal affects millions upon millions of future homebuyers?

James Brokenshire: I absolutely do. Unfair practices in the leasehold market have no place in modern housing, and neither do, for example, excessive ground rents that exploit consumers who get nothing in return. I called on the Competition and Markets Authority to look into this issue, and I am pleased it has now responded, also reflecting the calls from the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee—I note that the Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), is in his place this afternoon.

It is right that we get to the bottom of this, that we challenge it and that we respond to these unfair practices firmly and effectively.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): When will the Secretary of State introduce regulation to give leaseholders redress? The leasehold valuation tribunal is toothless and, frankly, worthless. Whether it comes to erroneous charges, mis-selling, dangerous cladding or expensive charges, leaseholders have nowhere to go. There needs to be urgent regulation.

James Brokenshire: I recognise the hon. Lady’s call, which is why we have taken a number of steps and will be bringing forward legislation to ban new leases on houses and to reduce future ground rents to zero monetary value. The Select Committee obviously highlighted the issue of existing leases as well, and we therefore now have a pledge in place and a number of people are coming forward to provide that direct response. I keep this issue under continual review as to what further steps are needed to change the situation for the future, as well as providing support for those already in this situation.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): My right hon. Friend and his team have, over the past year or so, made more progress than was made in the previous 20 years, which is greatly to be welcomed. May I ask that he continue showing the open-mindedness, flexibility and drive that are necessary to undo some of the past misdeeds, whether by declaring clauses to be unfair, and therefore unenforceable, or by finding simple, low-cost ways of righting wrongs that have been around for far too long?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) for his private Member’s Bill setting out the steps that are needed to bring the leasehold market into an appropriate space. He will have heard what I said about bringing ground rents down to zero. We have given that commitment, and the right thing is that we move forward with our proposed legislation. I am sure that, with his ingenuity, he will be able to scrutinise it and, no doubt, come up with further proposals to ensure that legislation is effective.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): This session may be the swan song of the Secretary of State and his team. We certainly hope not, and we wish them all well in the Tory turmoil to come.

Helen Goodman: But not too well.

John Healey: Indeed.

The CMA’s inquiry is certainly welcome, but it is action by Ministers that homebuyers ripped off in the leasehold system need most. The Secretary of State’s predecessor said in 2017 that the Government would stop new leasehold houses, but nearly 3,500 were sold last year. The Secretary of State himself said a year ago that he would end the use of Help to Buy for new leasehold houses, but he had to admit to me afterwards that that will not happen until 2021.

As the Secretary of State reflects on his time in this job, will he concede that any Government action has been too slow and too weak and has totally overlooked the needs of current leaseholders locked into unfair contracts?

James Brokenshire: No, I do not accept that. I direct the right hon. Gentleman to the action that has been taken and the fall that has been seen: the proportion of new build leasehold houses has fallen from 11% in quarter 4 of 2017 to 2% in quarter 4 of 2018, which was the lowest quarter so far for leasehold houses in the Help to Buy equity loan scheme.

The right hon. Gentleman issues a challenge on the existing Help to Buy scheme; he will note that I have asked Homes England to look into how we can renegotiate some of those contracts, because I was clear that there should be no new Government funding for schemes that promote leasehold, and that remains a firm commitment. Equally, we are taking action on the scheme now to confront some of the abuses that there are.

John Healey: Well, lots of warm words and fresh reviews, but no action. There have been 19 Government announcements on leaseholds in the 15 months that the
right hon. Gentleman has been Secretary of State, but there is still no sign of change for current leaseholders, or of the legislation to make it happen. Is not the hard truth that Conservatives cannot help leaseholders because they will not stand up to the vested interests in the property market? Do not homeowners who are looking for justice and radical, common-sense changes have to look to Labour to set a simple formula for people to buy their own freehold; to crack down on unfair fees and give homeowners the right to challenge high costs or poor performance from management companies; and to put an end, finally, to the broken leasehold system?

**James Brokenshire:** Clearly, the right hon. Gentleman has not been looking at the practical steps we have taken and, indeed, the performance that we have seen. Perhaps that is because of the turmoil in his own party, to plan for rising social care costs if we have uncertainty, so will the Secretary of State set out when Plymouth City Council and other councils throughout the country will find out their allocations for 2020-21?

**James Brokenshire:** Obviously, the hon. Gentleman will be able to discuss this matter further with my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary; indeed, I believe that meeting will take place later today. Plymouth has seen an increase in funding this year, with a core spend of £198.4 million. The hon. Gentleman issues a challenge on the need for certainty for next year; I understand that challenge and responded to it firmly at the recent Local Government Association conference. I am working with colleagues across Government to see that we have that certainty as early as we can possibly get it. Yes, it is linked to the spending review, but we know that planning is needed, and I am championing the issue so that we get it.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): A National Audit Office report this year showed that there is huge variation between the costs of and the activities delivered by local authorities throughout the country. The same report showed that there is no link at all between per pupil funding and the quality of the services delivered, according to Ofsted. Does my right hon. Friend agree that funding alone will not sort out the problems in either children’s or adult social care?

**James Brokenshire:** I agree with my hon. Friend and am grateful to him for highlighting the evidence that he rightly raised. We are working with the Department for Education on the review of relative needs and resources, including by jointly funding specific research on the need to spend on children’s services. We want to champion good practice and to ensure that it is there to drive change and improvement in children’s services. My hon. Friend is right that it is about delivery and not simply looking at the funding.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that he is working desperately hard to give certainty, but does he recognise that officials in Newcastle City Council are also desperate to ensure that the children in our city receive adequate care from next April, and they cannot do that job if they do not know how much funding will be available to support children in Newcastle?

**James Brokenshire:** The point that the hon. Lady makes is one that I recognise and one that I did address at the Local Government Association conference. We are approaching a spending review—a new period for the overall funding for local government—and I want to ensure that we give certainty as early as possible. That is what we are working to achieve, so the planning that she and others want for councils is absolutely what I want, too, and it is why I am doing all I can, within my powers, to see that that happens.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Northamptonshire has the second most expensive children’s social services in the country and is one of the very worst performers, so it is not about money but about management and leadership. In welcoming the appointment of a Children’s Commissioner, will the Secretary of State work with the Department for Education to speed up the implementation of the Children’s Trust rather more quickly than is presently envisaged?

**Andrew Gwyne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): When the Secretary of State looks back on his record in the current Conservative Government, which will be his biggest regret: savage cuts to funding of children’s services, or the wider impact of austerity pushing more children into needing those dwindling services in the first place?
James Brokenshire: One thing I will not regret is ensuring that I did not listen to some of the advice that I have been hearing from the Opposition. Indeed, we saw this weekend that, on the issue of the contracting out of services, their approach is effectively one that does not look at value for money or at the quality of service; it does not look at anything, it just but based on dogma. That is not our approach, which is about delivering quality services, sticking up for communities and making sure that we have well-run councils. Indeed, it is also about seeing that we are getting that funding going into social care and other services, too. That is what motivates us; that is what motivates me. I will certainly take no lessons from the Opposition.

Andrew Gwynne: I asked the right hon. Gentleman about children’s services. Of course, we can see that the Secretary of State just does not get it. His cuts have had dire consequences. The Public Accounts Committee says:

“Children’s social care is increasingly becoming financially unsustainable. The proportion of local authorities that overspend...increased to 91% in 2017-18.”

The Tory-led LGA also says that there is a £1 billion funding gap for children’s services this year. When will he understand that his sticking plaster approach will not fix the broken children’s services?

James Brokenshire: Again, we hear the same from the hon. Gentleman. When I look at the real-terms increase in core spending that councils have received this year, what do I get from Labour Members—opposition to that. They did not support it. They did not support that additional funding going into social care—children’s and adults’. We on the Government Benches have listened and responded. We will continue to take that forward, with the funding that has gone in over five years to support 20 local authorities to improve their social work practices, in addition to my commitment to listen to the sector and to advance its cause as we look to the spending review ahead to see that social care—children’s and adults’—is effective and delivers for our councils and our communities.

Mr Speaker: Order. In calling the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), I wish her a very happy birthday.

Local Authorities’ Statutory Care Duties

4. Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the ability of each local authority to fulfil its statutory care duties by the end of the 2019-20 financial year; and if he will make a statement. [912077]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Mr Speaker, I join you in wishing the hon. Lady a very happy birthday—what better way to spend it than at MHCLG questions.

It is the responsibility of each individual local authority to ensure that it can fulfil its statutory care duties. We have, however, supported councils to meet those duties by giving them access to several billion pounds of incremental dedicated funding for this purpose.

Mr Speaker: Birthday woman and man in a hurry.

Louise Haigh: I am very grateful for those birthday wishes, but I would be even more grateful if the Minister agreed with me that local authorities have a statutory responsibility to ensure that care workers they have commissioned are paid the minimum wage. The all-party parliamentary group on social care has heard increasing evidence that, despite guidance issued by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, care workers are still not receiving the minimum wage because they are not paid for travel time in between their contact hours. Will the Minister give me a great birthday present by announcing that he will review the way care workers are paid and that he will ensure they are paid the basic statutory minimum wage?

Rishi Sunak: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important issue. It is absolutely right that those who are carrying out this vital activity in difficult circumstances get exactly what they are entitled to. I have not seen the report, but I would be delighted to take a look at it later today and to talk to my colleagues at the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care to see what we can do to take this forward.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): If I had not been sitting down, I would have fallen over when the Secretary of State talked about the injection of extra cash for local authorities. This is, of course, on top of about 40% cuts in just under a decade. Local authorities are very squeezed in delivering their statutory care responsibilities and others. Will the Minister look seriously at all the work that is being done on homelessness and community building and assess the impact of these cuts in delivering wider Government policies on prevention and ensuring that people have decent homes to live in?

Rishi Sunak: I would echo what the Secretary of State said. This talk of cuts is simply not right. The amount of money that local authorities have to spend in this financial year is up in real terms over the last year. This was reinforced by the recent Budget, where we announced over £1 billion in incremental funding for local authorities, particularly targeted at the areas of immediate pressure in adult and children’s social care.

Mr Speaker: I call Dr Alan Whitehead. Not here.

Local Authorities: Adopted Local Plans

7. Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking in relation to local authorities that do not have an adopted local plan. [912081]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): Under the current plan-making regime, 37 local authorities have yet to adopt a local plan. Of these, 27 have submitted their draft plan for examination. We continue to monitor progress and offer support where appropriate in all these areas.

Gareth Snell: The Minister’s Department is taking action against only 15 local authorities where no local plan is actively in place. The Department also has an ambitious target of 300,000 homes a year—about 80,000
a year short. What action will he take to ensure that local authorities like Stoke-on-Trent that are failing to get a local plan in place do so quickly, so that they can develop and address this country’s housing need?

Kit Malthouse: As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, we commenced a formal process of intervention in 15 local authorities to ensure that they fulfil their obligations. I have spent the last 12 months touring the country, exhorting local authorities not only to get a local plan in place, but to do so on a long-term basis so that people can see the kind of decadal-scale planning that is required to get to 300,000 homes a year. If local authorities remain sluggish in producing a plan, as the hon. Gentleman claims his local authority has been—I think that its planning permission to two sites in Hatfield Peverel that go against the neighbourhood plan?

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): In relation to local plans and housing, Isle of Wight Council wants to set up a company to build council housing—I strongly support this—but says that it cannot access the necessary funds because it does not have a housing revenue account. Does the Minister agree with that statement, and, if so, what will he do to help my council to build council housing for Islanders?

Kit Malthouse: I congratulate my hon. Friend, who works very closely with his local council in its aspiration to build more council homes. This is exactly the sort of action that we want to see from local authorities, which were, frankly, induced out of council house building by the previous Labour Government. I am aware that quite a lot of councils in this situation do not have a housing revenue account, despite our lifting the cap and enabling them to access the funding that they need. I would be more than happy to arrange for his councillors or council officials to meet my officials to determine how they could establish just such an account.

Home Ownership

8. Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of recent trends in the level of home ownership.

Colleen Fletcher: With house prices in the region almost seven times the average annual salary, people in Coventry and the wider west midlands are struggling to get a foot on the housing ladder. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that more genuinely affordable homes are being built in the region so that home ownership is not out of reach for all but the best-paid and those with significant capital?

Kit Malthouse: May I start by saying what a pleasure it is to hear an Opposition Member who believes in the concept of private property—not something that is shared by everybody on the hon. Lady’s Front Bench or, indeed, her leadership? I am pleased that she shares Conservative Members’ obsession that people should have the ability to own their own homes where they want to. In the end, the solution to the problem that she poses is a massive increase in housing supply. We are committed to building 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s, not just for one year but for a series of years—perhaps for decades, if we can get there—to address this issue. In the meantime, the Government have put significant funding—billions of pounds—behind schemes such as Help to Buy to make homes more affordable. I hope that as many of her constituents as possible will avail themselves of the assistance that is there.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Ind): That is all well and good, but 30 years ago, when I bought my first house in Dudley, people were able to do so because the average cost was about three times the average income. As we have just heard, the average cost is now seven times the average income. At the same time, the number of homes for shared ownership and low-cost home ownership has fallen. So what is the Minister going to do to enable people like the ones I meet in Dudley every single week who are working hard in low-paid employment, desperate to own a home of their own, to fulfil their ambitions?
Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman puts his finger on an enormous problem for the country that we have not shied away from. He is quite right in pointing out that over the past three, possibly four, decades this country has failed to build the homes required by its population, and as a result we have seen unaffordability rise, particularly in London and south-east, but beyond that in the rest of the country as well. In the end, the fundamental solution is a massive increase in supply, which we are committed to. The Government have put significant resources behind lifting the number of homes being built in this country in a way that has not been seen for a generation. Last year’s net new additions to the housing stock were 222,000, and the leading indicators for next year are pointing towards something over 240,000. That will represent the largest expansion in house building in this country since the war.

Homelessness

9. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce homelessness.

Mrs Wheeler: Any loss of life is to be pitied, and we all apologise for that. It should not happen on our streets, particularly when rough sleepers are being looked after but drug dependency is involved. If an issue happens, it is tragic. We have put in £1.2 billion up to 2020 to solve these issues, and we are not shying away from them. We now give specific support to more than 240 councils, and that is a huge jump.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): First, may I declare my interest? There are real fears that the proposed abolition of section 21 in the private rented sector will lead to rent controls and a significant reduction in investment and supply, which may well exacerbate homelessness. Will my hon. Friend consider these fears before pressing ahead with the proposals?

Mrs Wheeler: I hope my hon. Friend will excuse my back; as we all know, we talk to each other through the Speaker. This is a very difficult issue, and one that we want to get right. People from all sides are asking questions about it, which is why the consultation is so important, and I encourage my hon. Friend and other people to take part in it. A very interesting report from 2010 suggested that rent control would make matters an awful lot worse, but the consultation is important.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Estimates of homelessness among veterans of our armed forces range from the low thousands to approximately 11,000. Why does the Minister think that the Government have failed veterans of our services?

Mrs Wheeler: As Members might imagine, as the Minister with responsibility for veterans in MHCLG, I have taken a great interest in this matter. In London, we have data from the combined homelessness and information network—so-called CHAIN data—which gives us very good and specific data about the number of veterans who are on the streets. Similarly, the homelessness case level information classification, or H-CLIC, contains data that all councils put into it. It is still experimental, because it has been going for less than 18 months, but the latest figures show that the number of veterans on the streets is lower than it has ever been, and lower than 3%.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Home Office contractor Serco is intent on making 300 vulnerable asylum seekers homeless in Glasgow. Some have been able to get interim interdicts through the efforts of the Govan Law Centre, the Legal Services Agency and Latta & Co, but some, including a constituent of mine, have not. Will the Minister speak to his colleagues in the Home Office to stop these evictions, which will result in people being put on to the streets?

Mrs Wheeler: As the hon. Lady agrees, this is a devolved matter. However, as regards the Home Office, I will of course do so. I recall a question that was asked at Prime Minister’s questions last week about it, and I need to refer the hon. Lady to the answer given then.

Alison Thewliss: A lot of this is not actually a devolved matter, because it is to do with the Government’s hostile environment, which will make it incredibly difficult for...
these 300 individuals, once made homeless, to be rehoused. That is a damning indictment on this Government. Will the Minister apologise for a policy that denies people the right to a roof over their head and is actively causing homelessness in my city of Glasgow?

Mrs Wheeler: Of course, the hon. Lady is absolutely right: this is a Home Office matter. I apologise for not explaining myself correctly before. It is a matter for the Home Office, and I will refer her question to the Home Office.

Fracking: Planning Policies

11. Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that planning policies on fracking provide for the safety of people and communities.

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): National planning policy makes it clear that, in considering planning applications, mineral planning authorities should ensure there are no unacceptable adverse impacts on the environment or on human health.

Cat Smith: Fifty seven earthquakes of up to 1.5 magnitude were detected in Lancashire last year in the two months when Cuadrilla was fracking at Preston New Road. Will the Minister commit to listening to communities such as mine in Lancashire and act in their interests to prevent permitted development rights being granted for shale gas exploration?

Kit Malthouse: As the hon. Lady will know, we have consulted on these permitted development rights. I am hopeful, once consideration by colleagues at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has finished, that we will be able to issue our response to that consultation. I would, however, point out to her that our ability to access gas allows us to stop burning coal. This country has just been through its longest period of not burning coal, by far the dirtiest of fuels, since the industrial revolution.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I hope there will not be any changes that make it easier for fracking to be permitted through the planning system. Like many of my constituents, I am deeply concerned about some of the associated impacts on the environment that come with fracking. Can the Minister assure my constituents that an industrialisation of our countryside, which is what fracking is, will be treated in the same way in the planning system as any other industrial development?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend has been a persistent advocate for his constituents on this issue. As he knows, alongside the consultation on permitted development rights for exploration, we also consulted on pre-application consultation steps that may have to be taken should an application proceed. Both those matters are under consideration by colleagues, and I hope we will be able to issue a response to them shortly.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I remind the Minister that the consultation he refers to closed last October. Twelve months ago, the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee did a report opposing permitted development rights and opposing transferring part of the fracking regime to the national infrastructure regime. Given the amount of opposition on his own side, as well as on this side of the House, and in local communities, is the Minister now considering withdrawing those proposals and instead giving greater powers to communities to decide whether they want fracking in their areas?

Kit Malthouse: The Chairman of the Select Committee is quite right to point out the timescale on which these measures have been under consideration, and I will certainly pass on his concerns to colleagues at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I will give the Minister another chance. Everyone—from the Royal Town Planning Institute to Friends of the Earth—has criticised the Government’s plans to allow fracking to take place under permitted development, rather than by achieving planning permission, not least because it bypasses the views and concerns of local communities. Given the Government’s silence on this matter since the consultation last year, will the Minister confirm today that the Government will not proceed to use permitted development for fracking and will not dilute regulations covering seismic activity—as requested by Cuadrilla, again, today—but will accept that fracking is environmentally unsound and invest more in renewable energy sources instead?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady is normally quite precise, but I should correct what she said at the start. We consulted not on fracking taking place under permitted development rights, but on exploration in advance of a full application being made for fracking. Those consultations are still under consideration by colleagues, in particular those with whom we work closely at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. I will impress upon them the House’s demands this afternoon that a response be forthcoming.

Midlands Engine

12. Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to deliver economic growth through the Midlands engine.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The Government are investing £1.6 billion through the nine Midlands local enterprise partnerships and have established the £250 million Midlands Engine investment fund. Some £217 million of the local growth fund is being invested in the Black Country, and projects such as the Elite Centre for Manufacturing Skills, with Dudley College, will drive economic growth in the area.

Mike Wood: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response, but businesses and residents in my constituency are frustrated at a lack of connectivity. Does the Secretary of State agree that a priority for the Midlands engine and the Government as a whole must be to invest substantially in connecting our region, whether by rail, by road or digitally?
James Brokenshire: I agree with my hon. Friend’s point about connectivity, and he will know that I visited Dudley recently to hear about those issues directly. That is why £215 million of the transforming cities fund has been made available to the West Midlands Combined Authority to support extending the midlands metro tram links to Brierley Hill, enhancing accessibility across the Black Country and helping to drive growth.

Local Government Funding: Removal of Deprivation Measures

13. Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on levels of local authority service delivery of the removal of deprivation measures from the local government funding formula.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): The Government have consulted on changes to the local authority funding formula and have heard from over 300 bodies. We are in the process of digesting those responses and will of course listen carefully to what the sector has said.

Imran Hussain: I am somewhat astonished that the Secretary of State and the Minister can stand at the Dispatch Box and keep a straight face while downplaying local government cuts. My local authority, Bradford Council, has been decimated by nine years of Tory austerity, which has stripped vital services of funding and dragged hundreds of our children into poverty. Does the Minister really think that cutting funding further and devastating our communities is an example of fair funding?

Rishi Sunak: As I have already said, funding in aggregate for local authorities has gone up, but it is worth bearing in mind too that funding for the hon. Gentleman’s local authority is up this year. I have noticed also that its spending power per household is higher than the average for metropolitan districts. Indeed, in Bradford’s latest accounts it boasts of the area having “Better skills, more good jobs and a growing economy”.

This Government are backing local councils to deliver for their local communities and will continue to do so.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): When will the Government review the empty homes premium, a hypothecated tax that is unfairly distributed between deprived precepting boroughs and shires? Hyndburn is about the 24th most deprived area in the country and collects about £600,000, the majority of which is given to wider Lancashire to spend, not the deprived area. This is totally unfair. Does the Minister recognise it as unfair and will he do anything about it?

Rishi Sunak: I am happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman about his specific concern, but in general it is for local authorities themselves to decide how to implement the empty homes premium. They are accountable to their electors, and this is not something that central Government have any execution over.

Developers

14. Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): What steps local authorities are able to take to hold to account developers that do not engage with local communities on (a) section 106 agreements and (b) other local planning matters after planning consent has been given.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Our recent reforms gave local authorities the tools to make it more difficult for developers to renegotiate contributions after planning consent. Where developers do not deliver on contributions, these can be enforced through legal proceedings. Finally, local authorities are required to consult on planning applications before consent is granted.

Andrea Leadsom: As part of a planning agreement, Persimmon is responsible for building a relief road for Towcester as part of that town’s expansion in my constituency. Highways England is providing £44 million to try to bring forward delivery of the road, but that now seems to be at risk due to problems between the developer and Highways England. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss how we can work together to ensure that the road gets built?

James Brokenshire: I would be very happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss the point she makes. We want to ensure that there is a tie-up on infrastructure; the £5.5 billion housing infrastructure fund is there precisely to support that activity. On section 106 agreements, the Housing Minister and I firmly believe that transparency —publication and making them available, so there is direct accountability—is really important. I will certainly meet my right hon. Friend.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will know that over my time there have been serious problems with the non-delivery of section 106 agreements, so could we not look at them? When building houses, land tends to be cleared and trees cut down. Under a new kind of section 106 agreement, we could make developers put money into building new forests, such as the Great Northern forest and the White Rose forest.

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that how we create stronger, greener environments is a part of the delivery we firmly need, so that we have a relationship between built and natural environments. I believe very strongly in creating communities. The new planning guide, with the national planning policy framework, provides greater certainty, but we continue to review this area with an accelerated planning Green Paper later this year. If the hon. Gentleman has specific points he would like to raise on how we ensure that that sense of greenness within development is upheld, I will be very grateful to hear from him.

18. Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Developers are not the only ones who do not engage with local people. In fact, the whole way in which we consult on planning is out of date and is regarded with some scepticism by many members of the public. May I urge the Secretary of State to tackle that—not least by
putting in proper resources and extending the scope of neighbourhood planning, as his Minister referred to earlier?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting neighbourhood plans, which I believe in very strongly, and how we garner that greater consent for development to take place. I underline the sense of how we speed up the process with planning, with development and with those plans. That is what the accelerated planning Green Paper is all about. I would be delighted to continue to discuss this matter with my hon. Friend and others to ensure that we make that effective.

Topical Questions

T2. [912100] Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Just over a week ago, I visited the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany where my children’s great grandfather was held by the Nazis after Kristallnacht. He was one of the lucky ones. He was able to leave Germany and be reunited with family, but millions of others were not so fortunate. The visit redoubled my determination to deliver the national holocaust memorial and learning centre.

There is a duty on all of us across the House to stand up against antisemitism, racism and bigotry. Through initiatives such as the communities framework, which we have just published, we must stand up for our shared values of openness, understanding and decency. We reaffirm those values, as we mark the centenary of the Addision Act this month, with plans to end the practice of the segregation of social housing tenants through new guidance on development to prevent people from being denied access to shared facilities such as playgrounds. I will continue to champion the values of fairness that underpin my work as Secretary of State.

Tom Pursglove: What steps is my right hon. Friend’s Department taking to ensure there is a co-ordinated cross-Government plan to make sure that areas with very significant housing growth, such as Corby and east Northamptonshire, receive the investment in infrastructure they need?

James Brokenshire: The £5.5 billion housing infrastructure fund is a cross-Government effort to unlock housing by supporting infrastructure development. With the Department for Transport and the Treasury, we are looking at ways to build capability across Government to make that as effective as possible. My hon. Friend is right. It is about that sense of delivery and consent, and seeing that homes are supported by the infrastructure they need.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): On Thursday, it was confirmed that high pressure laminate cladding, exactly like Grenfell-style ACM cladding, is lethal in certain combinations and must be removed from buildings. This could affect up to 1,700 additional blocks. The Secretary of State has known since last October that this cladding failed a fire test. No building should be covered with lethal materials and there are lives at stake, so I ask the Secretary of State: how many buildings are covered in this lethal cladding? What is the deadline for the removal of that cladding? Will the Government fund its removal?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady needs to be careful about the detail of what she has said, because she will equally know that there has been a BS 8414 test in relation to high pressure laminate, with different types of insulation, where the finding was not the description that she has set out. We provided advice in December 2017 and December 2018. We have now reaffirmed further advice to building owners to see that they take appropriate action to make buildings safe. That is what we have taken action to see and secure, and further steps are being taken with local government to test the type of materials that are in buildings. There is certainly no sense on this side of not taking the action that is required to make people safe.

T3. [912101] Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): A number of constituents are trapped in unfair leases. What is the Minister doing to ensure that they can buy out their lease from a developer at reasonable cost?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I thank my hon. Friend for her question. We have asked the Law Commission to look at making it easier, quicker and more cost-effective for people to buy their freehold or extend their lease. It is also examining the options on reducing the premium that leaseholders must pay to do that. We look forward to its recommendations in the early part of next year.

T6. [912104] Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): A damning report from the Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government has confirmed that the £200 million set aside to fund the removal of aluminium composite material cladding from private residential buildings will not be sufficient. Will the Secretary of State commit to funding work to ensure that all this potentially life-saving work can be carried out everywhere it is needed?

James Brokenshire: We believe that the £200 million, which was an exceptional sum, based on the extreme risk that this ACM cladding has, is sufficient to provide the necessary support to make the necessary remediation, the reason being that commitments are already in place from a number of private sector developers and builders, as well as other insurers, to see that that work is undertaken. It is on that basis that that sum has been ring-fenced.

T4. [912102] Bin Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Under this Government, greenhouse gas emissions have fallen by 25% since 2010, which is a considerable achievement. However, there is much more we can do to make our housing stock much more environmentally friendly. The Minister for Housing knows about this issue, because I have spoken to him about it several times in the past few weeks. Will he or the Secretary of State illustrate what we are doing to deal with it?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that. He sets out that need for improving the energy efficiency of new and existing homes—that aim is very much shared by the Housing Minister. We plan to
consult this year on uplifting the building regulations’ energy-efficiency requirements for new homes and work to existing buildings. Policies are also in place to improve existing homes, and these include the energy company obligation scheme.

T7. [912105] Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Mr S has been a brilliant private tenant for the past 12 years in his flat, always paying his rent on time, and decorating the flat and repairing it when necessary. He is also a great patriot, as a Royal Navy reservist. But none of this matters: in eight weeks, when his landlady issues him a section 21 notice, he will become homeless through no fault of his own. How is that right or fair?

James Brokenshire: We want to get this right in the private rental sector, which is why we have launched the consultation today on section 21 and how we provide that reform. If the hon. Lady wishes to draw the circumstances of this case to my attention, I will be happy to receive the details, because the sense of fairness underpins the action we are taking and is why these reforms are necessary.

T5. [912103] Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): The midlands has economic, cultural and historical ties with countries in every part of the world, but few are stronger than those with India. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on developments for a midlands engine partnership with business in India?

James Brokenshire: I am pleased to say to my hon. Friend that some further positive steps have been taken since my visit to India last October to forge those relationships between the midlands and Maharashtra in India. I hope to be able to give him some positive news very shortly on signing a memorandum of understanding to really regularise that and underpin how we ensure we have that shared expertise to create jobs, boost trade and take other steps to cement this and create that positive sense of prosperity that I know he strongly advocates.

T8. [912106] Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Why has the Housing Minister not accepted the need for new primary legislation to implement the Letwin review’s call for land value uplift to be properly captured? That would support social housing construction, including in areas such as Oxford.

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): We cannot wait for primary legislation; we have to get on with it now. In particular, there are lots of things in the Letwin review that can work with the grain and the weaves of current planning policy. For example, we will shortly be issuing guidance on housing diversification, which is one of the key suggestions in the review. We are encouraging local authorities to introduce local plans, as the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) urged us to do, so that landowners can realise the obligations placed upon them and so that the value of community contributions and affordable housing can be factored into the land price.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Permitted development rights have damaged the economic and social fabric of Harlow, increased crime and placed intolerable burdens on our education and social services. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said he would review them. What has happened to that review and what is the outcome?

Mrs Wheeler: I appreciate my right hon. Friend’s question, having recently visited Harlow to discuss this matter with him. In the round, 42,000 homes were delivered in the three years to March 2018 under permitted development rights with a change of use from office to residential. Earlier this year we announced a review of the quality standard of homes provided through permitted development rights for the conversion of buildings to residential use. The review is expected to conclude later this year. Today, I have written to all local authorities to remind them of their responsibilities regarding out-of-borough placements.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Currently, town and parish councils are not compensated in the council tax formula grant for providing student discounts, which means that parish councils in villages with large student populations, such as Kegworth in my constituency, are providing services used by students for which there is no precept. Will the Minister look into this inequity?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): We will take this away and look into it. My hon. Friend makes a valid point. More widely, in our communities framework, we have come forward with a plan for expanding the number of parish councils in this country to ensure they play their full part in delivering for the communities they represent.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): The Government are still allowing the use of flammable cladding on school buildings up to 18 metres high, which of course means most school buildings. A disabled child would have great difficulty getting out if there were a fire. Why won’t the Government do what every parent wants and bring in a total ban on flammable cladding on schools?

James Brokenshire: I thank the hon. Gentleman for flagging this up in the way he has. I took the step to introduce the ban on combustible materials on the surface of walls of high-rise residential buildings and others. We keep this under review. The Department for Education takes the lead on some of these standards, but I will certainly impress upon it the issues he raises, because safety and security are paramount.
Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): What is the Department doing to make sure that Help to Buy is more accessible for those on lower incomes?

Kit Malthouse: As my hon. Friend knows, the Department spends an enormous amount of time and energy promoting Help to Buy to those who are eligible, and the new Help to Buy scheme, which will come in once the current scheme finishes, will be targeted very carefully at first-time buyers. I am more than happy to take any suggestions she may have for how we can focus it more on those on lower incomes.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): There is a £3.1 billion gap in funding for children's services and a £4.3 billion gap in funding for adult social care, but, eight months before the start of the new financial year, local authorities have no idea what their funding settlement will be for the coming financial year or beyond it. What is the Secretary of State doing to address this crisis in local government funding, which is affecting the most vulnerable residents in communities up and down the country every single day? Why is he being so complacent?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Far from being complacent, the Government are working hard to ensure that local authorities receive the support that they need, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen). We know about the importance of children's services, and the importance of ensuring that all authorities benefit from best practice from places such as Leeds, Hertfordshire and North Yorkshire. We are funding those authorities so that they can spread that best practice throughout the country, transforming the lives of children everywhere.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I do not want to assume that Ministers have seen the letter that was sent to the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and me today by the director general for housing about the chairman of the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership and LEASE, the Leasehold Advisory Service. It deals with one issue satisfactorily. May I ask Ministers to see whether the alleged social media comments that pose a difficulty can be sent to the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform to establish whether he can overcome the second difficulty?

James Brokenshire: I will look into the matter and come back to my hon. Friend.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Representatives of nearly 50% of children's services have said that they no longer feel able to keep children safe. Recent research has shown that private fostering, children's homes and social worker agencies have amassed an estimated annual profit of £220 million, while simultaneously costing local authorities £20 million. At what point will the Government put the needs of vulnerable children before private profit?

Rishi Sunak: It is for local authorities to decide how best to conduct children's services in their areas, and it would not be right for me to stand at the Dispatch Box and tell them exactly how to contract. I will say this, however. When it comes to protecting the most vulnerable children in our society, the Government have ensured, through the troubled families programme, that hundreds of thousands of the most vulnerable families are receiving the targeted, intensive support they need so that their children can be kept out of care and they can stay strong together.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): The crisis in adult social care is likely to become worse as it becomes harder to recruit staff from the European economic area to work in that sector post Brexit. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Home Office to ensure that the sector has access to the long-term labour supply that it will need?

James Brokenshire: I have had discussions with not just the Home Office but the Department of Health and Social Care, and we have pursued the issue with our local government delivery board, which brings together councils from across the country to ensure that such issues are well planned. We keep this issue under careful review, but I believe that councils will rise to the challenge and ensure that the services on which their communities rely will not be disrupted.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Hull is proud of its maritime history, and our relationship with the sea has shaped not only our culture and our economy, but even our character. What support and encouragement can the Minister give Hull City Council in its bid to become an official maritime city?

Jake Berry: As someone who was born and bred in the city of Liverpool, I know that the connection between coastal communities and the sea is very strong. What support and encouragement can I give? Well, having visited Hull on many occasions and having had the privilege of experiencing some of the events that took place during its city of culture year, I can say that it seems extremely well placed. I am sure that the hon. Lady, and her colleagues in the constituencies surrounding hers, will let no opportunity pass to bang the drum for Hull, its place in our nation’s story as a maritime city, and its role in driving the future economy of our northern powerhouse.
Hong Kong

3.39 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Hong Kong.

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison): There have been a number of developments in Hong Kong over the weekend. On Friday evening, the police seized a quantity of explosives from a warehouse in the New Territories along with knives, petrol bombs, corrosive acids and T-shirts supporting Hong Kong independence. On Saturday, there was a large rally in the area known as Central in support of the Hong Kong police. Yesterday, hundreds of thousands of people took part in a largely peaceful march on Hong Kong island; however, some protesters diverted from the approved route and there were clashes with the police, including outside the Chinese Central Government liaison office. Last night, there were disturbing scenes in the New Territories town of Yuen Long: a group armed with chains and poles attacked pro-democracy protesters and other passengers at the metro station; 45 protesters were reportedly injured, one critically. We were all shocked to see such unacceptable scenes of violence.

There has been a great deal of speculation about the identity of the group who attacked people at Yuen Long metro station, but it is important that we do not jump to conclusions on their identity until a thorough investigation has taken place. I welcome Carrie Lam’s statement today saying that she has asked the commissioner of police to investigate this incident fully and pursue any law breakers. We will be keeping a close eye on this, as I know will hon. and right hon. Members.

I condemn all violent acts, but I stand by people’s right to protest peacefully and lawfully. We must not let the violent actions of a few overshadow the fact that hundreds of thousands of people took part in the march yesterday and did so in a peaceful and lawful manner. In doing so, they were exercising their right to peacefully protest and stand up for their freedoms. We fully support this right, which is guaranteed under the joint declaration. Successive six-monthly reports in this House have highlighted that Hong Kong’s political freedoms have been coming under increasing pressure, and the House is right to reflect this in its appetite for urgent questions, parliamentary questions and statements.

Let me assure the House that the Government remain fully committed to upholding Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy, rights and freedoms under the one country, two systems principle. They are guaranteed by the legally binding joint declaration. We will continue to be unwavering in our support for the treaty and expect our co-signatory to behave in a like manner.

Rights and freedoms and the rule of law are vital for Hong Kong’s future success; for its people, we will continue to stand up and speak out.

Catherine West: I agree with the Minister that the peaceful nature of the demonstrations must be paramount. Does he agree that there has been some doubt as to the wording of the governor of Hong Kong’s promise to suspend the plans around extradition, and that that could do with some clarification? Does he also agree that huge numbers of people are taking part, which reveals a deep concern about these ongoing proposals, and is there any way that he can use his office to assist in the clarification that the extradition plans will be 100% dropped?

Obviously this month saw the 22nd anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong from Britain to Chinese rule, and the day was marked by real fear among many people in Hong Kong that the principle of one country, two systems is being reneged on. Media reports paint an alarming picture: 45 people were injured, and of significant concern is that one of those was a journalist, and there is a question over press freedoms and the fact that the police were very slow to respond.

Coupled with the escalation in violence, reports also came out this weekend that the UK Government approved an export licence for £1.9 million-worth of telecommunications interception equipment to Hong Kong. Will the Minister tell the House what human rights assessment was made before the approval of that licence given the concerns raised previously about the Hong Kong authorities’ treatment of protesters during student protests in 2014, and how the Government intend to address the ongoing urgent concerns about the protests and the way they are being handled? Finally, will the Minister once more provide assurances that we stand with the people of Hong Kong in defending their democratic right to protest?

Dr Murrison: I shall start with the hon. Lady’s last question, about our standing shoulder to shoulder with the people of Hong Kong in their right to protest. I know that it was a rhetorical question, but it is worth emphasising that of course this country stands shoulder to shoulder with the people of Hong Kong, as I laid out in my opening remarks. On her point about interception equipment, I could find evidence of one licence, but it was an extant licence connected to counter-narcotics, counter-trafficking, search and rescue and counter-terrorism. I would say to the hon. Lady with the greatest respect that if you will the ends, you have to will the means. She will be familiar with the safeguards that this country has in relation to equipment that a country could use to disadvantage people internally or to pose a threat to its neighbours. They are well rehearsed, and I probably do not have time in responding to her question to rehearse them again.

The hon. Lady mentioned the governor, but I think she meant the Chief Executive. That was a Freudian slip and it is perfectly understandable that she would use that term, but it is important to understand the UK’s position in all this, because we are simply a co-signatory to the Sino-British joint declaration. We cannot impose things, as was perhaps the case in the past, and nor should we. It is important to understand Hong Kong’s autonomous behaviour, which we stand fully behind in accordance with the tenets of the joint agreement.

On the status of the extradition arrangements associated with Carrie Lam, I think that she has made it fairly clear that they are dead in the water. On the undertaking of one country, two systems, of course remains our view that that is in the interests not only of Hong Kong but, I humbly suggest, of China. We will continue to point that out in our discourse with Beijing.
The hon. Lady rightly commented on press freedom. Of course that is at the forefront of the mind of Ministers in the FCO right now, given that we have recently hosted in Canada the media freedom conference, at which many of these issues were aired. I do not think anybody can be left in any doubt as to the position of the United Kingdom in this matter, which is four-square behind the journalists who serve us so well in articulating concerns and reflecting on world events in the manner that they do.

The hon. Lady mentioned police behaviour. It is important that police behaviour in the UK or any country should be fully scrutinised. We have a proud tradition of that in this country, and we want to inculcate those norms and practices elsewhere.

In general, Hong Kong is a peaceful place with a good record for safety as a city. It has an independent judiciary that ultimately would be tasked with forming a view on whether the police have behaved appropriately, but before that, it is important that matters of concern are investigated internally, and I am pleased that the police commissioner and the Independent Police Complaints Council in Hong Kong have undertaken to do just that.

**Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): Regarding Hong Kong citizens’ fundamental rights and freedoms, the Chinese Government have warned the UK to “know its place and stop interfering” in what is a “purely internal affair”.

Does my right hon. Friend disagree with that assessment, and will he make that clear to the Chinese Government? Will he also make it clear to them that it is perfectly in order for parliamentarians here in the UK to engage on this issue? May I put it on record in this place, Mr Speaker, that UK parliamentarians will not be warned off doing that, no matter what warnings we receive individually?

**Mr Speaker:** They certainly will not be. I am aware of such efforts, as the hon. Lady knows. Such efforts to silence Members of this House are both improper and extremely ill judged, and the sooner their authors realise that, so much the better.

**Dr Murrison:** Indeed, and I hope that I made my views on the matter plain in my opening remarks. I agree with my hon. Friend that China and the United Kingdom are co-signatories and equally responsible for the Sino-British agreement, and we expect our co-signatory to honour it as we have done. In general, I believe that China has attempted to do that, and we will continue to impress on it the importance of that in our discourse with China, as I know the Prime Minister did in Downing Street with China’s Vice Premier on 17 June.

**Mr Speaker:** I very much thank the Minister for what he has said.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on securing it. The situation in Hong Kong is getting more and more serious by the day. The temporary suspension of the extradition laws was never going to be enough to appease the protesters. Their demonstrations are the culmination of years of frustration and based on the fear of interference by Beijing in Hong Kong affairs. It is time for some significant change.

Yesterday’s vicious attack by a mysterious armed mob on pro-democracy protesters making their way home is a new and sickening low in this sorry chapter. It was nothing less than an attempt to bully and frighten peaceful protesters into submission. The Hong Kong police have come in for a lot of criticism since June for their heavy-handedness and brutality, but they were nowhere to be seen on this occasion, and over 40 people were injured in the attack. Why was it allowed to happen?

Our call for an independent inquiry has so far been met with a less than satisfactory response. I therefore wonder whether the Minister can update the House on the Foreign Secretary’s call for an independent judge-led inquiry into the conduct of the Hong Kong police. We do not know who these people were or who put them up to it, but it is vital to find out. Does the Minister have any information as to the identity of the attackers and from where their orders came?

**Dr Murrison:** I share the hon. Lady’s assessment of the deteriorating political situation in Hong Kong. I also share her revulsion at the scenes we saw on our television screens over the weekend. We have called for an independent inquiry, and we would like to know what the scope of such an inquiry would be. That is important, particularly since the situation is evolving. When we originally called for such an inquiry some time ago, we were presented with certain facts, and we were calling for such an inquiry on the basis of what we knew at that time. Things have changed since then, and different things have happened, and we would like such things, including the weekend’s events, to form part of that inquiry.

This is a rapidly evolving piece, but we need to know to what extent the inquiry will be full, comprehensive and, as the hon. Lady is right to say, independent, which is crucial. It probably is not sufficient simply to have an internal police inquiry, which is what the IPCC would be in a Hong Kong context, and it really does need to involve Hong Kong’s excellent and well-respected judiciary.

I cannot really speculate on the nature of the individuals who are responsible for last night’s attacks, and it would be very premature to do so. Those things would need to be explored in any comprehensive inquiry, and the hon. Lady will understand that it would be unwise and unreasonable to speculate at this stage, although she will have seen the same press reports that I have.

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): The Minister is absolutely right to say how much he deeply regrets the events in Tsuen Wan and Yuen Long in particular over the past couple of days. All of us who wish Hong Kong well will be dismayed at what has become the seventh consecutive weekend of protest and violence. In many ways, the proposed extradition Bill has become a catalyst for deeper frustrations, and it is clear to all of us that the protesters’ five demands are going to have to be addressed, at least in part. Is my right hon. Friend aware that the Hong Kong general chamber of commerce has now come out in favour of two of them—that the Hong Kong Government formally withdraw the extradition Bill, even though they have acknowledged that it is
effectively dead, and that there is a judge-led commission of inquiry into all the events? If so, does he agree that we should support such calls?

**Dr Murrison:** My hon. Friend is an acknowledged expert in this House on Hong Kong, and the sense of his remarks is pretty spot on. On the extradition Bill being a catalyst for other things, it is a bit like uncorking a bottle. He is right to say that the Bill is important but has brought to a head wider unhappiness in relation to mounting events in Hong Kong. His judgment is spot on in that respect.

My hon. Friend asked about a judge-led commission, and our sense is that an inquiry needs to be independent, and needs to be seen to be independent by the international community. It would be wrong of me, from this Dispatch Box, to ordain the terms of reference of such an inquiry, although, as I have already said, the judiciary in Hong Kong is held in high regard and is generally regarded as being absolutely independent. One is perhaps drawn towards judicial involvement as a way of assuring the international community that these matters, in the fullness of time, will be investigated fully and comprehensively.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP):** The juxtaposition of this question with the statement later today on the Gulf illuminates what will be an increasingly geostrategic workload for the incoming Administration. The Minister should know that the entire House supports the Government’s standing up to China to ensure the rights of Hong Kongers, as guaranteed in the handover agreement, but if I may say so, previous attempts have been hindered by a lack of wider UK strategy in the Indo-Pacific region to address the weighty issues of the rise of China that our allies have been dealing with for more than a decade. Will the Minister therefore be willing, at some point, to bring forward a China strategy for debate on the Floor of the House, to stop the continual oscillation of successive UK Governments between “fill-er-boots” appeasement and knee-jerk Trumplianism?

Dr Murrison: I think that is very harsh. It is clearly our endeavour to work with the Chinese Government, and it would be bonkers not to do so, wouldn’t it? The hon. Gentleman is tempting me down a road that would cause all sorts of difficulties in trying to advance the human rights issues that he and I both hold dear.

We will be critical of China, if we think it appropriate, but the important thing is to insist on the tenets of the 1984 joint agreement and hold China’s feet to the fire as a co-signatory. We respect that agreement, and I know China will want to respect that agreement if it wants to continue working with the UK on a range of issues and common interests. On that basis, I hope we will move forward.

**Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con):** Does the Minister agree that the rule of law is essential to the economic stability of Hong Kong? Does he also agree that our definition of the rule of law—the definition generally understood by the international community—is not the one that China always understands?

Dr Murrison: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that working together to ensure prosperity in Hong Kong is vital. On the rule of law, we have to work with a number of systems across the world, and we need to be a little careful about insisting on a particular model. I am proud of our norms and values, and I have no difficulty in trying to inculcate them, but we have to be respectful of our partners. Particularly when engaging on human rights, we need to make it clear where we are coming from and the importance we attach to them, including when we come to strike trade deals. It is perfectly legitimate for such agreements to contain reflections on human rights, but we also have to respect our interlocutors.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): One of the people injured at Yuen Long was a journalist. Just over a week ago, the Government set up a committee to protect journalists, which is clearly very welcome. Will the Minister set out how in future the committee might be able to help journalists in Hong Kong who want to cover this matter impartially?

Dr Murrison: The right hon. Gentleman will, I hope, have admired the Foreign Secretary’s personal efforts in respect of media freedom, which came to a head with the conference to which the right hon. Gentleman refers. If it was in doubt before, Britain is now widely respected around the globe as being in the lead on this matter.

On the committee to which the right hon. Gentleman refers, it would be perfectly reasonable for such a body to take a view on the treatment of journalists who had been abused. There is a worrying tendency around the world for journalists who are doing their very best to promote openness and transparency and how to be abused in the way that they sadly have been in Hong Kong recently, as they have in other parts of the world. I share the right hon. Gentleman’s concerns. It is clearly up to the committee to work out how it is going to do its work, but no doubt it will take note of the particular abuse to which he refers.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Hong Kong is a peaceful place, but there is growing evidence that the Chinese Government are quite prepared to throw their weight around. If these so-called triads were indeed triads, they would not have just gone around attacking people on the station. That does not happen unless they are instructed to do so. Does the Minister share my concern for the future of the island? If this sort of thing is happening now, what is going to happen in 2047, when the island is handed back to China full-time?

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend is right to say that in 2047 the formal period covered by the Sino-British joint agreement will come to an end. The Government hope that the good practice in that agreement, which we hope will continue during the timeline of this particular agreement, will continue thereafter. In particular, we hope that the commitment to the one country, two states system, and the basic law and everything that is contained within that, including measures to further democracy beyond that which currently exists, will continue. I do not necessarily share my hon. Friend’s pessimism, but there is real benefit in the special status of Hong Kong as far as China is concerned. I very much hope that if China wants Hong Kong to continue to be a place where business is done and foreign revenue is...
earned, it will insist on the continuation of human rights and democracy, which underpin the uniqueness of Hong Kong to the mutual advantage of Hong Kong and mainland China.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Minister will be aware of the horrendous level of artificial intelligence-enhanced digital surveillance under which Chinese citizens, and Uyghur Muslims in particular, are obliged to live. Does he know to what extent that applies to Hong Kong and whether it contravenes elements of the Sino-British agreement? Will he confirm that whoever is the next Prime Minister and however desperate they are for a trade agreement with China, Britain will always stand up for human rights in Hong Kong and China?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Lady will forgive me if I do not comment directly on security matters.

On human rights, I hope I made it clear in my opening remarks that human rights and trade and prosperity are two sides of the same coin. I indicated that there is nothing to prevent human rights from forming part of any agreement that we might have. That is not to say that any agreement would necessarily contain clauses along those lines, but there is nothing to prevent the United Kingdom from insisting, in such an agreement, on particular measures of the sort that I think she would find very acceptable.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I am pleased that the Government have suspended the licences for sending riot control equipment to Hong Kong. Are there any indications that our diplomats or, indeed, the media are being restricted in their movements on the island of Hong Kong?

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend is right to say that on 25 June my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary gave an undertaking to ensure that the material to which my hon. Friend refers would not be the subject of any UK licences. Sometimes, the material that has been sold to Hong Kong has been misunderstood. For example, both my hon. Friend and I would agree that bomb disposal equipment and body armour are perfectly reasonable things to export to Hong Kong.

On the freedom of journalists, Hong Kong has been a place within the region where, historically, there has been a free press, and it would be very disturbing if there were a significant reversal of that. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) made reference to the deteriorating political situation in Hong Kong, and, in my answer, I agreed with her—that is my assessment as well. Clearly, that would include the situation with respect to a free press, as it is difficult to see how a deterioration in the way journalists go about their business would, in any way, be compatible with political freedom.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Will the Minister consider referring the worsening democratic deficit in Hong Kong to the United Nations Human Rights Council?

Dr Murrison: What I would like to see is greater attention being given to articles 45 and 68 of the Basic Law—that is to say a situation where we can look forward to an election of the Chief Executive and a fully democratic Legislative Assembly. I am an optimist. I would actually like to see democracy in Hong Kong greatly improved in the years ahead, and that has to be our ambition. Unfortunately, the events of the past few days have made that rather less likely.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Given my right hon. Friend’s comments and the current situation, how have his thoughts changed on advancing democracy in Hong Kong?

Dr Murrison: As I said to the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), I am an optimist and I want to see democracy improved in Hong Kong. I would hope that China agrees that its special nature is good for China, too. It is good for Hong Kong, and it is good for China. It is good for China’s prosperity. Articles 45 and 68 of the Basic Law contain within them the seeds of advancing democracy. That is why they are there and were signed up to by both the Chinese and the UK Governments in 1984. That is where I would like to see the attention focused in the years ahead, running up to the end of the Sino-British agreement. If we can move towards that, I think China will come to see that it is to its advantage, as well as to the advantage of the people of Hong Kong, that we should advance democracy further in Hong Kong rather than see it pulled back. Unfortunately, that is, as the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland said, the trajectory that we are on at the moment.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): In light of the increasing aggressiveness of the Chinese Government, the influence that the Chinese Government have had on Hong Kong, and even the Chinese Government’s condemnation of any comment by the UK Government on events in Hong Kong, many people rightly believe that the rights that they thought that they had under the joint declaration are being slowly strangled. The Minister has said that he is going to hold the Chinese Government’s feet to the fire on this issue. Will he tell us in what practical ways that is being done?

Dr Murrison: The joint declaration was lodged with the United Nations—the primary cockpit of international affairs and the highest body that we can possibly lodge such an agreement with. The eyes of the international community are on China. It is true to say that, traditionally, China has been fairly reluctant to make statements of condemnation of any comment by the UK Government on events in Hong Kong, many people rightly believe that the rights that they thought that they had under the joint declaration are being slowly strangled. The Minister has said that he is going to hold the Chinese Government’s feet to the fire on this issue. Will he tell us in what practical ways that is being done?

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): My right hon. Friend clearly understands the difference between protests and riots. Is he confident that the Chinese and Hong Kong Governments fully appreciate that distinction?

Dr Murrison: It is very important that institutions such as this House and Governments such as the UK Government make it very clear that we see a clear
distinction between a legitimate protest—which is something that we would all welcome as part of the way in which we carry out our affairs in a country such as this—and violence, bullying and subjugation of the sort that, unfortunately, we appear to have seen over the weekend. The two are very different, and it is important that legislatures such as this make that difference very clear indeed, as we are doing today.

4.10 pm

**Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg** (North East Somerset) (Con) *(Urgent Question)*: To ask the Secretary of State to intervene to ensure that funding is provided to treat those suffering from Batten disease.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care** (Seema Kennedy): I thank my hon. Friend for his question; he is a great champion for his constituents. We must ensure that all children with Batten disease receive world-class care and support. The Secretary of State has met families of children who suffer from the condition and has seen at first hand how cruel the disease can be. I pay tribute to my constituent Melanie Moffatt, whose amazing care for her daughter Matilda has been truly inspiring.

The whole House will recognise that a key element of providing world-class care is getting access to the most effective new medicines. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is the expert body, independent of the Government, that provides authoritative, evidence-based guidance for the NHS on whether new drugs and treatments represent an effective use of resources. If they do, the NHS is obliged to provide funding. In 2013, NICE introduced its highly specialised technologies programme, which supports access to drugs for very rare diseases such as Batten disease, through additional funding—up to £300,000 per quality-adjusted life year. However, companies still need to price their products appropriately and fairly. In this instance, Brineura has not been made available at a price that could be recommended by the NHS. NHS England stands ready to do a deal at a reasonable price, but this has not been possible so far. I urge BioMarin to sit down again with NICE and NHS England, as NICE has not yet published its final guidance, so that a fair and reasonable price can be agreed.

I assure the House that my Department and the NHS are working as hard as possible to improve the broader care and support for patients with rare diseases, including Batten disease. I reassure all Members that the Department is committed to ensuring that all patients with rare diseases have access to world-class medicines, care and support.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I thank the Minister for her response. I am grateful that she has not hidden behind sub judice on this occasion. Could she confirm to me that, while NHS England is obliged to follow a positive recommendation from NICE, it has the legal discretion not to follow a negative recommendation and can decide to pay for a drug? In the event that NHS England will not do this, what powers—if any—does the Secretary of State have to ensure that a drug is made available? If that cannot be done, in what way is NHS England accountable to Parliament for the decisions it makes, or is it entirely above accountability?

The point at issue today is that Brineura has now been available for two years and it is available in many other countries at a price that has been agreed between their authorities and BioMarin. We now know that three more children—leaving five altogether in this country, including my constituent Max—who ought to be receiving this drug are not. They suffer from a condition that means that they degenerate relatively quickly, and this
drug can stop the decline in their condition. It is therefore urgent that this matter is addressed quickly, rather than continuing to allow time to pass with sick children getting worse. It really is a most important and pressing issue. In instances where the drug companies and NHS England cannot agree, but where other countries have agreed, I wonder whether there could be any system of arbitration to determine what is a fair price, because the development of these drugs is exceptionally expensive.

Seema Kennedy: I thank my hon. Friend for his questions. I will attempt to answer all of them.

In terms of governance, no, NICE is not above accountability. Ministers set the framework for NICE, which is a non-departmental body. The reason it was established was to have fairness—so that there was no postcode lottery on access to various drugs. It is important that medical experts and scientists make these decisions rather than politicians. Regular governance meetings are held between the Department and NICE. There is a framework agreement. Where the Secretary of State considers that NICE is failing, or has failed, to discharge its functions or to do so properly, he can direct NICE to discharge functions. If NICE were to fail to comply with the Secretary of State’s direction in those circumstances, he could discharge such functions himself. There is therefore a strong and robust governance system with regard to NICE.

It is not always very helpful to use other jurisdictions as a comparison because we do not know the exact price that has been agreed. In addition, different systems have different healthcare populations and do not necessarily have the equivalent of our national health service.

Turning to access to Brineura, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and to Max’s family. I know from the very moving testimony by him and by other hon. Members such as the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) and from speaking to my constituent Melanie on numerous occasions that this is an absolutely dreadful disease. That is why we want the NICE process to be able to bring drugs to market as quickly as possible. Drug companies find this drug difficult to develop—that it is very expensive. It is not necessarily a drug that will be paid for by having millions of sufferers globally, and therefore a different system needs to be in place. That is why the bar for QALY is so much higher.

My hon. Friend’s suggestion on arbitration is very interesting, and I will take it away. On NHS England and the negative procedure, yes, in theory we could do that, but it is unlikely if NICE does not recommend a process. Overall, where a drugs company and NICE are unable to come to an agreement—we see this with other drugs companies and NICE—we see this with other situations, where other countries have access, but where other countries have not. Does the Minister agree that the NICE appraisal process is just not fit for purpose when it comes to assessing the suitability of drugs and treatments for rare diseases?

Access to Brineura would help to give patients and their child back, and it would allow them to enjoy time with their child and treasure special moments with them. As time ticks on without access to the drug, parents will witness their child’s condition deteriorate. No parent wants to see that, so we really need an appraisal process that captures rare diseases effectively.

Will the Minister step in and personally urge BioMarin, NHS England and NICE to meet and come to an agreement? Families do not want just warm words from the Minister; they want and need access to medicines now. I hope that this urgent question will result in real change in how we address rare diseases.

Seema Kennedy: In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), I urged BioMarin to get back around the table with NHS England and NICE and come to a fair and reasonable price. NICE has already approved drugs for 75% of rare diseases through its technology appraisal programme, including drugs for idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis and neuroblastoma. NICE’s process and review methods are constantly reviewed, and they are internationally respected. NICE knows that it has to keep up to date with developments in science, medicine and healthcare. There is a periodic review going on at the moment, and that includes extensive engagement with stakeholders.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): I thank the Minister for coming today and providing more information. On Friday, I met the parents of Michal, one of my constituents. Michal is four years old, and he was diagnosed with Batten in February. He has already lost almost all his ability to walk and speak, and his parents are desperate to get him access to this drug.

I understand what the Minister says about it not always being helpful to compare access to drugs in different countries, but this drug is available in 20 countries, including Wales. If Michal lived in Bungar rather than Burton, he would be getting the drug that could stop the progression of this disease now. It is simply not acceptable to say, “Let’s not compare what happens
here with what happens in other parts of this country, the United Kingdom,” and we need to know more about that.

The Minister talks about her desire to get BioMarin around the table. Time is of the essence for these children—every single day matters when it comes to stopping this disease in its tracks—so will she agree to pick up the phone to BioMarin and personally ask it to come around the table to negotiate with NICE? If Wales can afford to give children this drug, the Minister must have an idea about the scale of the difference between what we can afford to pay in England, and what Wales is paying. We have to find a solution to make this drug available to parents and children here in England.

Seema Kennedy: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and to the parents of Michal. This dreadful disease is so upsetting, not only for the children affected and their families, but for their wider communities. Health care in Wales is devolved. I again urge BioMarin to get back round the table, but I reassure my hon. Friend that I will make contact with the chief executive of NHS England to make sure that he is taking forward negotiations with BioMarin—he is the negotiating party—and I will let my hon. Friend know when I have done so.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) for securing it. The families of children with Batten disease have been left dangling for far too long, and the delay in a positive decision being arrived at—for what is a really obvious use of NHS funding, if we were to ask any taxpayer out there—is just too painful for many of them to bear. The stress and anxiety they are being caused is completely unacceptable.

The Minister acknowledges that this is a dreadful disease, but it is a dreadful disease that has a treatment—a highly effective treatment. It does not just score 30 QALYs; it has been acknowledged that it scores way beyond that. NHS England is adhering to an arbitrary cap set by NICE. Will the Minister please confirm whether NHS England can use a budget exemption in these circumstances to deal with the very tiny number of children who are affected, and what will she do practically—and what has she done since last week—not just to urge but to get BioMarin round the table with NHS England and NICE to get a positive outcome for these families and these children?

Seema Kennedy: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She has spoken to me and spoken in this House about Nicole and Jessica Rich. I agree that it is a highly effective treatment, but NICE sets the guidelines because it is made up of the independent experts and they are the ones responsible for the number of QALYs. However, as I have already said, it is constantly reviewing its guidelines in the light of the best available evidence. I have already reassured the House that I will make sure that I make contact with NHS England so that it is driving forward the process with BioMarin.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I have looked after a number of children with Batten disease in my career, and no one should underestimate the horrific nature of this condition with which a child develops apparently normally and then gets the horrific diagnosis that they will suffer neurodegeneration. I completely respect the importance of NICE being independent, and in general I do not get involved in these debates, but I believe I should do so in this one, because I actually think that NICE has this wrong. This drug does not make a little bit of difference—it does not have the effect of making someone die a couple of weeks later; it makes a phenomenal difference to the quality of life for these children. Yes, the trials have been short so far, but over a reasonable period it makes a massive difference, and I think we should do everything we can. I have heard the Minister say that she will ask the chief executive of NHS England to get BioMarin back round the table. How long will she give him to achieve that, and if he does not succeed, what will she herself do to ensure that these children get these drugs as soon as possible?

Seema Kennedy: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all the work she has done as a clinician. I can only say again—I know this is very disappointing for the House—that we have to rely on the NICE process to be independent. I hear what the House is saying about some people having doubts about the process, but, again, it is under review. NICE is internationally respected, and it has been going for 20 years. Yes, these are exceptionally difficult cases, but this is why, as custodians of NHS funds, we have to be very careful, because every pound we spend on one drug is a pound we cannot spend on another. I hear what my hon. Friend says about this being a life-changing drug, and I hope that BioMarin, NHSE and NICE will, and we would urge them to, carry on with their negotiations.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): There can be very few things as painful for a parent as knowing, once their child has been diagnosed, that there is potential treatment out there that may make a radical difference to their life, and it feels as though some bureaucrats—whether or not they are medical bureaucrats—are saying no. These little things in my hand, which would not have been prescribed for me if I had gone to the doctor a year ago, now cost £7,000 a month to the NHS, and I am delighted that I am able to receive them. However, I do want to make sure we have a proper system to ensure, for the most rare conditions, that there really is a possibility of making things available.

There may be only three dozen cases in the UK at the moment, which means there are probably about 900 in Europe, and if we include the Commonwealth, probably several thousand more. Why do we not have Governments in the world sitting round the table together with people from the pharmaceutical companies, who are not the baddies in this—these are the people, I think including the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), whose investment made these pills available for me, in part; investment in these pharmaceutical companies is a good thing—to make sure that more of these rare—disease conditions can be treated?

Seema Kennedy: We are determined to improve treatments for people living with rare diseases. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, they have to be treated differently because fewer people are affected by them. We have the rare diseases strategy, and we are trying to...
use genomics better to diagnose and treat diseases. We are trying to be the first health service to put genomics into day-to-day health delivery, which will enable us to diagnose and treat diseases such as Batten more quickly. We have care co-ordinators for patients with rare diseases and we are trying to ensure that those who live to adulthood are cared for better, but what the hon. Gentleman said about having an international approach is valid.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): The Minister rightly speaks about NICE’s important role in eliminating postcode lotteries. Does she agree that NICE’s independence is vital to ensuring availability to patients once an agreement is reached with BioMarin, wherever those patients are from, whether Penwortham in her constituency or Pensnett in mine?

Seema Kennedy: I could not have put it better myself.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) made the point about international co-operation, which already exists. A European agency examining the treatment of rare diseases was established in January. It is funded by €101 million and the UK is currently a participant. My question for the Minister is, will we still be, in the event of withdrawal after 31 October?

Seema Kennedy: There will be co-operation with other medicines agencies, and I have no doubt that future co-operation will also come under any agreement that we reach with our European partners following our withdrawal from the European Union.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Sadly, this is not the first time that we have been here discussing how to make a highly specialised drug available for people generally and the talks with companies. May I add my request to my hon. Friend to act urgently to ensure that the review of NICE is undertaken with speed and that the full range of appropriate stakeholders is included in the discussions to take NICE forward?

Seema Kennedy: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I have answered debates here and in Westminster Hall about the medical treatments for rare diseases. To reassure both patients and their families and Members of this place, we need to ensure that the review of NICE processes is robust and transparent.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Less than half of all available rare disease treatments licensed by the European Medicines Agency are reimbursed in the UK for patients to access freely through the NHS, compared with 93% in Germany and 81% in France. With respect, Minister, the parents of those young children with Batten disease have seen those figures as well. They are desperate for the medication for their loved ones, so will she agree to an urgent review of the funding for such treatments for UK citizens?

Seema Kennedy: We are putting record amounts of funding into the NHS, but I would rest again on the independence of the NICE process and the fact that it is experts and clinicians who are making these decisions. I agree that these are dreadful decisions and it is very hard for us to make them, which is why we rely on that expert advice. I would say to the hon. Gentleman that other jurisdictions are not always a good comparison.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) for securing this urgent question.

Will the Minister, while working to secure the funding of the drug Brineura to help sufferers of Batten disease such as my young constituent Kaycee Bradshaw, look at how we can help to prevent companies such as BioMarin from charging extortionate fees for life-changing drugs? Sadly, this company also charges beyond the NICE framework for Kuvan, a vital drug needed by my young constituent Liam, who suffers from PKU. BioMarin made a net-product revenue increase for 2018 of $31.3 million from Brineura and $26.1 million from Kuvan, and $1.5 billion from across its range of drugs. This, by my standards, is a clear example of playing profits with people’s lives. It hurts even more that it is children who are suffering. It is not on. It is time that Governments got together and took heed. We do not know what other countries are paying. It might be less than our £300,000 or it might not, but something must happen. Get together and put the pressure on, but please, please secure these drugs for our children.

Seema Kennedy: I pay tribute to Kaycee and Liam. The hon. Lady makes a very important point. We want pharmaceutical companies to develop their medicines here, so that they are brought to the market here first and our constituents have access to them. However, we also have an obligation to spend taxpayers’ money in a very fair way, so that every penny we spend is spent correctly and appropriately. When it comes to PKU, Orkambi or Brineura, what we are all—NHS England and all of us here—saying to the drug companies is that we will pay a price, but we want it to be a fair price.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Earlier in this Parliament, I supported a young constituent of mine in securing access to Brineura. Health is a devolved matter in Wales, but the NICE recommendations are still very important. The problem I have seen over the past four years, unfortunately, is that those guidelines do not work particularly well when a disease is extremely rare. Does the Minister plan to look again and review the guidelines, so that people are not penalised simply because the condition they have is rare?

Seema Kennedy: Right hon. and hon. Members have made clear to me their concerns about the NICE process for rare diseases. A review is ongoing, and I will keep a very close eye on it.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and to the Minister. I have a sense that we will very likely be returning to this matter in September, if not before.
Pensions for Severely Disabled Victims (Northern Ireland)

4.37 pm

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the eligibility criteria for the pension for severely injured victims.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): I am delighted to have the opportunity to respond to this urgent question and to clear up some worrying misconceptions that have been circulating over the weekend. Before I do, the more observant here today will have noticed that I am not the Secretary of State. She is at Stormont, where discussions are ongoing. I am sure we all wish those discussions every success.

I am happy to confirm that it remains the Government’s position that, while it is right and proper to provide a pension for victims of troubles-related terrorist incidents, it should not become a pension for terrorists. There is no moral equivalence between a bystander badly injured in a terrorist explosion through no fault of their own, and the people who manufactured the bomb, placed the bomb and detonated the bomb. I therefore happily confirm to the House that under the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill, which we debated last week and the weekend before that, if the Stormont Executive is not reformed by 21 October we will bring forward regulations to ensure a victims’ payment scheme is in place in Northern Ireland by the end of May next year. The eligibility for the scheme will reflect the basic principle I have just outlined.

There will be many important and sensitive details to work out. We will do that in discussion with the Northern Ireland political parties as the regulations are written and developed, but the foundations will be as I have described. I am delighted to have the opportunity to put that on the record here today.

Emma Little Pengelly: First, let me thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this urgent question—it is very much appreciated. I can, with confidence, extend the thanks of the many, many victims in Northern Ireland, who were deeply distressed by the recommendation over last week and the weekend. It proposed that the person who went out to murder, maim and cause hurt would also be eligible for this pension if in doing so they injured themselves.

Sadly, an appalling moral corruption lies at the heart of victims-related issues in Northern Ireland: the repugnant proposition that equates a victim with their victim makers. The hallmark of any peace process should be how we treat our victims. Sadly, too often—time and again—victims are being asked to compromise; to get much-needed help and support, they have to facilitate and allow those victim makers to get it also. That is fundamentally wrong.

Many challenging and difficult issues relate to the legacy in Northern Ireland, but we must never lose sight of what is right and what is clearly wrong. Therefore, I warmly welcome the clear statement from the Minister today that eligibility for this special pension will not extend to those victim makers—those terrorists who planted the bombs. This has caused deep distress for many, many years, particularly during the last week. Will the Minister outline when those people will be excluded? What immediate next steps is he intending to take to bring in this much-needed pension swiftly and give those victims and survivors the help they need?

John Penrose: First, I am delighted to hear that we are so strongly on the same wavelength. I refer not just to the hon. Lady and myself, as she rightly pointed out, this is a widely shared view on all sides of the community, both in Northern Ireland and, more broadly, right the way across the UK. I am glad that we are in the same place on this issue.

The hon. Lady asked about the timetable. Their lordships are considering the final stages of the Bill and so, technically, it has not quite cleared Parliament yet. Once it does and it is law, we will, in effect, work backwards from the due date at the end of May—it will then be laid out in statute—with, if necessary, a series of discussions, consultations and whatever it may be to get the necessary regulations in place in time. In the meantime, we will be making sure we have time to have conversations properly and carefully on these extremely sensitive, carefully approached issues, which will need to be addressed to get this right.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that the proposed pension scheme for victims is not and never will be a pension scheme for terrorists?

John Penrose: Yes, I am delighted to say that as often as necessary, as it bears repeating and needs to be put on the record. I am delighted to have the opportunity to say it to my hon. Friend, too.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): May I tell the Minister that he did not fool any of us? We recognised the fact that he is not the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I profoundly hope that he survives what may be something of a Götterdämmerung later this week, because he has been a first-class Minister. I think I speak for the House when I say that we very much hope that he is in place after les évènements of this week.

I do not want to over-congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly)—I do not want to blight her career too much—but, not for the first time, may I say that I thank her for bringing this matter to the attention of the House? I must also thank you, Mr Speaker. As you know, the hon. Lady raised a point of order last week and you indicated, as only you can, that the door was open and had but to be entered. We now see the proof of that. I hope you will allow me in passing to congratulate the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) on the brilliant British Open in his constituency; I also congratulate Shane Lowry. The rain rather reminded me of high summer in Donegal at one stage, but the Open was superb and it showed Northern Ireland in such an excellent light. The more people who realise what a marvellous place it is to visit, the better.

I am very much with the Minister on this: we absolutely have to put down a marker on this issue once and for all. The point is that when we are dealing with issues of victims and the potential duality of some standards, it is almost like being in an egg-and-spoon race: we have
to advance very slowly, very delicately and very carefully, because the potential for disaster is very high. I therefore state irretrievably, absolutely undeniably and completely without any possibility of misinterpretation that the Opposition do not wish to see any change in the definition of a victim as outlined in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006—unless, of course, there is agreement from the Northern Ireland political leaders. Legacy issues are decided on in consultation with Northern Ireland political leaders and are legislated for in Westminster.

The Opposition have long been in favour of a pension for seriously injured victims and survivors of troubles-related incidents. We do not believe in compensating the victim makers—it is important that we get that on the record once and for all. The victims and survivors pension hub is intended as recognition of the damage done to lives and livelihoods and not as a service to be accessed. The current definition of a victim was intended for use in application to services—originally for services such as healthcare, and latterly to the victims and survivors service.

If a system could be put in place through legislation in Westminster that provided a pension to those who have been injured—in some cases, as far back as the 1970s—and excluded those who were injured by their own hand, we would support that, and we think that there is a need for more definition. If it does not mean changing the definition of access to services, we, as a civilised society, should provide for all those who are in need. For that reason, the Labour Front-Bench team put forward an amendment that sought legislation but did not prescribe the form that it would take—mainly to try to get the amendment within the scope of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill.

Reference has been made to the House of Lords. The noble Lord Hain, a former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, moved an amendment to the Bill in the upper House that I think defines the issue even more closely. Will the Minister address the four salient points contained in Lord Hain's amendment? He referred to the regulations under subsection (1), which must make provision as to the eligibility criteria, particularly relating to the nature or extent of a person's injury...how, when or where the injury was sustained...residence or nationality...whether or not a person has been convicted of an offence.

We are as one on this issue. We want to support and give aid and succour to those who, through no fault of their own, have suffered what are very often life-changing injuries. They deserve better from this House and they will get better from both sides of it. We do not believe in pampering the victim makers.

John Penrose: I am delighted that the Opposition Front-Bench team support the broad principle, which I have just enunciated, and that we are of a very similar mind on this. That is extremely welcome news and I thank them for that.

I confirm that the four criteria that the hon. Gentleman read out from the new clause about victims' payments are absolutely central to the process of working through the details about how we do the definition of who will be eligible for the new payment scheme. That will be the way we deliver on the central principle, which I hope I outlined very clearly in my opening comments: making sure that this is not a pension for terrorists.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Will the Minister ensure that the "through no fault of their own" principle that he has set out specifically excludes those who were engaged in terrorist acts from receiving support, such as this pension?

John Penrose: Yes.

Mr Penrose: Yes.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Very well done.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Speaker—I appreciate that very much. I welcome very warmly what the Minister and the shadow Minister have said in the House today and the consensus that there is on this issue. I pay tribute to the many victims, including Michelle Williamson, who lost both her parents in the Shankhill bombing in October 1993, when nine innocent people were murdered on the Shankhill Road. The bomber who injured himself in planting that bomb would be eligible if this action was not taken to disqualify terrorist perpetrators.

Will the Minister join me in thanking all those victims and victims' organisations that have worked together to bring about a pension for victims and to make sure that the eligibility criteria are right and proper? Would he also care to comment on the Victims' Commissioner's position? While there is a consensus here, she appears out of step with many victims' groups and victims. Does that call into question her position? In a letter in today's press in Northern Ireland, many victims' groups have called into question her position on this issue.

John Penrose: I certainly join the right hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the unstinting and determined work done by victims' groups over many years to get us to where we are today. We are not there yet of course—we have to get this done by the end of next May, so there is more work to be done. But we are at least within sight; we are on the final lap, I hope, and I am sure that he and other Northern Ireland politicians will wish to reflect those views very carefully in the upcoming discussions.

On the comments of the Victims' Commissioner, she has suffered, I think, the full force of many people's wrath over the last few days. I am pleased that she has issued a clarificatory statement, which is very important, in which she says:

"I am acutely aware of the perception that this scheme is somehow drawing moral equivalence between victims and perpetrators. That is not the case."

It was vital that she clarified that point. I will leave her to answer her critics herself more broadly, but it was very good to hear her express that central point so clearly.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah, the deputy leader and knight of Lagan Valley, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Thank you, Mr Speaker.
John Penrose: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the issue of the legacy of the troubles goes much wider than the specific point about the victims’ pension and that therefore there are other issues that have not been dealt with through the EEF Act. He will be aware, because he and I have spoken about it elsewhere, that the Government have just published a digest of the responses to the rather large consultation. There were 17,000 responses—on the proposals for how the broader consultation—there were many responses to the rather large consultation—there were 17,000 responses—on the proposals for how the broader legacy issues might be dealt with, and in due course the Government will need to set out their response on how to take that broader canvas forward. He is absolutely right that those other issues are not going away and need to be addressed promptly.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): If you had called me earlier, Mr Speaker, and upset the leader, I would not have cared at all.

I thank the Minister for his clarification, which will come as an immense relief to many people in Northern Ireland, but can I push him a little further? Some of those involved in terrorist activity now claim that because of what happened to them—they might have been incarcerated, questioned by the police, had raids on their homes—they have suffered depression and a mental illness that qualifies them for a pension. Can he assure us that not just those who have injured themselves physically as a result of their involvement in terrorist activity but those who claim to have suffered mental illness because of such involvement will not qualify?

John Penrose: The right hon. Gentleman raises a broader and very important point, which is that, for victims who will qualify to begin with, it is important that we agree and understand that there are valid and very serious conditions that can be non-physical. We would not want to exclude victims who have ended up with a mental illness after being injured through no fault of their own. We should not exclude non-physical injuries from our calculation of how severely someone is injured and therefore of whether they are eligible. He is also right about the flipside. When we are working out who to exclude from the definition—in order to prevent this from becoming a pension for terrorists—mental illnesses and non-physical injuries need to be included in that half of the definition as well.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Should innocent casualties and far-from-innocent paramilitaries be treated in the same way? The answer is “No, never.” The Minister has said that, and 14 of the victims’ groups have said the very same thing, which is very much at odds with what has been said by the Victims’ Commissioner. One of those groups, Decorum NI, represents many of my constituents.

Will the Minister come with me to meet some of the victims and their families in my constituency at some time in the future—provided that he is still in place, as I hope he will be? They tell me, and I state today, that a definition that equates victims with perpetrators is tantamount to spitting on the graves of those who were murdered, salting the wounds of those who are living with physical impairments inflicted by terrorists, and mentally torturing those who have emotional scars after being the true victims of convicted murderers and evil terrorists, who can never be viewed on the same level or in the same capacity.

I welcome the Minister’s comments, but I also want to ensure that we keep true to them.

John Penrose: I thank the hon. Gentleman and others who have been kind enough to express a hope that I will continue in my post. I am bathing in the love. It was very kind of the hon. Gentleman, and of course, if I am still in place, I shall be delighted to come and meet the group that he described.
At approximately 4 pm UK time on Friday, Iranian forces intercepted the British-flagged tanker Stena Impero in the strait of Hormuz. The ship was surrounded by four fast boats from the Revolutionary Guard, supported by one helicopter. Iranian footage showed masked gunmen in desert camouflage descending from the helicopter on to the deck of the Stena Impero. HMS Montrose, a Royal Navy Type 23 frigate deployed in the Gulf, tried to come to the tanker’s aid. She repeatedly warned the Iranians by radio that their actions were illegal, but HMS Montrose was unable to reach the scene in time.

Nine days earlier she had successfully intercepted an attempt to board another tanker, British Heritage, but the tanker’s automatic identification system was switched off and her position was publicly available. So let us be clear: under international law, Iran had no right to obstruct the ship’s passage, let alone board her. That was therefore an act of state piracy that the House will have no hesitation in condemning.

Even more worryingly, this incident was a flagrant breach of the principle of free navigation on which the global trading system and world economy ultimately depend. I therefore urge Iran to release the Stena Impero and her crew and observe the rules that safeguard commercial shipping and that benefit Iran as much as any other country.

Iran has tried to present this as a tit-for-tat incident following the Government of Gibraltar’s action on 4 July to enforce EU sanctions by preventing the Iranian chartered tanker Grace 1 from supplying oil to Syria, but there is simply no comparison between Iran’s illegal seizure of a vessel inside a recognised shipping lane where the Stena Impero had every right to be and the enforcement of EU sanctions against a tanker that had freely navigated into the waters of a British overseas territory.

Since 4 July, we have made strenuous efforts to resolve the Grace 1 issue. On 13 July I spoke by phone to the Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, and also made clear in public that we would be content with the release of Grace 1 if there were sufficient guarantees that the oil would not go to any entities sanctioned by the EU. But instead of responding constructively, Iran chose to seize the Stena Impero, so we must now take appropriate action to support the safe passage of vessels through the strait of Hormuz.

As well as speaking again to my Iranian counterpart, I have also spoken this weekend and today to the Foreign Ministers of Oman, the United States, France, Germany, Italy, Finland, Spain and Denmark. COBRA meetings were held this morning and throughout the weekend, and the chargé d’affaires at the Iranian embassy in London was summoned to the Foreign Office on Saturday to receive a formal protest.

I can today update the House on further action we are taking. First, the Department for Transport has raised the security level for British-flagged shipping to level 3, advising against all passage in Iranian waters and, for the moment, in the entire strait of Hormuz.

Secondly, because freedom of navigation is a vital interest of every nation, we will now seek to put together a European-led maritime protection mission to support safe passage of both crew and cargo in this vital region. We have had constructive discussions with a number of countries in the last 48 hours, and will discuss later this afternoon the best way to complement our own commitment in this area.

Thirdly, while we will seek to establish this mission as quickly as possible, the Government have in the meantime dispatched HMS Duncan, a Type 45 destroyer, to take over from HMS Montrose, and she will arrive in the region by 29 July—a week from today. Fourthly, we will ask all British-flagged ships to give us notice of any intention to pass through the strait of Hormuz, to enable us to offer the best protection we can. We will then advise them of the safest way to transit, which may involve travelling in convoy. Finally, we are strengthening measures to protect ships flying the flags of other countries but which have British crew on board.

About 1,300 ships appear on the UK ship register. The combined British red ensign fleet is the ninth largest in the world, and on an average day two or three ships belonging to the red ensign group pass through the strait of Hormuz. The Gulf spans an area of nearly 100,000 square miles, and HMS Montrose covers an operating area of some 19,000 nautical miles. So far, she has escorted 30 merchant vessels through the strait of Hormuz during 17 separate transits, travelling 4,800 nautical miles in the process. It is not possible for the Royal Navy to provide escorts for every single ship, or indeed to eliminate all risks of piracy, but those risks can be substantially reduced if commercial shipping companies co-operate fully with instructions from the Department for Transport, which we strongly encourage them to do.

These changes—both short and medium-term—are made possible because of the commitment that this Government have already made to increase our security presence in the Gulf, including the opening in April last year of the first permanent British naval facility in the Gulf for over 40 years. This establishment in Bahrain now hosts HMS Montrose, along with four mine countermeasure vessels and one supply ship.
Finally, let me say that it is with a heavy heart that we are announcing this increased international presence in the Gulf, because the focus of our diplomacy has been on de-escalating tensions in the hope that such changes would not be necessary. We do not seek confrontation with Iran. We have taken every available opportunity to reduce misunderstanding while standing by our rock-solid commitment to the international rule of law, which is the foundation of global peace and prosperity. However, we must react to the world around us as it is, not as we would wish it to be, so if Iran continues on this dangerous path, it must accept that the price will be a larger western military presence in the waters along its coastline, not because we wish to increase tensions but simply because freedom of navigation is a principle that Britain and its allies will always defend. I commend this statement to the House.

5.6 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for giving me advance sight of his statement. Let me start by passing on the apologies of the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), that she cannot be here to respond herself, but as many will know, she is still at home recovering from the injuries she received after being knocked off her bike on Friday. I am sure that we all wish her well.

May I also take this opportunity to pay tribute to the outgoing Minister for Europe and the Americas, the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan)? He has served the Foreign Office with diligence and distinction in bad times and good, and he can certainly be forgiven for feeling that the bad times are about to return. We thank him for the spirit in which he engaged in our parliamentary debates and we look forward to his continuing to make those contributions from the Back Benches. I would also like to add that, in the unfortunate event that this is the Foreign Secretary’s final appearance in his current role, we thank him too for the welcome change in tone and the very welcome measures the Foreign Secretary has announced today, which are welcome, could have been put in place a full two days in advance that the action was going to be taken, why on earth, a full seventeen days later, was a British-flagged tanker left so hopelessly unprotected in the strait of Hormuz? Anyone with any understanding of the issue could see exactly how the Iranians would respond to the seizure of their own tanker. When the US told the Madrid Government 48 hours in advance that Grace 1 was headed for the Iberian peninsula, which could also explain why, 36 hours in advance, the Gibraltar Government introduced new legislation to shore up the legal basis for the seizure taking place in their waters. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm whether the US was also the source of our information regarding the tanker’s course, whether the US Administration asked us to seize it, and whether their primary basis for that request was that the tanker’s destination was Syria or that its origin was Iran? If it is correct that we knew a full two days in advance that the action was going to be taken, why on earth, a full seventeen days later, was a British-flagged tanker left so hopelessly unprotected in the strait of Hormuz? Anyone with any understanding of the issue could see exactly how the Iranians would respond to the seizure of their own tanker. When the measures the Foreign Secretary has announced today, which are welcome, could have been put in place a full 20 days before now, why were the Government’s eyes so patently off the crystal ball?

While I would like the Foreign Secretary to go into more practical detail about how the Government plan to resolve the Grace 1-Stena Impero impasse, we must also address the wider question: how do we de-escalate the tension with Iran, stop this tit-for-tat cycle of actions, and get the nuclear deal back on track? We need to use the deal as the foundation, which it previously promised to be, for addressing all the other concerns we have about Iran, not least the continued detention of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and other British dual nationals.

Setting aside the need to enforce sanctions, with which we wholeheartedly agree, against the Assad regime, will the Foreign Secretary tell us what the Government are doing to persuade the Trump Administration to drop their sanctions against Iran? Those sanctions breach the international agreement that we, the US and other countries worked so hard to achieve and have given the hard-liners in Tehran the excuse they have always craved to return to the strategy of isolation and aggression and to breach the terms of the nuclear agreement. That agreement is one of the great diplomatic achievements of the current century, and we must all strive to get it back on track before this escalation of tension reaches the point of no return.

Mr Hunt: First, those on the Government Benches wholeheartedly endorse what the shadow Foreign Secretary said about the shadow Foreign Secretary, whom we wish every success in having a rapid recovery after her unfortunate bicycle accident. I also thank him for his generous comments about my time as Foreign Secretary—without any sting in the tail. I particularly want to thank him for carefully comparing me to my predecessor after 5 o’clock, which was when the leadership contest for the Conservative party closed, because it might not have helped me if people thought that he thought I was a better Foreign Secretary. I also add my thanks for the brilliant service to British diplomacy of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), who was an outstanding Foreign Office Minister. He will be greatly missed inside King Charles Street—but not for long if tomorrow’s result is the upset that I am hoping for!
Let me turn to the substance of what the shadow Minister said. On the detention of Grace 1 by the Gibraltar authorities, I want to be absolutely clear that the United Kingdom did not endorse that detention by the Gibraltar authorities because of a request by the US. We did it because it was transiting oil through the waters of a British overseas territory in contravention of EU sanctions against Syria. We have been absolutely clear that our issue was with the destination of that oil, which was President Assad’s regime, because a fundamental objective of British foreign policy has been to ensure that we redraw the international red lines against the use of chemical weapons, which Assad has so tragically broken.

That is also why we have sought to de-escalate the situation by making it clear to the Iranians that, whatever our disagreements with that regime, we would support the release of the tanker if we could receive guarantees that that oil was not going to Syria. We made that offer in public as well as in private, so that they would know we were absolutely serious.

There has been a huge amount of work since the detention happened on 4 July and, on the security side, the Ministry of Defence has been extremely active: officials have been posted at the Department for Transport, HMS Duncan has been dispatched, the threat level has been raised to level 3 and the activity of HMS Montrose has been enhanced. In recent days HMS Montrose has done 17 transits with 30 vessels, including 16 flying the red ensign; the Wildcat helicopters have flown for 26 hours; and the FCO has been doing a huge amount to try to de-escalate the situation, including calls to my Iranian counterpart, my US counterpart Mike Pompeo and the Chief Minister of Gibraltar. I also met the Chief Minister of Gibraltar and the French Foreign Minister, among many others, at the Foreign Affairs Council on 15 July.

A lot of things have been happening but, on the substantive point raised by the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), it is important if we are to de-escalate the situation that we do not conflate what happened in Gibraltar and what happened to the Stena Impero with the joint comprehensive plan of action and our approach to the Iran nuclear deal, which is different from the approach taken by the Trump Administration.

On most foreign policy issues we are absolutely at one with the United States, which we consider to be our closest ally. Indeed, the alliance with the United States has been the foundation of global peace and prosperity since the second world war. We have a difference of opinion on this issue, but we are absolutely clear that, when it comes to freedom of navigation, there can be no compromise, which is why the solution we propose to the House this afternoon is one that brings in a much broader coalition as an alternative to de-escalating the situation by making it clear to the Iranians that, whatever our disagreements with that regime, we would support the release of the tanker if we could receive guarantees that that oil was not going to Syria.

The Iranians must understand that there will be no compromise on freedom of navigation in the strait of Hormuz, which is essential to the global economy and to global freedom of navigation. This country will not blink in that respect.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome what my right hon. Friend has said. There is no question but that it is the Iranians, not the British, who have caused this problem. Any linking of this would therefore be quite wrong, and I commend him for what he said on that.

I want to ask a very simple question, and it may be one that my right hon. Friend is unable to answer at this point. We have known for some time that there is a heightened problem in the Gulf and that our strongest ally is there with some force. Why did we not request or agree with the United States that in the interim, while we get the right resources in place, it acts in concert with us to protect some of our shipping, as it has said it could have done?

Mr Hunt: I always listen to my right hon. Friend very carefully on all defence matters, and I reassure him that throughout this period we have had close behind-the-scenes discussions with the United States on how we can improve maritime security. HMS Montrose’s 17 transit missions would not have been possible without US logistical support. Indeed, the United States has made a proposal on how we could enhance maritime security more generally. The US asked us to contribute to a maritime force on 24 June, which became a formal request on 30 June, and it formally briefed NATO allies and the Washington diplomatic corps on the proposal last Thursday and last Friday. We will be talking to the US about it later this week.

We think what the United States is saying is helpful and important, and we will seek to co-ordinate any European efforts on freedom of navigation with anything the US does, but we want the UK’s contribution to be to make that coalition as broad as possible.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I wish the shadow Foreign Secretary a speedy recovery. I also congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) on her election as the new Liberal Democrat leader, and I look forward to continuing to work with her in opposing this Tory Government.

I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. I also thank him for the diligence and seriousness that he, unlike his predecessor, has brought to this role—indeed, 20 minutes past 5, but I am not sure that comment would have swung it for him, regardless of when I said it. I thank him nevertheless.

I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) for his work. We have not always agreed, but I thank him for his collegiality. Where we have agreed, we have been able to work together. This is not a great time for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to be falling apart, but I entirely sympathise with the reasons he has set out today.

Iran’s actions are completely unacceptable. Along with the jailing of the innocent mum, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, that should tell us all what kind of regime we are dealing with. Regardless of who holds the post of Foreign Secretary in the coming days, they must be fully on top of their brief when it comes to Iran, and we must have a full complement of staff in the Foreign Office who are able to speak frankly on Iran. The damage done by the Foreign Secretary’s predecessor has illustrated what happens when one is not fully briefed when dealing with Iran.

Right now, there is a need for engagement, cool heads and a multilateral approach, and I am glad to see the start of that with the Foreign Secretary’s statement today. Will he set out what talks he is having with our partners, over and above the ones he has already set out, and in
particular along the lines of what is happening with the Iran nuclear deal? That is a critical piece of work that will need to be done. There are concerns that this Administration have taken their eye off the ball, and certainly that the UK has been ill prepared. Will the Foreign Secretary set out in a bit more detail why this situation was not foreseen and what actions he is taking to look at it again? This is a dangerous situation and there must be a clear understanding of what is going on, alongside the work to look into ways to de-escalate the situation.

Finally, Northern Marine is headquartered in Clydebank in the constituency of my hon. Friend. We are thinking about the families of those affected at Northern Marine. I thank the naval personnel, particularly those on HMS Montrose, for their service.

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He gives me the chance to say that as a member of a naval family I lived for a couple of years in Rosyth, so I, too, along with everyone on the Government Benches, thank the naval officers and their families for the great courage and service that they are showing to our country at a very challenging and worrying time.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. We understand from Richard Ratcliffe, Nazanin’s husband, that she has been moved back to Evin prison in Tehran. We think that is a positive sign. It sounds like the way that she was detained for a week without any access to her family was totally unacceptable and, I am afraid, all too predictable from the Iranian regime. The hon. Gentleman will understand that I am seeking not to make any link between these broader military and security issues and the situation that Nazanin faces, because I do not think that would help to get Nazanin home, but I know that the whole House is absolutely clear that, whatever disagreements we have with Iran, an innocent woman must not be the victim. She must be allowed to come home.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Iran nuclear deal. This is an area where the Trump Administration have a genuine and honest difference of opinion with us, because it is not a perfect deal. It was a deal that allowed sanctions relief for Iran but did not prevent Iran from supporting its proxies in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq. It allowed Iran to carry on destabilising the region, which was why the Trump Administration took the course that they did. However, given that four years ago Iran was 18 months from acquiring a nuclear weapon, we feel it is a huge diplomatic achievement that Iran does not have a nuclear weapon today. The middle east would have been much more dangerous had it acquired a nuclear weapon, which is why we are seeking to preserve the deal. We are being clear to the Iranians that the recent breach of the uranium enrichment levels is not acceptable, but we are giving them the space to bring themselves back into compliance with the JCPOA before we formally pull the plug on it. We hope that they will do so.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that both the supply of oil to Syria and the capture of a British-flagged tanker are criminal acts for which Iran cannot be excused, and that they require the more robust response that he has now announced to the House, including the policing of an international waterway by a multinational taskforce? In view of what he has just said, does my right hon. Friend agree that whatever view one takes of the American Administration’s course of action over the joint agreement, it would not make sense to exclude the American navy from participation in that multinational taskforce?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend speaks with enormous experience on these matters because of his own background as Defence Secretary. I can assure him that we would not exclude, or seek to exclude, the American navy because it has a vital role in, for example, the refuelling of our own ships, the communication system, the command and control system and, indeed, the intelligence support. We would always operate in partnership with our American allies in these situations whatever difference of opinion we might have on the Iran nuclear deal.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Back in June, the Government’s view was that naval escorts for ships passing through the strait of Hormuz would not be appropriate because it would be seen as provocative and escalatory. Therefore, I very much welcome the announcement that the Foreign Secretary has made today in response to Iran’s seizure of the Stena Impero and his announcement of a proposal for a European-led force, which is a reminder to the whole House of the benefits of European co-operation. We have a very good example of another anti-piracy operation in Operation Atalanta, which has been very successful off the east coast of Africa. Will he tell the House how quickly he expects this mission to be established, and will it have sufficient resources to protect all the ships, which we now know are vulnerable, as they pass through the strait of Hormuz?

Mr Hunt: I can give the right hon. Gentleman a little bit of the answer to that, which is that it will not be a sudden switching on and off. There will be a gradual build-up of presence, because it takes time for ships to get to the region from all over the world. HMS Duncan will arrive on 29 July, or possibly even before that, as the first step in this process, but we are having substantive discussions later this week with allies from across the world in which things such as the timescales will become a bit clearer. I would be happy to write to him after that.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I entirely support what the Foreign Secretary has said and the actions that he intends to take. May I ask him three particular points? The strait of Hormuz must be the most overflown and monitored sea area in the entire world, and I would be grateful, therefore, for these answers. First, when did the Stena Impero leave Fujairah? Secondly, what time was HMS Montrose first alerted to her passage? Finally, what advice did the Stena ship seek of the British Government before she sailed?

Mr Hunt: On the first question, I will write to my right hon. Friend, because I do not have to hand the exact time and date that the Stena Impero left Fujairah. The warning that HMS Montrose had was 60 minutes,
which was not long enough. We ask all shippers to give us at least 24 hours’ notice. We did not get that in this case, but that does not excuse a criminal act of piracy. We do hope now that all shippers will co-operate fully in giving us the notice that we need to give them the protection that we are able to give.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I hear what the Foreign Secretary has said about not linking the situation in Hormuz with that of my constituent Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, but with the best will in the world he must be aware that the Iranians have previously used my constituent as a bargaining chip. He must also be aware that, only last week, the supreme leader promised retribution for the dispute over Grace 1. As the Foreign Secretary said, Nazanin has been transferred to prison after a week in the mental health hospital where she was handcuffed to her bed and guarded by someone who was armed. Her ward was sealed off and she was not allowed any contact with her family. She was then transferred back to prison. Will the Foreign Secretary reassure me that he is taking proper steps to ensure that this situation does not mean that my constituent’s chances of freedom are ended and that she will be returning to West Hampstead with her family?

Mr Hunt: May I take this opportunity to thank the hon. Lady for her very diligent campaigning for the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe? I was trying to be very careful with my words just now to say that I always try to avoid linkage between the two cases because, inevitably with a country such as Iran, our relations go up and down, and I would never want an innocent woman to suffer as a result of the ebb and flow of those relations. Of course, I cannot guarantee that Iran does not seek to make that link itself, and it would be completely wrong of it to do so.

I am afraid that the stories that the hon. Lady tells me about the conditions under which Nazanin has been detained are stories that I have heard and they are totally shocking. We hoped—and I think the hon. Lady will be aware—because I want her to know that we will never, ever forget the fate of even one British national who is treated the way that Nazanin is being treated.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), who has been detained by a leadership contest announcement in which she has been elected as the leader of the Liberal Democrats. I am very pleased that that has not required any Liberal Democrats to resign their positions.

Mr Speaker: I am pleased that the right hon. Gentleman is so pleased that none of his 11 parliamentary colleagues, himself and the successful leader included, has resigned. I know he is very happy about that, and I am very happy to join in his happiness for himself.

Mr Hunt: We have a plethora of distinguished former FCO Ministers on the Back Benches today. I am just grateful that the Work and Pensions Secretary and the Defence Secretary are on the Front Bench, otherwise I might be a bit lonely.

My right hon. Friend speaks with a lot of wisdom and experience of relations with Iran. One of the issues that he navigated extremely successfully during his time in the FCO was the fact that we feel like we are talking to two different groups of people: the Government of Iran and the Foreign Minister, who are usually quite reasonable when we talk to them; and then the people, we never get to talk to, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, who are always kept at a distance.

It is tempting to say that there is no point talking to the Foreign Ministry in Iran because it does not have any influence over the Government. But that is also wrong, because it has access that we do not have and it can present a more moderate case. That is why we continue with these contacts. The best hope that we have is the fact that Foreign Minister Zarif proposed a basis on which to restart negotiations with the United States for a different version of the nuclear deal. That was rejected by the United States, but I think that the fact that that language has started to emerge in the last couple of weeks is a sign that there is some hope of a negotiated end.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): First, may I pass on my best wishes to the shadow Foreign Secretary? As a cyclist myself, I know how vulnerable cyclists are in London. May I also apologise for the absence of my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), who has been detained by a leadership contest announcement in which she has been elected as the leader of the Liberal Democrats. I am very pleased that that has not required any Liberal Democrats to resign—other Members may regret that—in the way the leadership of the Conservative party has required some very sensible Ministers such as the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), to resign their positions.

In relation to Iran, it is clearly time for cool heads. I very much welcome the fact that we have the current Foreign Secretary in post and he has made it clear that we are not up for military action. Does he think that discussions now need to take place about the composition and size of our fleet? Does he agree that although we are not in an actual war with Iran, we are clearly in a propaganda war? Is he able to say a little about what the Government are going to do to counter the image that the Iranians are portraying of the ship perhaps going off course and colliding with another vessel?

Mr Speaker: I am pleased that the right hon. Gentleman is so pleased that none of his 11 parliamentary colleagues, himself and the successful leader included, has resigned. I know he is very happy about that, and I am very happy to join in his happiness for himself.
Mr Hunt: Let me take this opportunity to congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) on her election as Liberal Democrat leader. I look forward to having cordial relations with her as a fellow-party leader if I am successful tomorrow in the election.

With regard to the right hon. Gentleman’s point about the war of words on news, this was actually one of the times when the Iranians did not really bother to pretend that they were peddling a myth about the cause of the seizure of Stena Impero. They changed their story three times in the space of about 24 hours, and are not making any pretence at all that in their view this is a tit-for-tat seizure. That is why we have to be very clear about the difference between a legal detention of a ship with oil bound for Syria versus this wholly illegal act of state piracy.

Mr Speaker: It is right and typically gracious of the Foreign Secretary that he congratulated the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) on her election, and I myself do so. I wish her every possible success in the important work that she now has to undertake.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary accept that the taking of hostages and the flouting of international law have been the signature strategy of Iran ever since the Islamic revolution in 1979? If he does accept that, was it not entirely predictable—and, indeed, predicted—that by impounding this Iranian ship, however legally justified that was, the consequence would be an attempt to retaliate by grabbing a British vessel? What consideration was given, before the original decision was taken, to the adequacy of the number of ships in the Gulf, either ours or those of our allies? What attempts were made to persuade vessels that had to navigate the strait that they should do so in small convoys, which would at least enable two, or at most three, frigates to protect a larger number of ships? Sailing independently and separately meant that one or more were bound to be seized.

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend is right: we did foresee that this could be one of the reactions from the Iranian Government. That is why we took a number of steps after the detention in Gibraltar on 4 July, including the despatch of HMS Duncan and a lot of extra activity from HMS Montrose over the past few days in escorting 30 vessels, a number of which were British- flagged. There has been a lot of additional activity, but we wanted to do it in a way that was not a red rag to a bull and did not end up with even bigger consequences than the ones we faced, and that gave diplomatic channels a chance to work. I think that it was right to start in that way, but regrettably Iran has not chosen to follow the path that we hoped, so we are taking much more robust action today.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I share the Foreign Secretary’s concerns about the possibility that tensions will escalate and that the region may descend into conflict. That is why it is so important that we are clear about the legality of the decision to detain the Grace 1. Can I press him on two points? Will he tell us a little more about the legal basis? Carl Bildt, co-chair of the European Council on Foreign Relations, as the Foreign Secretary will know, has described it as intriguing. Is the Foreign Secretary confident that we, as a country, and the European Union, as a Union, are consistently applying the European Union sanctions against Syria—as we should? I agree with them, but are we consistently applying them so that there is no room for Foreign Secretary Zarif to call into question our motives?

Mr Hunt: Those were intelligent questions, and I will try to do justice to them. As I understand it, it is a requirement of EU law that if a load destined, in breach of sanctions, for somewhere that should not be receiving cargo goes through an EU port or EU waters, we have an obligation to seize that cargo. That is a matter of international law, and that is what has happened. Foreign Minister Zarif tries to argue that, unlike the United States, we do not support extraterritoriality in the application of sanctions. But that is not what happened in this case, because the ship sailed into Gibraltar waters. One could argue that our actions would not have been consistent for us had the ship been seized outside Gibraltar waters, but it was inside.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Iran is going unpunished, is it not?

Mr Hunt: Commendably brief—and the answer to that question is no, because I do not think that Iran can possibly want an increased western naval presence in the strait of Hormuz, which is right in its backyard. That is the consequence of what it has decided to do with the Stena Impero.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and for his service in his current role. I thank him for the way he has carried out those duties, and not only on the big international set-piece occasions; I know of his own deeply personal and intense commitment to the welfare of UK citizens across the world, particularly those who have been detained—not just the high-profile cases, either. The latest incident by Iran comes, as he mentioned, amid the destabilising influence of Iran in the middle east and elsewhere, and its support for terrorist proxies. What are the UK Government doing, along with allies, to get to grips with Iran, its approach to the rule of international law and everything else that it is doing?

Mr Hunt: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the generous way in which he asked his question. Precisely because of that destabilising approach to many parts of the most dangerous and unstable region in the world, although we do not agree with the US approach to the Iran nuclear deal, we do try to support the US in every way when it asks us to help—for example, in checking the activities of Hezbollah in Lebanon. We have proscribed Hezbollah in this country, because we do think that it is a terrorist organisation, and we have to recognise that in British law.

The same is true of the work that we do with the American military in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Our approach to Yemen has been to try to separate the Houthis from their Iranian paymasters. Although we might not agree with the tactics, it is important that we recognise that in the United States’ strategic approach, the long-term solution in the region is for Iran to cease that destabilising activity.
Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): The Kingdom of Bahrain generously hosts HMS Jufair, the base from which HMS Montrose and other royal naval vessels operate. Its role in the Gulf is crucial, and in recent years Bahrain has been subject to destabilisation by the Iranian regime. Will my right hon. Friend take the opportunity today to acknowledge the value that this country places on the support that it receives from Bahrain, and the obligations it owes to that country?

Mr Hunt: I am very happy to do that. We have a memorandum of understanding with the Kingdom of Bahrain, and we are incredibly grateful for the support that Bahrain gives us in hosting HMS Jufair. In fact, that is the first permanent naval presence we have had in the middle east since 1935, so opening it last year was a very big step.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I, too, warmly commend the work of the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), although I think it is a bit over the top to resign from office just to avoid appearing before the Foreign Affairs Committee tomorrow afternoon.

On a serious point, the UK’s position on Iran has always been subtly different from that of the United States of America, even though it is our closest ally. That is partly because of our historical relations with ancient Persia, but, more importantly, even on the night that George Bush declared Iran a member of the axis of evil, we were actually trying to send an ambassador to Tehran for the first time for many years, and the American position ended up scuppering that. Just how can we make sure, in the coming months, that while we maintain our strong alliance with the United States of America, we still maintain our independence of thought in relation to Iran?

Mr Hunt: That is a very fair question. The truth is that we have to do that by being very frank with the Trump Administration when we disagree with them and about why we disagree with them. I think that, under the surface, the positions are a bit closer than they might look in the simple sense that I have actually had a number of conversations with President Trump himself about his concerns about what would happen if that region became nuclearised. I do not think the United States is indifferent to the nuclear threat in that region, and it has started to talk a lot about that recently. We use our influence, I suppose in private circles, as much as we can to try to get a meeting of minds.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I am sure we all agree that our elite Royal Navy forces—our Royal Marines, which are known to be the best in the world—should be commended for taking their role in enforcing these EU sanctions seriously and effectively. However, it does surprise me, since the Iranians made it clear that there would be tit-for-tat retaliation for our blocking tanker Grace 1, that we have not yet seen other EU navies coming to our Royal Navy’s assistance in policing the strait of Hormuz for commercial shipping. Will the Foreign Secretary give the House more information on when we will see such burden sharing from our EU allies?

Mr Hunt: What my hon. Friend says is close to my heart, as the son of a naval officer, a phrase I have been known to use in the last few weeks one or two times—[Interruption]—and as an entrepreneur, but that is not perhaps relevant to this afternoon’s statement.

My hon. Friend makes a very important point. The Defence Secretary has been talking to the Defence Ministers of France, the Netherlands, Norway and others about more burden sharing within the EU. The reason we have constructed the proposal that we have in the way that we have today is precisely because we are trying to encourage more European involvement in maritime security, because that is in the European interest.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): While the world witnesses the horror of this dangerous 3D, real-life game of battleships, may I relay to the Foreign Secretary—he may be more than that by this time tomorrow—the concerns of my Iranian diaspora constituents? Their relatives and nearest and dearest are caught up in this, such as the children unable to access vital medicines due to the sanctions imposed by Trump and Bolton in vengeance because they do not like their predecessors. May I urge him to do all he can and all in his power to condemn and rectify these cruel hardships suffered by ordinary Iranians on the ground, as well as to carry out his decisive actions on the high seas?

Mr Hunt: I commend the hon. Lady for staying in touch with the Iranian diaspora in this country, who remind us that at their heart many Iranians fundamentally do understand our values and want to find a way to accommodate Iran in the modern world. Iran is a great country and a great civilisation, and we ought to be able to find a way to resolve our differences. However, there is the particular issue at the heart of it—I discussed this with the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), the parliamentary leader of the Democratic Unionist party, just now—which is its support for destabilising activity across the middle east, which is already the most dangerous region in the world, and that is the thing we have to address if we are going to solve this.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Given that the risk of seizure was foreseen and that 95% of goods entering the UK do so by sea, does the Foreign Secretary agree that a Royal Navy of fewer than 20 ships is not up to the task and that we need to spend more on our defence, because no matter how capable a ship, it cannot be in more than one place at a time?

Mr Hunt: I might be straying slightly from my brief as Foreign Secretary, but it will not surprise my hon. Friend to know that I support increased spending on our armed forces. We have to recognise that we had in many ways a golden period after the fall of the Berlin wall, when there was a peace dividend and we were able to reduce defence spending, but now we have to recognise that there are increased dangers in the world, both in the middle east and because Russia has become much more aggressive. I think that the Navy in particular has become too small, so I hope that whoever the next Prime Minister is will reflect carefully on what we can do to bolster our great Royal Navy.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The United Kingdom is home to somewhere between 50,000 and 70,000 Iranian nationals and their immediate families, many of whom are here because of the position that either the current regime or its equally oppressive predecessors in the current climate of extreme intolerance, what are the Government doing to ensure that those Iranian nationals,
who are here legally and are innocent of any crime, are not victimised or targeted because of the crimes committed by the Government that they have escaped from?

Mr Hunt: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will let us and particularly the Home Office and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government know if he comes across any examples of that, because those Iranian nationals—the vast majority of them have now become British citizens—are extremely welcome and make a tremendous contribution to our country.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I welcome the question by the Government about whether we have taken, but we wanted to ensure that we can bring forward the building of planned new ships in the UK?

Mr Hunt: I have just asked the Defence Secretary that very question, to which the answer is yes.¹

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I agree with what the Secretary of State has said about the importance of freedom of navigation, so may I ask what guidance has been issued to escorting vessels about the use of force in defence of that principle?

Mr Hunt: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand that we do not discuss rules of engagement publicly, for very obvious reasons, but we are always doing everything we can to make sure that those vessels are able to do what it takes to keep vessels safe.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement today and all the hard work that he has done and I hope will continue to do. The Veterans Minister, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), stated on TV yesterday that the Royal Navy needs to be built up, reinforced and strengthened in the Gulf and, indeed, across the world. Until that happens, will the Secretary of State work alongside other countries in the Gulf—for example, Saudi Arabia and perhaps the United Arab Emirates—and others to provide policing and the protection of all ships in the strait of Hormuz?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely. We want our allies in the Gulf to get involved in support of freedom of navigation, as we do other countries outside Europe, such as Australia, that have expressed an interest in being supportive.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): The Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Foreign Secretary, whom I thank, are well known for their effective use of soft power—of course, we head the index of soft power—but does he agree that that does not mean that we do not need increased defence spending? As a major maritime nation, we have duties in the world that require a larger Navy.

Mr Hunt: I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend and thank him for his question. Just to add to my earlier comments, at the point of Brexit, that will be a moment when a lot of people around the world will be looking to us to see what type of country we want to be in the world. We are one of the very few countries that has always championed democratic values and the security needed to underpin them, and the Royal Navy has an absolutely critical role in doing that.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): There are justifiable concerns that if Iran resumes its nuclear programme, there will be an arms race in the middle east, with other countries, especially Saudi Arabia, scrambling to build their own nuclear weapons. Can the Secretary of State tell us what the Government will do to address that risk?

Mr Hunt: Yes: continue to support the Iran nuclear deal, despite the pressure that it is evidently under; do everything we can to persuade Iran not enrich its uranium towards 20%, which is the tipping point from which it could develop nuclear weapons relatively quickly; and work with as many other countries as we can to try to get them to support us in those endeavours.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What discussions is the Foreign Secretary having with our allies in the Gulf, who have been warning about Iranian activities for years now, and with Qatar, which maintains rather closer relationships with Tehran, but relies on the strait of Hormuz being open to ship its cargoes of liquefied natural gas, including to the UK?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point about Qatar, because LNG is absolutely critical to the global economy. That is one of the main reasons, alongside oil, that we have to maintain freedom of navigation. We have good discussions with Qatar and all our allies in the Gulf, and we are expecting strong support from them.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary mentioned Iran’s malign interventions in the region. While the House may be rightly concerned about

¹[Official Report, 24 July 2019, Vol. 663, c. 16MC.]
the strait of Hormuz, terrifying videos were released last week from Yemen of young boys between eight and 18 at the 300-jihadi training camps run by the Iranian-backed Houthis chanting, “Death to America! Death to Israel! Curse upon the Jews! Victory to Islam!” We should add that to last week’s $430,000 donation to Hezbollah, the drone attacks, also last week, with Iranian technology, and the 30 academics in opposition who have been summarily sentenced to death in Yemen by the Iranian-backed Houthis. Does the Foreign Secretary accept that the tanker crisis is just part of the problem in the Gulf region involving Iran? We have to take a broader brush to this issue and not just focus on the tanker crisis because it affects us directly.

Mr Hunt: Yes, and the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He speaks very powerfully of one country where we are see the malign impact of Iranian sponsorship, and we doing everything we can in Yemen. We have, against expectations, managed to get a peace process going in Yemen, and one of our main hopes is that that will decouple the Houthis from their Iranian paymasters, so that they can take part in a Government of national unity and contribute more constructively to peace in Yemen than the way that he talked about, because what he said is very worrying.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his earlier answers to my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald), with which I completely agree. I know that he is nervous of straying out of lane, but does he agree that the Royal Navy is not just about power projection but has an important diplomatic role as well? Therefore, it is not just our defence policy but our foreign policy that is greatly enhanced by a larger surface fleet.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Hunt: Yes, and I wish I had made more of my strong agreement with what my hon. Friend has just said in the last few months. As we have been talking a lot about the Gulf and he has mentioned the Navy, let me talk about a couple of other areas where I think we could do with a stronger Royal Navy presence. One of them is the Arctic and the other is the Indo-Pacific region. I think in both regions it would send a very strong signal about British national self-confidence if we had the naval capacity that we would all want.

Mr Speaker: Oh, very good! The Foreign Secretary is not that bothered about straying out of lane; he is going from one region to the other. This is all very encouraging.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. I note that he said that while HMS Duncan has been despatched to the Gulf, it is there to take over from HMS Montrose—so we are still going to finish up with one destroyer covering 19,000 nautical miles and having to escort on average three vessels a day. Are we so bereft of naval power that we cannot send an additional ship to the area and have to rely on other European nations who have not divvied up so far or has this decision been made so that we do not annoy the Iranians?

Mr Hunt: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his eagle eye in spotting that detail, but I want to reassure him that when HMS Duncan arrives HMS Montrose will not be going out of service immediately. There will be a period, particularly the extremely dangerous period in the next few weeks, when they will be operating together. Secondly, we will get HMS Montrose back into service as quickly as we can. Thirdly, HMS Montrose is based in Bahrain, so it will stay in the region for its refitting and refuelling. It will not be far away.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I commend the Foreign Secretary for his tone during his statement, but does he agree that this act of piracy represents a pattern of behaviour from the Iranians, both directly and through its proxies, in an overall strategy to achieve regional hegemony in the middle east? What we urgently need is a strategy that restores balance, so the Iranians cannot take advantage of our strategic weaknesses.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. People who have been studying the region for longer than I have would say that there is no issue with Iran being a regional power and a great regional power; the issue is whether it is a great regional military power. It is Iran’s military presence in so many other parts of the region that is so destabilising and is the root cause of many problems. He is absolutely right to focus on that.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Iran and Iran alone is responsible for the illegal seizure of the Stena Impero, and the Foreign Secretary has made that crystal clear. Will he also be clear that if notice of passage had been given as requested, HMS Montrose would have been better able to protect that vessel?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When the Stena Impero was taken, HMS Montrose was actually only 20 minutes away and trying very hard to get there in time. I hope one of the consequences of the terrible incident that has happened is that ship owners will give us the notice we ask for when they transit their ships.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I very much welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement and the actions the Government are taking to try to address this crisis. Does he agree that the priority now should be the safe return of the crew and the British-registered vessel?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely. What we want is secure freedom of navigation for the thousands of ships that pass through the region every year. If the ship is returned and the crew released, and if we are confident that we are returning to a stable situation, we will then of course review the military measures we have announced today to see whether they are still necessary.
Telecoms Supply Chain Review

6.3 pm

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement.

New telecoms technologies and next generation networks such as 5G and full fibre can change our lives for the better. They can give us the freedom to live and work more freely, they can help rural communities to develop thriving digital economies and they can help the socially isolated to maintain relationships. They can transform manufacturing, and make possible connected and autonomous vehicles, smart cities and agriculture. But we can begin this revolution with confidence only if our critical infrastructure remains safe and secure.

We know that there are those who have the intention and the capability to carry out espionage, sabotage and destructive cyber-attacks against our communications sector. The move to 5G brings a new dimension to those risks, given the increased dependence that our national infrastructure is likely to have on those networks over time. That is why, soon after taking up this office, I commissioned a review into the UK telecoms supply chain, involving Government, industry, international partners and the National Cyber Security Centre. It was designed to assess the security and resilience of the UK’s telecoms networks, and to determine what should be done to improve them. Today, I have published its conclusions.

The review identified three key areas of concern. First, existing arrangements may have achieved good commercial outcomes, but they have not incentivised cyber-security risk management. Secondly, policy and regulation in enforcing telecoms cyber-security need to be significantly strengthened to address those concerns. Finally, the lack of diversity across the telecoms supply chain creates the possibility of national dependence on single suppliers, which poses a range of risks to the security and resilience of UK telecoms networks.

The review concluded that the current protections put in place by industry are unlikely to be adequate to address the identified security risks and deliver the desired security outcomes. Therefore, to improve cyber-security risk management, policy and enforcement, the review recommends the establishment of a new security framework for the UK telecoms sector. This will be a much stronger, security-based regime than at present. The foundation for the framework will be a new set of telecoms security requirements for telecoms operators, overseen by Ofcom and Government.

The new requirements will be underpinned by a robust legislative framework. We will pursue legislation at the earliest opportunity to provide Ofcom with stronger powers to allow for the effective enforcement of the telecoms security requirements and to establish stronger national security backstop powers for Government. Until the new legislation is put in place, Government and Ofcom will work with all telecoms operators to secure adherence to the new requirements on a voluntary basis. Operators will be required to subject vendors to rigorous due diligence and contract management. This will involve operators requiring all their vendors to adhere to the new telecoms security requirements. They will also be required to work closely with vendors, supported by Government, to ensure effective assurance testing for equipment, systems and software, and to support ongoing verification arrangements.

In addition, we must have a competitive, sustainable and diverse supply chain if we are to drive innovation and reduce the risk of dependency on individual suppliers. The Government will therefore pursue a targeted diversification strategy, supporting the growth of new players in the parts of the network that pose security and resilience risks. We will promote policies that support new entrants and the growth of smaller firms. This includes research and development support, promoting interoperability and demand stimulation—for example, through the Government’s 5G trials and testbeds programme. We will also seek to attract trusted and established firms to the UK market. A vibrant and diverse telecoms market is not just good news for our consumers; it is good news for our national security, too.

The review also concludes that there should be additional controls on the presence in the supply chain of certain types of vendor that pose significantly greater security and resilience risks to UK telecoms. The House will be particularly concerned, of course, with the position of the Chinese technology firm Huawei. The Government are not yet in a position to decide what involvement Huawei should have in the provision of the UK’s 5G network, and I want to explain why that is.

On 16 May, the US Government added Huawei Technologies Ltd and 68 affiliates to its entity list on national security grounds. US companies now have to apply for a licence to export, re-export or transfer a specified range of goods, software and technology to Huawei and named affiliates, with a presumption of denial. On 20 May, the US Government issued a 90-day temporary general licence that authorises transactions in relation to specified areas. These measures could have a potential impact on the future availability and reliability of Huawei’s products, together with other market impacts, and so are relevant considerations in determining Huawei’s involvement in the network. Since the US Government’s announcement, we have sought clarity on its extent and implications, but the position is not yet entirely clear. Until it is, we have concluded that it would be wrong to make specific decisions in relation to Huawei, but we will do so as soon as possible.

But I also believe that it would be unnecessary and unwise to delay the introduction of the remainder of the telecoms supply chain review’s conclusions. The telecoms security requirements that the review proposes must apply to all companies that want to supply equipment and services in our telecoms supply chain, wherever they come from. The review I commissioned was not designed to deal only with one specific company and its conclusions have a much wider application; the need for them is urgent. The first 5G consumer services are launching this year, and the equally vital diversification of the supply chain will take time. We should get on with it.

I recognise that colleagues may wish to pursue further the technical detail of the proposals that the telecoms supply chain review makes, not least with officials at the National Cyber Security Centre, who will be available to answer questions in Room O in Portcullis House from 10 am to 11 am tomorrow. But I hope the whole House will agree that the future of our digital economy depends on trust in its safety and security, and that if we
are to encourage the future scale-up of new technologies that will transform our lives for the better, we need to have the right measures in place to make our telecoms supply chain both safe and secure. That is what the approach proposed in this review will deliver, and I commend it and this statement to the House.

6.11 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Good afternoon, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement and notice of today’s announcement.

In January this year, the Secretary of State said that the telecoms supply chain review was “not a Hua wei specific exercise”.

I am afraid that the report published today may be stretching that phrase to its limits. The Government’s handling of the question of Huawei’s involvement in the future of the UK’s 5G network has been defined by one thing: confusion. Rather than this review being published as expected—in March, including a decision on Huawei’s role in our future telecoms networks—we have had a flurry of delays, leaks and rumours.

Today’s further delay on a decision on Huawei means that this confusion will continue, leaving the telecoms industry without the clarity and the public without the confidence they need. A ban on Huawei products could significantly delay the roll-out of the 5G technology that will underpin our tomorrow’s economy. The innovative and green technologies that will form the basis of our future rely on the development and deployment of trusted 5G technology. Our digital infrastructure is already falling behind. The UK lags embarrassingly behind in international comparisons of full fibre roll-out. We are second last in the list of OECD countries, with just 4% of the UK having access to full fibre networks. What Britain needed from this review was not a muddle; we needed a new model for a genuinely world-class digital infrastructure, which we lack at the moment. So this decision must be taken as quickly and transparently as possible, because, whether the Government need to ban Huawei for security reasons or not, the Government have a roll-out target to meet: 5G for the majority of the country by 2027.

We need clarity, one way or another, and the Government should have a plan B for meeting this target if necessary. This review has provided neither. That goes directly against the advice of the Intelligence and Security Committee, which said last week that “the extent of the delay is now causing serious damage to our international relationships: a decision must be made as a matter of urgency.”

Does the Secretary of State agree?

There are some measures in this review on diversifying the market that are welcome, but this is not an overnight solution, and surely these objectives are best achieved through working with our European partners. Hitherto, the Secretary of State has sought to keep our digital regulation regime in lockstep with Europe. Can he tell us whether the EU is following suit now that the Americans have taken action? If it has not, is he not now concerned that UK digital policy is significantly diverging from that of our closest trading partners?

The situation is indeed complex, as the Secretary of State says. The United States’ recent blacklisting of Huawei has added long-term viability concerns to the existing security considerations. But I am concerned that the future of the UK’s digital infrastructure is being held hostage by transatlantic geopolitics. The question here should be, what is in the UK’s public interest? It should not be, where does this fit into US foreign policy? The British public deserve a trustworthy and modern 5G network that is fit for the future; I fear that, under the new Prime Minister and his Administration, they will get neither.

With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I will finish on one more point. This could be the last statement that the Secretary of State makes in his current role and, if it is, I would like to put on the record how much my team have enjoyed working with him. I have one phrase for him, from a very great man, who once sang these words:

“For what is a man, what has he got
If not himself, then he has naught
To say the things he truly feels
And not the words of one who kneels
The record shows”—

he—

“took the blows
And did it”

Huawei.

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman was doing so well until the end; I suppose I should be grateful he did not quote:

“Start spreading the news, I’m leaving today”.

First, on the hon. Gentleman’s last remarks, let me say that the feeling is entirely mutual: I have enjoyed working with him and his colleagues. Our constituents expect not just the cut and thrust of debate across this Dispatch Box, which we have also enjoyed, but that we work together where it is appropriate to do so, and I am grateful to him and his colleagues for the spirit in which they have done exactly that.

Let me say a number of things about the hon. Gentleman’s comments on the statement. First, he is right to say that this announcement is about further delay in relation to decisions on Huawei, and I have explained why that delay is necessary. He is entirely right to say that the industry requires clarity and we should seek to give it that. At the moment, we are not capable of offering that clarity, and any decision that we were to take now might end up being different in the future when that greater clarity arrives. It is not a failing of the UK Government that is at work here, but an attempt to understand the actions of the US Administration and the implications of them.

The hon. Gentleman has said that he is concerned to ensure that this should be a decision about the interests of the UK and not the priorities of the US Administration, and I understand that. I can give him the assurance that decisions we take will be decisions in the best interests of the United Kingdom, but he knows that this is a hugely interconnected sector and it simply is not possible to make sensible judgments about telecommunications without recognising those interconnections. What the US Administration do has a significant impact on Huawei, and we have a situation in which Huawei equipment has American components and intellectual property within it. If that equipment is to find its way into the UK telecoms network, of course the actions and decisions of the US Administration are important—hence the necessary delay here.
Jeremy Wright: My right hon. and learned Friend is right to highlight the ISC’s statement, which has been an important contribution to the debate. As he knows, there is a significant overlap between what it says and the review’s conclusions. On Ofcom’s powers and the resources that must flow with those, I agree that it will be necessary to make sure that Ofcom has the resources to discharge its new duties properly. We will seek to give proper attention to that in the consultation process that is to follow.

On the issue of the timescale for the consultation, my right hon. and learned Friend will understand that we are keen to proceed as quickly as possible. One of the reasons I am addressing the House this afternoon is that had I not done so this week—the House will know that I made a commitment that it would know first when we were in a position to disclose the results of this review—I would be doing it in September at the earliest, and we would be beginning this process some six weeks later than we now can. I hope he recognises that that is an indication of the Government’s intention to proceed as quickly as we can, notwithstanding what he described as an inevitable delay in relation to Huawei specifically.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I welcome the publication of the Government’s telecoms supply chain review report today. I am very pleased to see that the report reflects many of the points that the Intelligence and Security Committee raised in its statement on 5G suppliers on Friday. I specifically welcome the explicit national security direction power for the Secretary of State to compel telecoms operators in relation to high-risk vendors, because that issue was first raised by the ISC back in 2013.

With that praise in mind, may I pick up a couple of points? The timetable for providing Ofcom with increased responsibility for the new telecoms security requirements will clearly be of great importance. I ask the Secretary of State, will that be accompanied by additional resources for suitably skilled staff? If Ofcom is to do this job, it will need staff—probably brought in from elsewhere—who have skills that Ofcom does not possess. Can he give any greater clarity on the consultation timetable? I appreciate that the legislation is more difficult, but it would be helpful for the House to have an idea of the timeframe for the consultation process.

Finally, turning to Huawei, in the light of the United States’ position and the lack of clarity on entity classification, I entirely understand why the Secretary of State finds it difficult to make a decision at the moment. Clearly, if Huawei is deemed to be such an entity, the reality is that none of those inventing the technology will be able to have any dealings with that company, with long-term consequences for Huawei’s ability to deliver for anybody. That having been said, will the Secretary of State assure the House that this will not be used as an excuse for can kicking? I think that once the 90 days are up, as he may agree, there will be clarity, and the decision must then be made.

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman is also right to say that this is important technology and it can have a huge impact on our economy; he heard what I said about that a little earlier in the statement. He is wrong to say that the fibre roll-out has reached 4% of the country. It has now reached 8%—it was 4% when I arrived in this job and it has now doubled. He is of course also right to say that that leaves us with a considerable distance still to travel. It is important that we do that in a number of ways, with the most important perhaps being to commit fully to a full fibre roll-out: that was a strategic decision that the Government made—again, in the past 12 months.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman makes reference to the discrepancy that there may be in the approach that different EU countries may take. Of course, it would also be right to highlight the approach that other Five Eyes colleague countries may take. A huge variety of approaches is being taken; there is no uniform approach in the EU, with each country taking a slightly different one. The same is true of the Five Eyes nations. We of course want to engage with all our international colleagues, particularly those with whom we discuss these matters on a regular basis, and make sure that we have their input. However, I go back to my earlier comment; in the end, this will be a judgment that we take in the best interests of the United Kingdom.

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that the Government need much more of a bigger-picture approach, rather than the silo approach that is happening at present?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman has asked a number of questions; let me try to deal with as many of them as I can.

On the hon. Gentleman’s last point about Chinese involvement in the wider economy, he will recognise that there is a balance to be struck between welcoming inward investment into our economy, which we do, and wanting to be confident that our security requirements are met. In relation to ZTE, he may know that the Government’s judgment, based on advice from the National Cyber Security Centre, is that ZTE should not have engagement particularly in the 5G communications network, which is the subject of this review and this statement.

On the hon. Gentleman’s earlier points, he describes what I am announcing as prevarication. I hope that I have been straightforward in accepting that there is a delay, and I have explained the reasons for it in relation to Huawei. I do not believe that it would be sensible, responsible or helpful to anyone, including the telecoms industry, were I to give a partial decision today when I am not in a position to give a complete decision. It follows from that that when the decision comes to be made, there will be a new Prime Minister in office—that is now a little less than 48 hours away—so it is inevitable that that will be the case.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned a legal challenge. As you would expect me to say, Mr Speaker, from a former life I am always aware of the possibility of legal challenge. In my experience, it is always a possibility, but the way that we can best insulate against it is to reach sensible decisions based on defensible criteria. Again, the best way to do that is to make sure that we have all the information that we need before we make a decision of this kind. That is precisely what the Government propose to do.

It is, of course, a possibility—and remains so—that the Government may decide that an outright ban on Huawei equipment in the 5G network is the appropriate course of action. All I say today is that we are not yet in a position to make a comprehensive decision about that. As soon as we are, we will, but the hon. Gentleman has my assurance—as I indicated to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson)—that the decision that we will take will be fast and foremost, in the interests of the United Kingdom, and that security interests and our national security equities will be the most important consideration in that.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) suggests that the actions that we are taking are behind the curve internationally. That is not so. If we produce telecoms security requirements in the way that we propose, they will be world-leading measures, and we should be proud of that. We will legislate for them as soon as we are able to do so.

The hon. Gentleman asked for more detail about what diversification of the supply chain might involve. Let me give him some possible examples. We are talking about measures such as improved access to spectrum and the promotion of new infrastructure models. He will be aware of the £200 million 5G test beds and trials programme, which we believe will support new investment, and we can and should pursue greater interoperability for equipment from different suppliers, including by requiring this in technical standards. Of course, the Government can use their buying power to promote a diverse supplier base. We should do all those things in addition to seeking to invite existing, established suppliers to come into the UK market, where they are not already present.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does this mean a delay in the roll-out of 5G to constituents in Wokingham and elsewhere? If so, how long a delay are we talking about?

Jeremy Wright: The commercial decisions that mobile network operators are making now about what equipment to buy are part of a continuing process. All those mobile network operators will need to consider carefully the position I have outlined today and make the appropriate commercial judgments, but we are seeking to move as quickly as we reasonably can to give them the clarity they need to continue making those investments.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the assessment of the National Cyber Security Centre is that the risk posed by Huawei equipment to the security of the 5G network is manageable and that that assessment is based on long experience and the unique experience of working with Huawei over 10 years, looking carefully at every Huawei product that comes on to the UK market? What is his estimate of the impact on the speed of 5G roll-out, which was rightly highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) as a critical question, of excluding Huawei equipment from that network?

Jeremy Wright: The right hon. Gentleman is right to talk about managed risk. He will recognise that we have been managing the risk presented by Huawei’s specific circumstances within the 4G network for some considerable time. He is also right, of course, that we have to consider the potential delay to the roll-out caused by any measures we decide are necessary. I repeat that the most important criterion is that we act in our national security interest. If that causes delay, it may well still be the appropriate course of action, but we will need to decide that when we are in possession of all the facts. He has my assurance that when we do that we will make the most balanced judgment we can. As I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), all commercial operators will need to take account not just of what we have said today but of what they already know about the position in the United States and elsewhere.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Secretary of State accept that the phrase “manageable risk” is almost a contradiction in terms, because if it were fully manageable, it would not be a risk? Is he not absolutely right not to be taking a decision with such profound security implications for our future in the dying few hours of an outgoing prime ministerial Administration? Finally, does he accept that unlike other suppliers, which, it is true, may have contaminated supply chains themselves, Huawei is unique in being subject to article 14 of China’s
national intelligence law, passed in June 2017, which empowers the intelligence agencies of the Chinese state to “request the relevant organs, organisations and civilians to provide necessary support, assistance and cooperation” to those intelligence services? We would be mad to enter into a direct security relationship with the agencies of a totalitarian communist state.

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s comments. Of course, he is right that we should take no risks that are not manageable. Once we are in possession of all the information we should have, we will have to judge whether we are capable of managing the appropriate risk effectively. If we are not, it is a risk that we should not take. On that I entirely agree, but that decision has not yet been taken.

My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the Chinese law—it is what makes Huawei different from many other suppliers in the network—but I repeat the point I made a moment ago: a process for managing that risk has been in place for some considerable time. So far as delay is concerned, I repeat that in my judgment the right way to proceed is to delay only until we are in possession of the facts and information necessary to make the right judgment. That is the process we will undertake.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Intelligence and Security Committee issued a statement on Friday saying that the UK network had to be built in such a way as to withstand attack from any quarter. The Secretary of State knows that only Nokia, Ericsson and Huawei can provide the 5G required for the UK’s use. While his noble aspiration is to pursue targeted diversification, is that realistic given the three potential suppliers? Should we not have a resilient service that can meet any potential threat within any of those three suppliers, rather than the desperation of simple diversity?

Jeremy Wright: The right hon. Gentleman is right, but they are not mutually exclusive. We can and should do both. Diversification will not happen overnight, which is one reason I want to proceed as swiftly as possible with that track. It will take time for us to develop diversification in the market, but none the less we should seek to do so in the longer term. In the shorter term, he is also right—he knows this from his ISC work—that part of the reason we want a larger number of suppliers in the system is not simply that that is commercially and economically beneficial, but that there is a security benefit. Having several different suppliers’ equipment in the system helps to prevent overdependence on any one supplier’s equipment. That is an obvious security imperative. We should do that. It is part of the calculation we make about the security imperative in this decision.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Given the fundamental issue of security, which for many of us here must override all the other interests, I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend on this statement on a new security framework, particularly since it will be a much stronger security-based regime than that which exists at present.

Jeremy Wright: I am very grateful for my right hon. Friend’s support. As he knows, my clear intent in commissioning the review was to focus first and foremost on security. No other consideration comes ahead of security. Fundamentally, we must make a decision on the basis of what is in our security interests, but he is also right that if we were to focus solely on one company or country, we would miss the broader important point that our telecoms supply chain must be resilient and secure, regardless of where equipment comes from, because risk may transfer from place to place and our population is entitled to expect that the approach we take puts security at its heart, wherever the equipment comes from.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): It is essential that the national security implications of using Huawei equipment be fully taken into account, but what consideration, if any, is given to the use of Huawei equipment in the repression of Uyghurs? Do the UK Government take that and the use of similar equipment by other manufacturers from China into account?

Jeremy Wright: I know that the right hon. Gentleman regularly raises this issue with colleagues from the Foreign Office. As he knows, we are concerned about it across Government. It is important that the UK Government, in their communications with the Chinese Government, stress the importance of human rights and their protections for minorities as well as for majority populations in China, and we will continue to do that. The judgments we make in this review will not diminish the UK Government’s enthusiasm for making that case.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Given that Huawei is to all intents part of the Chinese state, given that China has extensive history of intellectual property theft, data theft, cyber-attacks and the development of a surveillance state in parts of its own country, given that it is building up a dominant position in advanced comms that will eventually put Nokia, Samsung and others out of business, given the increased warnings of the Cell, and given our Five Eyes colleagues’ positions, does the Secretary of State agree that having any tech from one-party authoritarian states in our critical national infrastructure raises difficult and potentially insurmountable obstacles when it comes to data protection and protecting our human rights, the rule of law, our value system in the 21st century and security?

Jeremy Wright: I certainly think that my hon. Friend’s description justifies his reference to difficult issues. As for whether they are insurmountable, if he will forgive me I will not answer that question, because it would predetermine the outcome of the review that still has to happen specifically in relation to Huawei. However, all the points that he has made are proper for consideration as we make that decision.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): May I take the question asked by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) a little further? A million Uyghurs are languishing in concentration camps in Xinjiang, and the people of that province are under constant surveillance with the connivance of Huawei in the regime. All of us—especially those of us who are members of the Select Committee on Defence—are
aware of the security risks of the project, but the Secretary of State and the Government have yet to answer a more fundamental question. Why should they reward a company that has been complicit in creating an authoritarian, dystopian Xinjiang with such a large Government contract?

Jeremy Wright: As I said to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, the UK Government are not uninterested in this subject; far from it. The hon. Gentleman will understand, however, that the parameters of the review that we are undertaking here relate to what measures it is sensible to take to protect our security interests within the UK telecoms network. Elsewhere in the Government, we continue to take a strong interest in the welfare of minorities in China and elsewhere, and to make strong representations thereon.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I welcome the statement, and, in particular, what my right hon. and learned Friend said about the new national security framework for telecoms. Does he agree, however, that that framework needs to reflect the rapidly changing technological landscape in which we are operating, and needs to be properly resourced to be effective and serve its purpose?

Jeremy Wright: Yes, I do agree with my hon. Friend. I think that both those points are important. We need to build the framework in a way that enables it to adapt as the technology develops, and we will seek to do that. He will have heard me say that we intend to consult on the specifics of the telecoms security requirements. The matter will then come to the House, because we will need to legislate for the powers that will be necessary for both the Government and Ofcom to enforce those requirements.

Universal Credit: Managed Migration

6.41 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): At the core of my Department is the desire to deliver a considered and considerate welfare system that incentivises work. Universal credit has been rolled out nationally, and there are now more than 2 million claimants. We continue to listen to claimants, stakeholders and Members of Parliament in order to improve the system. In short, we examine what works, and act accordingly. That is why one of my first acts as Secretary of State was to announce legislation for a small pilot to move existing welfare claimants on to universal credit. Managed migration involves moving claimants who are still on legacy benefits, and whose circumstances have not changed, across to universal credit. The pilot will give colleagues and claimants confidence in the Department’s approach to the transition before we return to the House to report on progress and seek permission to extend managed migration.

Today, I am laying regulations to commence the pilot, for no more than 10,000 claimants, which will start this month as promised. We will begin with one site—in Harrogate, as previously announced—to ensure that people’s transition is carefully supported. There is a possibility that the pilot will be extended to further sites as it progresses. We will be able to learn from putting processes into practice, and to adapt our approach accordingly.

The Department will continue to work closely with expert stakeholders to ensure that the pilot supports the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach claimants. Claimants who are moved to universal credit will be eligible for transitional financial protection to safeguard their legacy entitlement. They will also have access to additional financial support before they receive their first universal credit payment, including the two-week run-on of housing benefit and the discretionary hardship payment, as well as advances.

Let me reiterate that the Department does not intend to stop the benefits of anyone who participates in the pilot. Instead, we will be testing how we can encourage and support those who move over to universal credit, without halting their benefits. This listen-and-adapt, evidence-based approach is the right way to deliver universal credit.

We have also revised our approach to claimants who are entitled to the severe disability premium. The regulations that I am laying today will enable us to begin to provide support for claimants who were entitled to the premium and have already moved to universal credit. From 24 July 2019, those claimants will be considered for backdated payments covering the time that has elapsed since their move. They will also gain access to ongoing transitional payments that reflect the severe disability premium to which they were previously entitled. We have reviewed the rates of those payments to enable the most vulnerable to receive increased support. Claimants will now receive payments of up to £405 per month alongside their universal credit awards, increased from the previous proposed maximum of £360. We estimate that by 2024-25, approximately 45,000 of the most vulnerable claimants will benefit from this package of support, worth an estimated £600 million over the next six years. My Department will begin the process on Wednesday, ensuring that claimants are paid at the earliest opportunity.
Following the High Court judgment on the severe disability premium, the regulations will also—in 2021—bring an end to the barrier that prevents its recipients from moving to universal credit as a result of a change of circumstances. Until 2021, anyone who receives the premium and whose circumstances change will continue to be held on legacy benefits, as they are now. After 2021, the barrier will be removed. SDP claimants will move on to universal credit through natural migration, gaining access to the new payments that are available to those who have already moved over.

The Department will continue to follow this approach in the weeks and months to come, identifying areas for improvement and seeking new ways to give better support to claimants. In the months ahead, we will complete an evaluation of the effectiveness of universal credit sanctions in helping people into work in order to report to the Select Committee in the autumn. We will be evaluating the results of our pilots, which explored the possibility of offering claimants more frequent benefit payments on demand. We will be launching a new service enabling private sector landlords to receive housing benefit rent payments directly from the Department, and continuing a proof of concept in south London to test a “written warning” sanctions model, according to which a sanction would not be applied on the first failure to attend an appointment.

I am determined—and I know the Department that I lead is determined—to ensure that universal credit is always a force for good.

6.47 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement.

Universal credit was meant to simplify the social security system. In fact, it is deeply flawed, and has caused real hardship to so many people across our country.

In March, the Secretary of State shockingly announced her intention to pilot managed migration even before she had secured approval from Parliament. Now she has left it to the eleventh hour to bring these regulations to Parliament. Managed migration is deeply controversial. The Government’s original intention to send nearly 3 million people a letter saying that their benefit would stop on a particular day, and that they would have to apply for universal credit, shifted the responsibility for securing essential support for millions of people from the state to the claimant. In so doing, the Government would have risked catastrophic consequences for many of the most vulnerable in our society. Understandably, the plans were met with outrage from many sections of society: how could a Government visit such a plan on the people?

It really is important for these important regulations to be debated on the Floor of the House. The Government committed themselves to doing that on 8 January, when the Minister for Employment, the hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), said:

“We will…ensure that the start date for the July 2019 test phase…is voted on.”—[Official Report, 8 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 175.]

Can the Secretary of State therefore guarantee today that the regulations will be debated in full, and voted on in the House? To do any less would be an absolute disgrace.

It is hardly surprising that universal credit is so controversial, given that it has caused so much misery. During the geographical roll-out, we have seen a sharp increase in the number of people where it has been introduced going to food banks. That is a source of shame for the Government. It cannot be right that in one of the richest countries in the world, children are going hungry and their parents are having to seek help from food charities.

In its report “The next stage of Universal Credit”, the Trussell Trust says:

“Benefit transitions, most likely due to people moving onto Universal Credit, are increasingly accounting for more referrals” to food banks.

In a report published last month entitled “Universal Credit: What needs to change to reduce child poverty and make it fit for families?”, the Child Poverty Action Group says:

“The DWP stated in response to the Social Security Advisory Committee…report on managed migration that”

the Government

“would ‘explore options’ to remove the need for a new claim, so it is disappointing that the regulations put forward for the managed migration pilot do not allow for this by giving the department the power to create claims.”

So can the Secretary of State enlighten us: do the regulations she lays today address that?

The Child Poverty Action Group goes on:

“We understand that officials are reluctant to go down this route but we believe that their concerns are surmountable and do not justify the risks involved in the current proposed approach: that people will be given a deadline for claiming universal credit and will have their legacy benefits terminated if they do not manage to do so on time.”

The Secretary of State says in her statement that the Government do not intend to stop the benefits of anyone participating in the pilot; intentions are all very well, but the regulations we have seen thus far show Government giving themselves the power to do just that, so will she guarantee today that no one will have their benefits stopped?

The Secretary of State says that the Government have revised their approach to claimants entitled to severe disability premium, and that the regulations she is laying today will enable the Government to begin to provide support for claimants who are entitled to severe disability premium and have already moved to universal credit. These are severely disabled people who have had vital financial support cut by this Government, so why is it only now, after months on end, that the Government are going to begin to provide support? What thought has she given to the hardship her lack of action has caused? What assessment have the Government made of the hardship that severely disabled people may have been suffering because of their loss of income? What assessment have the Government made of the hardship that severely disabled people may have been suffering because of their loss of income? What would the Secretary of State say to the Disability Benefits Consortium, which wrote this month:

“Many disabled people have not yet felt the full extent of the cuts made to welfare benefits, as many have not yet moved on to Universal Credit. When that happens, there will be dramatic increases in the levels of poverty among people who are already at crisis point. It is a disaster waiting to happen”?

[Amber Rudd]
The role of any pilot is to justify the whole, yet we know the flaws in universal credit are causing real hardship; the five-week wait and the insistence on making and managing a claim online build in disadvantage to the millions who are deeply disadvantaged already through low literacy levels or lack of access to IT. I note the Secretary of State’s comments on support during the pilot, but that will do nothing to help subsequent claimants. There is also the requirement of monthly assessment periods for the self-employed while their tax assessment period is annual, creating additional expense and administrative costs for that group. The abject failure of the Government on irregular payments means the issue remains unaddressed too, and the stories of people having all their benefits stopped because they are paid twice in one month through no fault of their own are going unheeded. The two-child limit is penalising families despite the horrific child poverty statistics, with over 4 million children going without sufficient food, shoes that fit and the security of knowing their families have enough. It is vital that these issues are debated on the Floor of the House so that all these issues can be addressed.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady is determined to demonise what is a very sensible approach to trying to ensure that universal credit delivers what it is intended to deliver. She has given us a catalogue, as always, of the things that she disapproves of, but let me just highlight the things that are relevant, perhaps, to what we are discussing today.

On the one hand the hon. Lady criticises me for, as she puts it, coming out at the last minute, but on the other hand she asks why this has not been done before. She cannot have it both ways: we are determined to get on with this, which is why I am here today, and which is why I am sticking to what I said we would do, which is to make sure that we come back to the House before the managed migration pilot begins.

Getting support for this measure is incredibly important, which is why we are proceeding by negative resolution. We are doing that—to answer one of the hon. Lady’s questions—because that was the advice we received from the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments. The benefit of that, which I hope she will agree with, is that we can begin making the payments as soon as possible. She asked why we have not got on with making the payments; on the basis of what we are doing today, we will be able to get on and start that on Wednesday.

The hon. Lady asks particularly about how we will ensure that nobody actually loses their benefits. As I said in my statement, I am absolutely committed to ensuring that the managed migration is handled in such a way that nobody loses their benefits. The numbers that we are dealing with in Harrogate and the support that we are getting from the jobcentre and, happily, from the Member of Parliament my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), who is present, will make a huge difference to ensuring that every single person has that positive experience.

I know that somebody—hopefully me—will have the opportunity to come back next year and report on the outcome from this managed migration pilot; getting it right and engaging with stakeholders and making a success of it are going to be absolutely crucial to continuing to build on the success of universal credit.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): CS Lewis said: “We are what we believe we are.”

and I believe that a civilised society is coloured, crafted, characterised by how it treats its most vulnerable citizens. To that end, I welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment that claimants moving through the process will receive transitional protection and protect their income as they move. However, Mr Speaker, you will know as a constituency MP, as we all do, that the assessment of need is of critical importance and that too often in analysing need the system has been cruel in its crudity and callous in the criteria being applied to that assessment, from being rigid and insensitive to dynamic conditions, particularly degenerative ones. So will the Secretary of State during this process agree to review the means by which needs are assessed, to ensure they are fit for purpose?

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question and his continued interest in ensuring that the poorest in our society and in his constituency are well looked after. The purpose of the managed migration pilot is to make sure that we get it right; constantly engaging with stakeholders will be part of that, and of course we will take any learnings from it.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement, although it is staggering that the Department for Work and Pensions is pushing out regulations days before recess. Although it is correct that the back-payments are being issued—Members across the House, including on the SNP Benches, have been calling for that—hearing about them 48 hours before the change takes place is, frankly, disrespectful to the House and outrageous.

I have a number of questions. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the Government are formally accepting the decision of the High Court? That leads to the next question, which is about the £405 a month. Will the Secretary of State publish how that figure has been calculated, to give us all an opportunity to see that the Government are complying with the High Court decision? The Secretary of State has confirmed that these regulations will be laid under the negative resolution procedure; however, her predecessor had committed to allowing the House to debate the new regulations. Why is the House not being given the opportunity to debate them? Finally, can she confirm that the Social Security Advisory Committee has been consulted on these new regulations?

Amber Rudd: To address the final question first, the SSAC has been consulted. On how the amounts have been arrived at, that is broadly in line with what the tribunal has recommended, but I will take the opportunity, if I may, to write to the hon. Gentleman so that he can see the set-up for himself. He asked about the previous Secretary of State and her commitments: the commitment that we are delivering on today is to respond to the requirement to lay the legislation and for me, the Secretary State, to come to the House and set out why we are doing it. The advice that we have received is to use the negative resolution procedure, because things have been changed since the former Secretary of State laid the original legislation, but I
acknowledge that to move in future from the pilot to the full managed migration is likely to need much fuller debate.

Amber Rudd: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his comments and for his time in discussing with me a constituency issue that contributed to my responding in an accelerated way to the plans I was already formulating for looking again at how we support people with terminal illness diagnosis. Yes, I will continue to proceed with that at pace, because I am very conscious that the people who have that sort of diagnosis need as much support as possible, as soon as is conceivably possible, so that these kinds of inhumane mistakes are not made again?

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his questions. I am aware that there is, quite rightly, a lot of interest in how we will assess the pilot, and I have been looking at that myself. Ultimately, the pilot will be a success if we get as many people as we expect across from the legacy benefits to universal credit as effectively and efficiently as possible. I want to ensure that we give them the right support, and that they have an effective transfer. The process we have at the moment will be based on “Who knows who?”—“Who knows me?” will be the theme—so we are engaging with organisations and individuals to ensure that they get the right support. I have already requested my Department to look at the five-week delay for new universal credit recipients. Perhaps that will be one of the things we will look out for.

Jeremy Lefroy: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his statement. Has she been able to look at the five-week delay for new universal credit claimants to see whether it can be reduced? A lot of us on both sides of the House feel that it could be reduced to much less than five weeks.

Amber Rudd: I know that my hon. Friend has raised this on several occasions, and he will be aware that the Department has already made changes that will affect the run-on of housing benefit and additional legacy benefits by the end of next year. I will always look at finding ways to get those essential funds to the people who really need them as early as possible.

Debbie Abrahams: I am very glad that the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) has reconsidered his decision to beetle—or, in his case, perhaps to stroll—out of the Chamber, because I note that even as we deliberate on the most serious and solemn matters, not only has he been seated like a dignified Buddha but he has demonstrated that his penchant for alliteration never ceases.

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. In contrast to the utterly absurd and over-the-top response of the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), may I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend for her statement. Has she been able to look at the five-week delay for new universal credit recipients? Will she confirm that it includes the approach she is taking to the receipt of benefits by people who have terminal illnesses? Will she consult the organisation she promised me and others only very recently—I am very grateful to her, as are my constituents, for her help—be concluded as soon as is conceivably possible, so that these kinds of inhumane mistake are not made again?

Mr Speaker: I am very glad that the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) has reconsidered his decision to beetle—or, in his case, perhaps to stroll—out of the Chamber, because I note that even as we deliberate on the most serious and solemn matters, not only has he been seated like a dignified Buddha but he has demonstrated that his penchant for alliteration never ceases.

Caroline Harris: Individuals with a disability premium on their employment and support allowance are still eligible for housing benefit because universal credit does not cater for cases that are out of the ordinary—for example, those receiving recovery services. Since migration, however, many people are not receiving payments because local authorities are not providing the correct information or recognising the special circumstances of such claims. Can the Secretary of State advise what, if any, training is planned for local authority staff, to ensure that they give accurate advice and subsequently provide appropriate and proper payments?

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Lady for raising this. I am determined to ensure that local authorities are correctly informed so that they can support not only the managed migration pilot but managed migration overall. That is one of the things we hope to learn from the Harrogate pilots. We will be giving them a small amount of extra support to ensure that we can learn properly from the jobcentre. Perhaps that will be one of the things we will look out for.

Alison Thewliss: The Secretary of State should be aware that one of the canaries in the universal credit system is in the transition from live service to full service. One of my constituents was forced to make an entirely new claim, but errors were made. My constituent’s income was interrupted, split payments were cancelled and they had to explain the situation again and again to jobcentre staff. Reassessment on health grounds was proposed, despite my constituent
having been granted a 24-month bye on the live service before the move to full service. How can my constituents have confidence in the Government when the system is so riddled with errors as it evidently is? Is it not the case that, for many people, the canary in the universal credit system is dead?

Amber Rudd: It is disappointing to hear from the hon. Lady that her constituent has had such a difficult time. I hope that we will be able to erase any errors that have taken place in the past and ensure that we have a seamless process in future. I would just tactfully point out to her that the system this replaces had many more problems. I would like this system to be perfect, and it is my aim to get it as close to that as possible. The previous system, which had six different benefits in three different places, was incredibly hard work and really cruel to some constituents, and I hope that most people appreciate that this system will be more effective and efficient.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement that the Department will not stop the benefits of anyone participating in the pilot, but has she calculated what resources the local jobcentre will need to ensure that this happens for the very vulnerable people involved? In Harrogate, 56% of the people involved were already on universal credit in February, and I understand that fewer than 2,000 are due to migrate using the process. That is far less than the rest of the country, where there is an average 27% roll-out. What resources are being put in place in Harrogate, and in other places where the pilot will be rolled out, to ensure that the people are supported? Will the people who receive transitional protection for their severe disability premium see that protection eroded as universal credit progresses? Will the Secretary of State confirm whether they will receive any uplifts from universal credit if they are also on transitional protection? Will those people also suffer deductions from their universal credit, which will in many cases make people worse off? Will she bring forward the run-ons of legacy benefits from June next year as planned, to ensure that people who are transitioning to universal credit under the pilot can benefit from those run-ons?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady asks a lot of detailed questions, and I will do my best to answer them, but if I have not done so, I hope she will write to me so that I can complete my response. A discretionary hardship fund will be in place for the individuals who are being managed-migrated from legacy benefits to universal credit in Harrogate, which will be the equivalent of the legacy benefits being paid in addition that were going to be received next year, in June 2020, for people who are being moved from one benefit to the other. So the answer to her question is yes, but the type of payment will be under the umbrella of a discretionary hardship payment instead. She asked about the support that the jobcentre will get. We are working with it, and a dedicated team is working closely with my Department to ensure that there is true learning from the experience of moving people in this way. She asked specifically about Harrogate and why we are doing this there. The answer is that it already has a relatively high level of people on universal credit, but a significant number will still need to be transferred. I did say in my statement that it might not be the only location, and we are taking permission to do up to 10,000, so it may mean that, to complete that learning process, we do it elsewhere as well. We are keeping an open mind on that, because it is essential that this really covers the serious matters of getting it right, some of which have been raised in the House today.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State use this pilot to review thoroughly the impact of the catastrophic five-week delay policy in universal credit? It is forcing people to use food banks, as the Trussell Trust reports; forcing people into debt to her Department, because they have to take out what she calls an advance but is, in fact, a loan; and, as we have discovered over the past two or three weeks, opening up a bonanza for crooks and fraudsters who dupe people into taking out unwanted advances and claiming universal credit. Will she do a thorough assessment of the impact of the five-week delay as part of the pilot’s evaluation?

Amber Rudd: The right hon. Gentleman is no doubt aware that, in addition to the advance, the housing benefit run-on and the legacy benefits run-on will come in next year, and they are effectively part of the transitional arrangements being offered to the pool of people who are having their migration managed. He has raised this matter before. I have bent over backwards to ensure that we get funds to people as soon as possible, and former Secretaries of State have done the same, but I know that some people still have concerns about what more we can do to ensure that people on the lowest incomes are supported at the moment of difficulty when they move from one benefit to another. I will always take an open mind to looking what we can learn from that going forward.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I recently received confirmation that one of my constituents, with the support of my constituency office team, had been awarded more than £2,000 in benefits that had been wrongly withheld. While that was welcome—he certainly welcomed it—why should somebody have to go to the MP, and why should an MP’s staff spend days and days on an individual case just to get somebody the money that is theirs by right?

For 18 months, my constituents have been used as guinea pigs for a failed and failing system. During that time, rent arrears have increased, food bank usage has increased and personal debt has increased. One of the Secretary of State’s ministerial colleagues actually suggested that the reason for the increase in food bank use might be that everybody knows where the food bank is, but nobody can find the jobcentre. Glenrothes jobcentre is right next to the bus station, and someone cannot get a bus in or out of Glenrothes without going past the jobcentre. Does the Secretary of State believe her colleague that the increase in food bank use in my constituency is because a high-profile jobcentre has become invisible, or would it be more honest to say that food bank use is increasing because my constituents and many others are victims of a welfare system that is no longer fit for purpose?

Amber Rudd: I simply do not recognise the hon. Gentleman’s characterisation either of my ministerial colleagues or of the intention of universal credit. The
Amber Rudd: Gentleman describes his jobcentre in some detail, and I expect he knows some of the work coaches who do such a remarkably good job engaging with individuals and trying to help them into work. I ask him to remember that before he describes the system as not fit for purpose. The former system was not fit for purpose, with six different benefits from three different places and no personal interaction. Universal credit is much more positive for his constituents and for mine.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State look at the system that encourages claimants to take out a new enterprise allowance to go into business, but one year down the line, when they might still be building up that business, the system assumes that they are earning a minimum amount? A Kilmarnock couple came to my surgery on Friday to say that they have been left with absolutely no income because their UC assessment has assumed wages that they are not making. They are in hardship, and it is quite possible that businesses will fail as a consequence of this system. Does she agree that that is another example of why universal credit is not fit for purpose?

Amber Rudd: I want to take this opportunity to say that the new enterprise allowance has been a great success in supporting businesses, and I am pleased with how it has been picked up by MPs and constituents. As for the one-year policy that the hon. Gentleman referred to, we must ensure that we get the right balance between supporting enterprise and making sure that taxpayers are supporting businesses that have a strong future. If he feels so strongly about it, he will no doubt want to make a submission to the spending review at the end of the year, but I think that the balance is right at the moment. We have to think about whose money it is, how it is spent and where work will be available to people.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you been given any indication that any statutory instrument may be brought forward to amend the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971? I believe that a small statutory instrument is all that is required to allow supervised drug consumption rooms in Glasgow to go ahead. They are very much needed given the deaths of 1,187 people in Scotland last year. Has any indication been given to you that such an instrument might come forward before recess?

Mr Speaker: I am not aware of any such intention. My understanding is that there will be statutory instruments tomorrow but not, to the best of my knowledge and recollection, on this subject. The Clerk at the Table is swivelling around, which is sometimes testament to his desire to vouchsafe valued advice, but he has re-swivelled, which suggests that, in fact, he has no such desire at this stage. In all solemnity, I must say to the hon. Lady that I am not aware of any such plan. It is obvious that she thinks that there should be a plan and, knowing the persistence and indefatigability that she has demonstrated in her four years in the House, I feel sure she will be registering her point with force and alacrity to Ministers for as long as is necessary to secure the outcome that she seeks.
Serjeant at Arms

7.16 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride): I beg to move,

That this House expresses its appreciation to Kamal El-Hajji BEM for his distinguished service since February 2016 as the first BAME Serjeant at Arms, and for his prior 12-year career in public service at the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Constitutional Affairs, all of which service was notable for its geniality and quiet determination, and extends to him its best wishes for his retirement.

It is a pleasure to move this motion, for I am sure that I speak for the whole House in thanking Kamal El-Hajji for his work as Serjeant at Arms—a position in which he has served in this Chamber with distinction and through some of its more important moments in recent history. I thank him on behalf of the whole House for his three-and-a-half years’ service.

A lot of water has passed under Westminster bridge since Kamal took up his role in February 2016. He was already a distinguished figure before coming to this place, having received the British Empire Medal following his time at the Ministry of Justice. Kamal’s experience there, and in previous roles including at the Department for Constitutional Affairs, led to his selection by a panel led by you, Mr Speaker. The appointment of a Serjeant at Arms with a black, Asian or minority ethnic background had been a long time coming—604 years, to be precise—and we should rightly celebrate that important milestone. Kamal has demonstrated, through his service, that Parliament is for everyone in the UK.

Certainly, Kamal’s enthusiasm for Parliament has made him an able champion of this place, as has his facility for languages. He has welcomed distinguished visitors in an official capacity from a variety of nations, including several Heads of State—the Princess Royal, the King of Spain, the King of the Netherlands, and the President of Slovenia—and countless visitors from right across the United Kingdom. Kamal has commanded respect among those who visit and work in Parliament.

That may partly be because he bears a sword in the estate, and in the face of evident danger, Members then looked himself with the dignity and authority we would expect, remaining in the Chamber throughout and supporting Members while the building was locked down.

We are grateful to all those who undertake to protect us as we go about our role of representing constituents. As we conduct our proceedings, we are reminded that there are times when our democracy has to be protected by actions as well as by words. That is why I hope that, as he steps down to spend more time with his wife and two boys, Kamal will look back with great pride on the years in which he played his part in fulfilling those responsibilities.

During his time with us, he, too, has contributed to the history of this place by serving us right here in this Chamber, the very cradle of our democracy.

We wish Kamal well. He leaves with our thanks and deepest gratitude.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House, both for what he said and for the way in which he said it.

7.20 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for moving the motion paying tribute to Kamal El-Hajji.

The office of Serjeant at Arms dates back to 1415 or, as Morecambe and Wise would have it, quarter past 2. Kamal El-Hajji has diligently served as Serjeant at Arms of the House of Commons for three and a half years and, as the Leader of the House mentioned, Kamal is the first person from a BAME background to hold one of the most prestigious posts in UK public life. During his tenure there has not only been an EU referendum but a general election.

Kamal has had a distinguished 12-year career in public service. He became the head of front of house and VIP relations at the Ministry of Justice in 2010 and, since 2001, he held a number of administrative and security roles at the Department for Constitutional Affairs, as it then was, and later the Ministry of Justice. In 2015 he was awarded the British Empire Medal for services to the Ministry of Justice.

In Parliament, Kamal performed his ceremonial duties with dignity and grace from day one, including with his retirement last Friday. As the Leader of the House pointed out, Kamal is a martial arts expert, which meant you were very safe as you walked along in the procession, Mr Speaker.

Kamal’s excellent interpersonal skills, commitment to customer service and genial manner will be missed, especially by Members who have had the pleasure of working closely with him. We have been fortunate to have a colleague who was so kind, genuine and helpful.

Kamal has a young family, and his main reason for retiring was to spend more time with them and his wife. He has been an outstanding public servant, and Her Majesty’s Opposition wish him and his family good health and happiness for the future.

7.22 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I join the tributes to the Serjeant at Arms. He is distinguished, he is dedicated, he is perceptive and he is respected by Commons staff and by MPs. He has led, served and experienced all that this House has to offer.
When his appointment was announced, Kamal said that with the help of Allah— I recommend that people
look up the expression because, as Islam is one of the
Abrahamic religions, Allah is the same God that the
Jews and the Christians acknowledge—he would do
what he could. He has been described as a gentle giant,
but I forget whether it was by you, Mr Speaker, or by
Rose Hudson-Wilkin, the Speaker’s Chaplain.

Kamal is a natural peacemaker, and he is passionate
about Parliament. He has helped everybody with whom
he has come in contact. People respect him for the
loyalty he has shown during his years here, and he has
always looked for the best in others. It is right that we
describe him as someone who cares about what we do
and who cared about what he did. We wish him well.

We know that, at times, it is not the Serjeant at Arms
but the Clerk to the Serjeant at Arms, such as Judy
Scott Thomson, whose voice is still heard when the lift
gets stuck, telling us not to panic and not to do what we
should not do. But it is the Serjeant at Arms who
provides the leadership and Kamal, whom I referred to
as “Sir,” has done really well in his time here. I wish him
well, and I hope, with the help of Allah, he will enjoy his
time in retirement.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I
thank the Leader of the House for moving this convivial
and important motion. I want to express the appreciation
of Scottish National party Members for the service that
Kamal El-Hajji has given to this House over the past
few years.

Kamal has discharged his responsibilities in a courteous,
good-natured and thoroughly professional way, to the extent
that he has become a good friend to many of us on both
sides of the House. Scottish National party Members
have got to know him a bit better due to proximity, as
he is surrounded by the SNP throng and we have more
opportunity to share stories and anecdotes with him.

Such is the attention this place receives that several
people actually think Kamal is an SNP Member, although
they wonder why an SNP Member has buckles, breeches
and a sword. “He doesn’t say very much, but he seems
to be better dressed than the rest of you,” is what we
tend to hear.

Of course, Kamal is the first BAME Serjeant at
Arms and the first Muslim to hold his post, of which he
should be immensely proud. A serene zen calm comes
from him as he perches on his chair. He is a centre of
serenity in these frenetic surroundings. He is the most
relaxed wielder of the sword this place will ever have.
Yes, he is a gentle giant, but he is a dignified one. He is a
gentle giant who happens to be well-rehearsed in the
good use of all sorts of martial arts.

It is now time for Kamal to pass on the sword. It was
never pulled in anger, even though I tried on several
occasions to encourage him to go into the Lobby to
move on recalcitrant Members who would not go through
in time; he never obliged me. Perhaps I will have better
luck with the next Serjeant at Arms.

It has been a pleasure to work with Kamal, and it has
been a pleasure to know him. I know he is retiring to
spend more time with his young family, but he is a very
young retiree at 60 years old. I think he will be tempted
back into public service in some capacity, and there are
several roles that would be ideal for somebody with his
skills and abilities. We hope to see him back in some
form in the future but, for now, I wish Kamal all the
best and good luck. Enjoy your retirement.

7.27 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD):
Speaking from the Liberal Democrat Bench, I feel
compelled to echo the words of everyone who has
spoken.

On a personal note, I should say that I am the first
MP of British-Palestinian descent, and I have discovered
that I am the first of Arab descent of any kind. What
perhaps you do not know, Mr Speaker, is that Arabic
has been spoken in this Chamber on many occasions
because, every time I came in, Kamal and I would look
at each other and speak a little in Arabic.

Every time there was something happening in the
House, Kamal’s unfailing kindness would shine through.
He would often call me over and say, “This has happened.
I want you to take care of yourself.” I am sure I am not
the only Member for whom he did that. Kindness
emanates from him, and he has a steely centre. We knew
that if anything happened, he would be there for us.

I would simply like to say, in the words of our shared
heritage: shukran, merci, thank you.

7.28 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On behalf of the
Democratic Unionist party, I wish to convey my thanks
to Kamal El-Hajji for his time in this House. There is no
doubt that, on many occasions, we all felt a bit more
secure because he was here. As the hon. Member for
Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) said, he
would summon us with a look, and he would look after
us and tell us what to do.

As you know, Mr Speaker, I am usually here in the
late hours for the Adjournment debate and, on many
occasions, the Serjeant at Arms was here as well, so we
got to know each other. It is one of the wee things you
probably notice, Mr Speaker, but he would step back
and click his heels together whenever he took down the
Mace, which reminds me of when I clicked my heels
during my Army days—he seems to have that bearing,
too.

Mr Speaker, you can take much credit for your leadership,
and we all greatly welcomed the House having its first
BAME Serjeant at Arms. We were very pleased to see
him here.

This House does tradition, history and culture
exceptionally well. Every nation around the whole world
wishes that it had the tradition and history that we have,
and Kamal brought that across each and every time
that he represented us in the House. This great nation of
the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern
Ireland does it so well, and does it well together. Kamal
is always perceptive, helpful and personable and I put
on the record our thanks to him. Kamal epitomises all
that is best in the House, and I wish him, his wife and
his children every happiness for the future and thank
him very much for what he does and for what he has
done for us in the past.
Whoever the new Serjeant at Arms is, we look forward to them doing equally well; we have a great tradition here. Kamal’s work in the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Constitutional Affairs, and the fact that he received the British Empire Medal, reflect on his qualities, which the House has had the pleasure and happiness to enjoy together—not only in friendship, but in respect of the security position that he held for us.

7.30 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Having heard other Members’ tributes to the Serjeant at Arms, I wish to speak only of my personal experience of dealing with Kamal.

In all my dealings with the Serjeant at Arms, he always strived to help me. For example, when some MPs were—horror of horrors—smoking on the non-smoking part of the Terrace, he took my concerns seriously, and I received letters of apology from those MPs. To the best of my knowledge, they have not yet repeated their offence. He also managed to clear the Members’ Families’ Room of Members of the other place, so that the children of my SNP colleagues could stay there safely when they were down during the Scottish summer holidays, which, as everyone should now know, are totally different from the holidays here in England.

Because of where the Serjeant at Arms sits—my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) referred to that—I have been able to have wee chats with Kamal, who always asked me how I was during very difficult personal circumstances. He always talked fondly of his young family; he has told me that he is leaving so that he will be there for them, and I am sure they will enjoy seeing much more of him. I wish him a long and happy retirement.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, I want to take the opportunity to say how grateful I am to all colleagues for what they have said on this occasion by way of tribute to Kamal El-Hajji. It rather reinforces a very deep and long-held sense that I have had about our Serjeant, which is that, among all sorts of other positive characteristics, he has excellent interpersonal skills and is extremely popular with right hon. and hon. Members. They trusted him, knew they could rely on him and recognised his interest in and commitment to them. I can honestly say to the House that throughout his three-and-a-half-year tenure in post as Serjeant, no Member ever came to me to speak ill of him. Members esteemed him. He discharged an outward facing role, to boot, interacting with and offering a service to those who visited the estate. In that regard, too, I heard no complaints and much praise.

Kamal loved the House of Commons. He was enormously proud of having the opportunity to serve here, and he came to us on strong recommendation from his previous work. Indeed, I remember him enjoying very positive references—one written and the other oral, if memory serves me correctly—from distinguished Government Ministers who had interacted with him and who wanted very warmly to commend him to me. When he came to us for interview, one of the factors that weighed heavily in his favour was the moving and powerful examples he gave of how, in earlier roles, he had sought to defuse tensions and to act as an effective conciliator between different parties, each of which felt very strongly that it had right on its side. He was very much a peacemaker. I can, however, confirm that I was always mightily impressed, as others were, by his bearing and evident physical robustness. It is indeed the case that he carried himself extremely impressively. Although I am not the naturally nervous type, to be accompanied by Kamal as Serjeant, whether he had a sword with him or not, was always greatly reassuring to me as Speaker.

Colleagues have conducted themselves on this occasion as I would very much have hoped they would: from different parties, independently of each other, with fond affection and good will of Members and many others right across the House of Commons. I wish to speak only of my personal experience of dealing with Kamal.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, I want to take the opportunity to say how grateful I am to all colleagues for what they have said on this occasion by way of tribute to Kamal El-Hajji. It rather reinforces a very deep and long-held sense that I have had about our Serjeant, which is that, among all sorts of other positive characteristics, he has excellent interpersonal skills and is extremely popular with right hon. and hon. Members. They trusted him, knew they could rely on him and recognised his interest in and commitment to them. I can honestly say to the House that throughout his three-and-a-half-year tenure in post as Serjeant, no Member ever came to me to speak ill of him. Members esteemed him. He discharged an outward facing role, to boot, interacting with and offering a service to those who visited the estate. In that regard, too, I heard no complaints and much praise.

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Question put and agreed to.

BILL PRESENTED

School Food Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Layla Moran presented a Bill to amend the Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014 to further restrict the serving of foods high in fat, salt or sugar in schools and to require all school meals to be free of added sugar by 2022; to require all publicly-funded schools to adhere to those standards; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 426).
Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) Bill

Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee, considered.

Third Reading

Mr Speaker: I call the hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), the Minister in a hurry, to move the Third Reading of the Bill. He may be a Minister in a hurry in more ways than one—I know not—but, as always, he is a happy and positive-looking Minister.

7.37 pm

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

I always try to be pithy, Mr Speaker, as you instruct us to be, but this is an important matter, so we shall proceed without too much haste.

Ratepayers have told us that the current system, with revaluations of business rates every five years, has not been responsive enough to changes in the rental market. They have asked us for more frequent revaluations so that the system is fairer and more closely reflects the rents that they actually pay. This small but significant Bill delivers what business has asked for: it moves business rates revaluations in England on to a three-yearly cycle, and brings forward the next revaluation to 2021 so that ratepayers benefit from the change as soon as possible.

I am grateful for the contributions of all Members, both on Second Reading and in Committee, and thank them for their support for the Bill. In the public evidence sessions, we heard from various business groups that expressed their support. I thank them, including the Confederation of British Industry, the British Retail Consortium and the Association of Convenience Stores. I give particular thanks to the Local Government Association and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy for not only their comments in the evidence sessions but their work with my officials to ensure that we can implement the Bill in a manner that meets with their approval.

Lastly, I give thanks to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), who has been, as ever with these relatively short and uncontroversial Bills, thoughtful and constructive in his approach. I am of course grateful to the Clerks of the House and, indeed, to my team, who have managed to get this important legislation through its various stages with efficiency and effectiveness.

This is a small but important Bill that continues our support for business in this country, and I commend it to the House.

7.39 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The Bill came around very quickly from Second Reading to Committee and then to Third Reading, which just shows that, when Parliament decides to do something, it can do it. Perhaps that is because we are light on business and there is time to debate and discuss these issues. I know that this is a geek interest—I take pride in being a geek and in liking data, numbers and finance, and this is an important matter. We cannot achieve the Government’s ambitions if we do not have a solid financial foundation. Business rates, although boring for many people, are actually a very important part of that. I also wish to echo the thanks to the Clerks for supporting the passage of the Bill. As always, they acted with absolute professionalism and ensured its smooth passage.

The purpose of the Bill has already been outlined, which is that it creates a three-year cycle and brings forward the revaluation period by one year. None the less, issues were raised on Second Reading and in Committee. I am slightly fearful that the Minister will be whisked away to another Department very shortly, and that we will lose his consistency and thoughtfulness. It matters not only that we pass the legislation in this place, but that we manage the transitional arrangements and the impact that naturally follows. We need to see what transitional arrangements will be in place. We need to ensure not only that the valuation office has capacity and is encouraged to deal with the backlog of 60,000 appeals going back to 2010, but that it has the people to deal with a new revaluation in the appeals process that will come. We need to make sure that the transitional arrangements are there, so that those who are adversely affected are able to manage that transition.

As part of the wider review, we need to ensure that we are clocking the geographical shift in valuations that takes place with every revaluation, because if we are going to move to 50%, 75% or 100% retention, that will naturally have an impact on the financial stability of local authorities that are part of those schemes. If, after every revaluation, we see a transition to the values of London and the south-east, that will not help build the northern powerhouse, which is a shared ambition for everyone who cares about the whole of the UK benefiting from the country moving forward.

We also need a more fundamental review of local government finance. I really feel sorry for local government Ministers. It is not right that the Treasury often has a closed mind to their funding issues, that they are told to deal with the envelope of money that they have, and that they are always last in the queue, behind the NHS, the police service and other more pressing Departments. The truth is that, if we do not get this right, older people will not get the care they need, younger people will be put at risk, and, critically for democracy, people will question why they are paying more and more council tax for less and less of the neighbourhood services that everybody enjoys universally. We on the Labour Benches will be holding our own review.

I thank the Minister for his approach this Bill, and I look forward to scrutinising it through the transitional arrangements as we approach the revaluation.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business Without Debate

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL
(3 SEPTEMBER)

Ordered,

That, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 10(2)(b), the sitting in Westminster Hall on Tuesday 3 September shall begin at 11.30am, shall be suspended from 1.30pm to 4.30pm and may then continue for up to a further three hours.—(Michelle Donelan.)
PETITIONS

The exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union

7.43 pm

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The petition states:
The Petition of residents of Corby and East Northamptonshire, and the surrounding areas,
Declares that the Brexit that the petitioners voted for should be adhered to and delivered in full by Her Majesty's Government; notes that the free-movement of people from the EU should be ended; further that immigration should be better controlled and the system fair; further that the United Kingdom should stop sending billions of pounds each year to Brussels; further that the United Kingdom should be allowed to make its own laws in our own country; and further that those laws should be judged by our own judges. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Prime Minister to take into account the concerns of petitioners and deliver the Brexit which the British people voted for.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Shelton Road Planning Application

7.44 pm

Tom Pursglove: The petition states:
The Petition of residents of Corby and the surrounding areas,
Declares that the planning application requesting for a combined heat and power waste facility to be built at Shelton Road, Corby, should be rejected; notes that the proposed site is adjacent to a new housing estate at Priors Hall Park, as well as local schools, and specifically the Corby Business Academy; further that the energy from waste industry is an explosive one with numerous accounts of plants exploding causing death and injury to workers and others nearby; further that the incineration of waste for energy recovery is a waste of valuable resources and is harmful to the environment and local communities and does not form part of a circular economy. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to press upon Corby Borough Council and Northamptonshire County Council to reject the planning application, and for the developers to find an alternative, more suitable site, thus reducing any negative impacts on young students and local residents.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Clearly, we are soon moving on to the Adjournment debate. As there seems to be more time than is often the case, would it be in order for Members such as me who are concerned about chalk streams to make a contribution to the debate, or do I need the permission of the Member in charge or the Minister?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I can help with that: no, in both cases. As there is more than half an hour for the debate, it is open for other Members to speak—obviously as long as their speech is relevant.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Mine is an entirely separate point of order. It is based on rumour and press comment recently. It will not have escaped your notice, Mr Deputy Speaker, that, over the past 10 years, on many occasions in this Chamber, I have had the privilege of raising points about HS2, which is a railway project that goes through the middle of my constituency. Over the period of 10 years, I have been saying that the cost of this project will rise dramatically. The press has reported that Mr Cook, the acting chairman, has possibly written to the permanent secretary in the Department for Transport to raise the £30 billion—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I think I have the message.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: May I continue?

Mr Deputy Speaker: No, no, you cannot—I am on my feet. First, I understand that the Minister is now here, and we can carry on. There is no need to make spurious points of order. I am well aware of HS2. As you well know, as a member of the Panel of Chairs, points of order are meant to be short and succinct. I think that we can both agree that that was not. I think we have finished.
Degraded Chalk Stream Environments

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

7.47 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me for my Adjournment debate this evening. I am delighted that I did not try your patience with a spurious point of order, as that really would have been naughty. If I had tried your patience with a spurious point of order, it would have been on an environmental matter, and I would have just wanted to know how I could bring to the attention of this House the fact that, on Friday afternoon, the Secretary of State refused a planning application by Veolia to build a massive incinerator in my constituency.

I was delighted with the refusal, and I now hope, as do all my constituents, that Veolia will give up its plans to put the incinerator in my constituency, give up trying to put one in Hertfordshire and disappear. If I had made a spurious and bogus point of order, that would have been it.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con) rose—

Mr Walker: I will give way on that point, but I would like to get to the substantive part of my speech.

Sir Oliver Heald: Does my hon. Friend agree that mine was not a spurious point of order? I have seven chalk streams and I want to make a speech.

Mr Walker: Of course, and there was nothing spurious about my delight at Veolia failing to get its application through—it was just that I wanted to bring it to the attention of a wider audience.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): My point of order was not a spurious one. I wanted to inquire whether the Secretary of State for Transport had indicated that he was going to make a statement on the escalating costs of HS2, which will damage the chalk streams in my area, as my hon. Friend well knows.

Mr Walker: I thank my right hon. Friend for alerting the House to that very important point. HS2 does pose a risk to chalk stream and riverine environments. No doubt if time allows, my right hon. Friend will bring her observations. I shall come to the matter later in my speech.

Sir Oliver Heald: I had miscounted; I have eight chalk streams in my constituency.

Mr Walker: My right hon. and learned Friend is such a love of country sports, but also a love of the environment. I share many loves of the countryside—particularly pride in—and it is getting worse. We have had three dry years in a row. There is this myth that we live in a wet country. Certainly, parts of our country are wet but the rest of the world. Saving the world does not start with us doing lecturing other countries on their environmental responsibilities? Saving the world does not start with us doing lecturing other countries on their environmental responsibilities?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is very perspicacious in his observations. I shall come to the matter later in my speech. He is absolutely right to raise that point and I hope that both the Minister and I will be able to address it, as I know other colleagues share his concerns.

The degradation of our chalk streams is one of the worst environmental scandals of the late 20th century and the start of the 21st. Of course, the other great environmental scandal is the destruction of the marine environment off the west coast of Scotland through salmon farming—an industry that has laid waste to numerous sea lochs off the west coast of Scotland and has destroyed the native fish runs in many of the rivers that feed those sea lochs.

It is important that I put the situation in context. As I said a moment ago, we have 85% of the world’s chalk streams and most of them are highly degraded. I find it extraordinary, given our own poor environmental record, that colleagues in this House lecture Indonesia and Brazil so freely on their responsibility to the rain forests. Of course, those two countries have a huge responsibility to the rain forests, but if we cannot save the chalk streams that are literally in our own backyard, what are we doing lecturing other countries on their environmental responsibilities?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has just pointed out, our chalk streams are literally being abstracted to death. Parts of the streams that I named at the start of my speech do not flow. In fact, a few of them barely flow at all from their source to where they join a bigger river. That is our record and it is one that none of us should take any pride in—and it is getting worse. We have had three dry years in a row. There is this myth that we live in a wet country. Certainly, parts of our country are wet but the east and the south-east are actually dry, and they are getting drier. The aquifers are not being replenished by rainfall and they are getting more abstracted, so even less water is going into our rivers.

Let me give an example from the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) in Buckinghamshire. This country has over 85% of the world’s chalk streams, and these streams are a unique habitat.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman and I share many loves of the countryside—particularly a love of country sports, but also a love of the environment. Does he agree that there is a delicate balance to be struck to ensure that companies can continue to operate as they attempt to find alternative sources of water rather than chalk streams? What more does he feel can be done as a matter of urgency to protect these environmental treasures, because treasures is what they are?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is very perspicacious in his observations. I shall come to the matter later in my speech. He is absolutely right to raise that point and I hope that both the Minister and I will be able to address it, as I know other colleagues share his concerns.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has just pointed out, our chalk streams are literally being abstracted to death. Parts of the streams that I named at the start of my speech do not flow. In fact, a few of them barely flow at all from their source to where they join a bigger river. That is our record and it is one that none of us should take any pride in—and it is getting worse. We have had three dry years in a row. There is this myth that we live in a wet country. Certainly, parts of our country are wet but the east and the south-east are actually dry, and they are getting drier. The aquifers are not being replenished by rainfall and they are getting more abstracted, so even less water is going into our rivers.

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Sir Oliver Heald: I had miscounted; I have eight chalk streams in my constituency.

Mr Walker: My right hon. and learned Friend is such an honest and decent man. He could have misled the House that there were seven chalk streams in his area, but he has corrected the record without being summoned back—in fact there are eight.

Let us now get to the serious part of this debate, because this is a very serious matter that causes a great many colleagues on both sides of the House a huge amount of concern. The Colne; the Beane; the Mimram; the Gade; the Ver; the Chess; the Misbourne; the Wye; the Riber; the Hambie; the Bulbourne; the Quin; the Hogsmill; and the Wandle. The list could go on, but these are all chalk stream rivers that are degraded or dying around my constituency in Hertfordshire and the
Dame Cheryl Gillan: It is always a great pleasure to welcome my hon. Friend to Chesham and Amersham, particularly at the invitation of Paul Jennings. Does he agree that Paul Jennings is one of the most outstanding advocates for chalk streams and our environment, and that he should be praised for all the efforts that he and the River Chess Association put into trying to maintain and preserve this chalk stream for our children and our children’s children?

Mr Walker: I entirely agree. I know Paul Jennings well; he is one of the greatest friends any chalk stream could have. He is a conservationist of the highest order, and he deserves our full congratulations and respect for the tenacity that he has shown in ensuring that the issues that afflict so many of our chalk streams are kept somewhat in abeyance on the Chess. However, I am afraid that even he would admit that he has not always been successful in doing that.

In the past 10 years there have been five dry events in the Upper Chess. In the 20 years prior to that, there were three. Drier years mean more abstraction, and things are only going to get worse. Affinity Water serves the home counties north of London, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) will know. Affinity has no reservoirs. It only abstracts waters from the chalk aquifers—that is the only place it can get its water from. As we know, the aquifers it abstracts from are those that feed the rivers that are dying. Affinity serves 3.6 million people. In 20 years’ time that number will be nearer to 4.5 million. Where on earth is the water going to come from? If we go on as we are now, the water will come out of the aquifers and we will not have a single chalk stream running in Hertfordshire or Buckinghamshire. That is not an exaggeration; that is where we are at.

Affinity has tried, within the constraints that it is operating under—bearing in mind that it has no reservoir. It reduced pumping at one pumping station on the River Beane by 90%, which was actually a very brave thing to do. Yet that part of the river has not started flowing again because the long-term damage to aquifers that have been used and abused for the past 30, 40 or 50 years is so extreme that it may take decades to recover.

It is not just abstraction that kills rivers; it is what happens after the abstraction. If companies are abstracting water from chalk streams, they either dry them out—and that does kill them—or they reduce the flow. When there is low flow in a river, it cannot get rid of pollutants; pollutants concentrate. A river that is flowing well can move pollutants on down it, dilute them and dissolve them. This does not happen when a river is being extracted to death. So what is the next consequence of extraction? We get topsoil run-off, which just sinks to the bottom of rivers and depletes them of oxygen. It sticks to the chalk at the bottom, destroying any oxygen that can get into the chalk for the small invertebrates that live in it. Then there is phosphorus from agriculture and sewage works, which causes oxygen depletion from algal blooms and eutrophication. Basically, we have environments that cannot support life, or which support limited life, because there is no oxygen. Agricultural pesticides wash in off the fields, destroying biodiversity and wiping out invertebrates and the fly life that comes from them. Then there are the many septic tanks up and down the country that are unregulated and leaking into groundwater that finds its way into rivers. The challenge is immense.

This is an environmental crisis of a monumental scale that we are failing to address. Fundamentally, we need to reduce abstraction now. Thames Water, which I have worked closely with at times, has done that on the River Chess and the River Cray, but it wants to do more—and quite frankly it needs to do more. So what is Thames Water doing? It is making efforts to reduce leakage, and those are to be welcomed and applauded. It can introduce metering, promote water efficiency, and go into schools to educate children as to the importance of water, but, at most, these efforts will reduce consumption in the area it serves from 142 litres per day to 136 litres per day. That is just not a significant decrease. It is an important amount of water, but at 3.5% it is not going to save the day. Thames Water estimates that by 2045 there will be a shortfall of 350 million litres of water a day between the amount available and the amount needed.

There is only one game-changing solution to this crisis, and that is to create more storage capacity, which we do by building more reservoirs. I think that the last major reservoir we built was the Queen Mother reservoir for the east and south-east of England in 1974, so we have grown the population by millions but we have not put in any additional water storage. If we want to save our chalk stream rivers, of which we have 85% of the world’s resource, we really have to build reservoirs. The spade-ready reservoir that has been on the books for 12 years but has been blocked by a well-organised group of 20 people is the Abingdon reservoir in Oxfordshire. That is a game changer. If we get the Abingdon reservoir built, that starts to create the capacity we need, but at the rate the population of London and the south-east is growing, we will need more than one Abingdon—we will need two or three Abingdons. Until we start capturing water at the times of plenty and using it during dry periods like we are experiencing now, we will remain in trouble. We will be in a position where our own environmental record falls well short of where it should be, and we will limit our ability to change the way that other countries handle their natural resources, because they can look at us and say, “What on earth are you doing? You are in no position to lecture us.”

I could go on at great length, but I am not going to. In fact, I may have already gone on at great length, but this subject warrants some exploration. Finally, I would like to thank the Angling Trust, particularly Martin Salter—a former Member here—and Stuart Singleton-White, for the amazing document they have published, “Chalk Streams in Crisis”. It really is an extremely good, but somewhat depressing and sad, read. It is a call to arms. If we are to be taken seriously, we have to make changes to the way in which we approach our valuable and precious ecosystems. One of the most valuable and precious is our chalk streams, and, as I said, we have a lamentable record in this area.

8.3 pm

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) on his thorough, wide-ranging and very informative speech. I, too, was exercised to come to this debate having read
the report by Martin Salter that he referred to. It is a fantastic piece of work that all Members should have a look at.

The hon. Gentleman is a passionate and long-term defender of our river system. I simply want to make a couple of technical points. To clarify, by contrast to him, I am not and I cannot self-identify as a fisherman. I have stood by a few chalk streams with him occasionally, but that does not make me a fisherman. However, just like him, I am worried about how we preserve the unique biodiversity and international reputation of our threatened chalk streams. My chief concern is the degradation of our river systems due to water abstraction and what this tells us about some wider public policy concerns that we should all share in this House, irrespective of whether we are advocates of fly fishing in chalk streams.

It seems to me that the basic issue is quite simple: how can we protect our natural environment and chalk streams without making alternative sources of water available? The fundamental issue is how we can make more water available. As has been said, we have unique resources in this country. England has 160 of a total of 210 chalk streams in the world, and southern England has several of the greatest chalk streams on the planet. Yet today many of them are in an appalling state. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, no water is moving through them—there is no flow—and year on year the situation is getting worse. It is literally happening in front of our eyes: our unique river system is dying through a lack of water. I recently saw some data that suggested that only 14% of the rivers across England are now considered to reach good ecological standards. That is an environmental catastrophe, as the hon. Gentleman said.

The question is, why is that happening? Without doubt, our climate is changing, but this crisis is not about drier winters, hotter summers and drought: that does not give the whole picture. That is why this seemingly narrow conversation about chalk streams has much greater significance in terms of wider public policy issues and concerns. How do we achieve the provision of new water? The supply, distribution and quality of new homes is a central issue, as are the role of the water companies and patterns of regulation. These are all issues that—dare I say?—flow out of this debate about chalk streams. The demand for water, especially through new house building in the south east, has dramatically increased. For example, it is estimated that in my part of east London—in Barking, Dagenham and parts of Havering—there will be some 50,000 new units in the next 10 to 12 years. That is an awful lot of house building, and the question is, where will the water come from? Nationally, we seem to be moving towards a consensus of at least 300,000 extra units a year, which returns us to the question where the water will come from.

I, too, read the Thames Water briefing that was sent out at the back end of last week. It said—I think the hon. Gentleman mentioned these figures, which caught my eye—that accounting for climate change, population growth and environmental regulations, there will be a daily shortfall of some 350 million litres a day by 2045, and that will, in turn, double in the following 50 years. So this is an environmental catastrophe that is being played out day to day across the country.

A failure to provide new water means that water companies extract water from our rivers, which cannot cope and subsequently die. That appears to be the basic reality. The rivers are further undermined when excess sewage is discharged into them, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. Time and again, the water companies have been fined, but they just take the hit. The point that he did not make is on how the water companies free-ride their ecological responsibilities. For example, last week it was brought to my attention through The Guardian that Ofwat has reduced the fines on Southern Water from £37.7 million to just £3 million for thousands of pollution spills, wilful misreporting of data and cover-ups. How will this type of leniency and—dare I say?—criminality be changed in terms of their behaviour, which is degrading our river systems?

Objectively, it seems clear to me that we need new water infrastructure, leakage reductions, smart metering, education and desalination—those all have their place—but the reality is that we do not have enough reservoirs. I think that the hon. Gentleman said that the last one was built in 1975. He can correct me if I am wrong, but I thought it was 42 years since we built a reservoir in this country. If we join the dots, the policy does not add up. How can we satisfy growth in London and the south-east without such new infrastructure? If this is not confronted, the crisis that our rivers face will intensify and they will never recover.

As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, Thames Water has announced plans to bring forward the Abingdon reservoir, with construction starting in 2025, but I gather that this has been beset by problems. It would be good to hear where we are with that project and any other proposed infrastructure projects, not least because the responsibility lies with several different authorities: the Environment Agency, the National Rivers Authority, the Government and the water companies. I will end on that point, but I repeat that tonight’s short and apparently narrow debate has great significance, not just for those who fish in our unique chalk streams, but for everyone who is interested in how we will meet the demands of a growing population without further degrading our river systems and wider environment. That is something that should be beyond party politics, and something on which we might all agree.

8.10 pm

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) for his remarkable and important efforts in this area.

In my constituency, we have eight chalk streams: the Upper Rhee, the Rib, the Ash, the Quin, the Beane, the Mimram, the Lea—near Bayford, where I think my hon. Friend fishes—and the Ivel. There has been some progress with the Beane and the Mimram following the WWF campaign “Rivers on the Edge”, of which Martin Salter was a strong supporter and about which we had debates in this House. There has been a 90% reduction in abstraction at Whitehall pumping station near Watton-at-Stone, and the Fulling Mill pumping station at Welwyn Garden City was completely decommissioned; that represented some success.

As my hon. Friend said, however, the condition of the northern part of the rivers is very dry. The Upper Rhee is dry, and there is a lot of concern about the Rib...
in the Standon area and north of Standon. The situation is similar with the Ash and the Quin. The Beane at Walkern, north of Watton-at-Stone, is short of water. There is a campaign in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) about the Mimram. The Lea is low, and the Ivel springs in Baldock are so dry that people regularly write to me to express their concern.

It is worth thinking about what the unique chalk stream environment is like. My constituency has small hills, between which are the chalk streams, and they create a unique environment with unique flora and fauna. Nestling in the environment provided by these ecosystems are flowers such as saxifrage, as well as small English crustaceans and the water vole. There is a campaign to highlight the importance of this environment and ecoculture. More needs to be done.

The river environment is like. My constituency has small streams such as the Mimram. There is a campaign in the constituency of my hon. Friend about the Mimram. The Lea is low, and the Ivel springs in Baldock are so dry that people regularly write to me to express their concern.

**Mr Charles Walker:** I am sorry to cut my right hon. and learned Friend off as he is paying tribute to the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, but I want to pay tribute to it as well. Jeremy Paxman recently wrote that we no longer have to clean our windscreens, because there are now no insects splattered on them. There are so few insects because our rivers—and, in our part of the world, our chalk streams—have been so degraded that insects can no longer live there. Without insects, we have no fish and no kingfishers; the whole ecosystem and food chain begin to collapse. My right hon. and learned Friend is entirely right to raise that concern.

**Sir Oliver Heald:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue and giving us a chance to highlight the importance of this environment and ecoculture. More needs to be done.

The climate in our country is changing, as it is across the world. We must think about how we address the challenges, whether it is by creating large reservoirs, as has been described, or by changing our housing planning policy that governs estates and new builds. We must insist on the attenuation of water on industrial and business parks and in our housing. There is so much potential to capture and re-use water with grey water harvesting systems, and all new houses must be built with them. I am proud to say that 10 years ago I installed one, and it makes a dramatic difference to my water consumption.

These are the sorts of things we can do immediately. As has been described, we must of course build more capacity through reservoirs. I remember the Queen Mary reservoir from my youth and from driving around it, and there is such a need, as has been described. However, we can do this in addition by building capacity, on a very local basis, with our new homes. That will make a significant difference in reducing abstraction. May I again thank the hon. Member for Broxbourne? I welcome the debate, and I congratulate him on it.
8.20 pm

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western). When I was growing up politically, one of my great mentors was Sir Keith Joseph. He said that one of the greatest challenges we were going to face in the future of the world was water shortages and the resulting movement of populations around the world, and I think that is starting to come very true today. My mother was always very keen on saving water. I do not know how many hon. Members will remember doing so, but she used to put a brick in the cistern to make sure that she did not use too much water when flushing the lavatory.

Aside from that, may I congratulate my hon. Friend, the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) on obtaining this debate? It would be fair to say that he and I have spent many a happy hour, with Paul Jennings, sitting beside one of the purest and clearest chalk streams, the River Chess, just outside London. It is not even at the end of the Metropolitan line; it runs alongside the Metropolitan line. It is accessible to the public, and it is one of those wonderful habitats and environments that can really bring people peace and tranquillity. People can leave this world behind as they sit there and, in the case of my hon. Friend, try to attract a trout to the end of his line.

Mr Charles Walker: The great sadness is that, to the uninitiated eye, the river looks beautiful—and it is beautiful—but as Paul Jennings would say, it is clinging on by its fingertips. Its flow is a fraction of what it should be: although it remains beautiful, its ability to support life is just draining away.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I am afraid my hon. Friend is right. I came into the House at the same time as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr Walker), in 1992. That reservoir is not overdue, but long overdue and should have been built many years ago.

May I also pay tribute to the authors of “Chalk Streams in Crisis”? Four of the organisations that contributed are closely associated with my constituency. The Chilterns chalk streams project—a fantastic project started in 1997, prompted by the low flows in the 1990s—was expanded in 2000 to include all the rivers. It is led by the Chilterns Conservation Board, with the River Chess Association and the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire wildlife trusts. All these organisations work constantly and tirelessly to try to protect our environment.

Sir Oliver Heald: In my constituency, there are people who can remember swimming in the River Beane north of Watton-at-Stone when they were very young; now it is completely dry. Does my right hon. Friend have constituents with such recollections about the Chess?

Dame Cheryl Gillan: Yes, very much so. Both the Chess and the Misbourne, at times in the past, flowed really well and invited people in during the hot weather, such as we are going to experience this week, in safety. Safety is very important, because there is now the amazing rough swimming movement, it is important to remember that rough swimming must be carried out in safety. People need to think about how they are getting into the water and how they are getting out. I fear there will be plenty of people diving into the water later this week, as the temperatures soar.

Vicky Ford (Cheilmsford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for letting me join this brief debate on chalk streams. I am going to spend the first Saturday of my recess canoeing down the River Chelmer in Chelmsford. I believe all our rivers are potentially in crisis and need protection. Does she agree?

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I think the points made by colleagues across the House have been very accurate in that we are busy lecturing other people around the world about how they should save their environment, but we are not actually looking over our shoulders at our own backyard, which is deteriorating.

The point that we have 85% of the world’s chalk streams is not lost, particularly in the south-east, because about a fifth of those are in the Thames Water region. The combination we have talked about—the climate and the geology of where these chalk streams are—means that they have the most amazing characteristics. They support special wildlife habitats and species, including things such as the brown trout and the water vole. Chalk streams are really important not just for angling, but because they are fed by groundwater aquifers. That means the water is clear, pure and inviting, which is of course why the water companies always wants to take water from them.

The hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) spoke about the Thames Water briefing that was put out. He said he was struck by the predicted shortfall of 350 million litres a day between the amount of water available and the amount we will need by 2045. Population growth, climate change and environmental regulations will dramatically affect our demand and need for water. I echo the call made by the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington, because unless we build in safeguards and build in the reuse of water, we are going to find ourselves in a desert and in a drought like no drought we have ever seen. We take water for granted when we are not having it, we really do suffer.

ITV or radio programmes such as on Radio 4 going, irritating than to hear weather forecasters on the BBC, says, and she is absolutely right. There is nothing more important than to preserve our environment, particularly our chalk streams.

Mr Charles Walker: I hear what my right hon. Friend says, and she is absolutely right. There is nothing more irritating than to hear weather forecasters on the BBC, ITV or radio programmes such as on Radio 4 going, “Good news, it’s going to be a dry week.” or, “Good news, it’s going to be a dry weekend.” This country is going to spend the first Saturday of my recess canoeing down the River Chelmer in Chelmsford.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: The point is well and emphatically made: that is absolutely right.

Matt Western: The right hon. Lady is being very generous in giving way yet again. I would just add that so much of our culture has been steeped in this green and pleasant land, as it is oft described, but it is becoming increasingly parched. There is one point I want to raise with her. Does she share with me a slight concern that, with HS2, there will be some sort of disruption to the watersheds in her constituency and potentially to those in my own in Warwickshire?
Dame Cheryl Gillan: I like the cut of the hon. Gentleman’s jib, as they say. I am going to get on to HS2—I tried to get on to HS2 earlier, but I was admonished—because it is important.

I want to make a couple of points, particularly about my own constituency. In the Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty, we have nine chalk streams. The River Chess and the River Misbourne sit within my own constituency, and I am afraid the problems are identical for both. When we talk about the term “over- abstraction”, I think that is to use the phrase quite mildly. To put this crisis into context for the Chilterns specifically, the average person there uses about 173 litres of water a day, which is 32 litres above the national average. In the Chilterns, we are also facing unprecedented infrastructure development.

Being at the end of the Metropolitan line, we are obviously a popular place for people to live out of London, and we now have the arc of innovation joining Oxford to Cambridge. We will face housing pressure down from the north of the county and across the middle, which will bring hundreds of thousands of houses and more pressure on our precious environment. London and Slough are also expanding, so we have more and more demand coming up from the south of the county for housing and therefore water. The Chilterns AONB is being squeezed in the middle, yet it is the lungs of London. It is the nearest easily accessible area where people can enjoy the pleasures of walking in the hills and by the chalk streams, watching the red kites soar above, yet we will lose all that unless we try to protect it.

The Chess and the Misbourne are unique in finding themselves in the unfortunate position of being on the HS2 route and therefore part of what was a £55.7 billion taxpayer crisis—what I gather is now more likely to be an £85 billion crisis, according to the chairman’s internal review, if the rumours are correct. I believe the figure will be even higher. This is not just about the financial cost of HS2, but about the damage done to our chalk streams, which will cause a loss of environment and habitat that is irreplaceable.

For years my constituents have sent me pictures of the Chess and the Misbourne when the flows are low. They come back, but one day they will not. The River Chess in particular is one of the most important areas of wildlife. I have mentioned the brown trout and the water voles, but we also have stream water-crowfoot there. We get fishermen, photographers and the wildlife enthusiasts coming out. The Chess is also an important educational asset as a chalk stream, and we get universities gathering data and people coming to study there. It used to be very active, with amazing water mills, but that would not be possible today. The Chess was a productive river; we could not find that today. Those water mills are now private houses. The weather and the climate becoming drier, interspersed with some very wet periods, has done the chalk streams no good at all. The river also faces other threats, including from invasive species such as the mink and Japanese knotweed, and that is on top of the extraction for public water supply and the pollution that results from the concentration as the flows become lower.

I very much hope that this debate, which was called by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne, will stimulate a greater interest in these chalk streams and a greater will on the part of the Government to protect them. We are pleased to see that Thames Water and Affinity Water are planning to work together on a new reservoir project near Oxford, which now features strongly in both their new water resource management plans and in Thames Water’s revised business plan for 2020 to 2025. The south-east region of the UK is one of the driest and most populated corners of the country and has the highest demand for water. If we do not increase our reservoir capacity, it will become the desert of the United Kingdom.

This excellent report, which we have all had the opportunity to read, contains a number of recommendations and actions. I will not read them out, but I recommend that the Minister read them carefully and study what could be an important way forward in giving vital protections to this part of our environment. It is unique, and the status of these chalk streams is important not just to the environment in the United Kingdom, but to the world. Once we have lost them, we will never ever get them back. If there is a climate change crisis, there is certainly an even bigger crisis in the state of our chalk streams.

8.33 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the register.

I have the honour and privilege to represent a large part of the Berkshire downs, which feed the chalk streams of the Kennet, the Dun, the Lambourn and the Pang. These are very special riverine ecosystems. As was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), whom I congratulate on calling this debate, chalk streams are hugely important not just for the area where the river flows, but for the entire catchment. They are extraordinary features of our natural world. Areas such as the Berkshire downs, and others that hon. Members have spoken about so eloquently, are the water towers of communities such as London, where we sit tonight, and they are under threat as never before.

In a brief moment of relevance in my parliamentary career, I held responsibilities not dissimilar to those held by my hon. Friend the Minister. We had had a number of years of drought, and that year we faced the Olympics and the Queen’s jubilee. The fifth largest economy in the world was literally at risk of having people in the south and south-east of England filling their water from standpipes in the street—an extraordinary moment. We were on the point of having Cobra meetings. The then Prime Minister, David Cameron, said to me in the Lobby, “Just make it rain.” That gave me powers of the divine, because you will remember, Madam Deputy Speaker, that, as the Queen and Prince Philip stood by the Thames, the heavens opened.

I do not take any responsibility for that, but the problem was not that it rained—that was very welcome—but that it rained for three years. All the work we had been doing in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on drought management, fantastic work across a whole range of different trade bodies, other organisations and agencies of Government, was subsumed by having to deal with too much water. We have terribly short memories in this place and in Government. I hope that we are not starting to cause real concern, because if we have another dry winter my hon. Friend the Minister and her colleagues will be contemplating a real emergency.
Mention has been made this evening of the great naturalist and broadcaster, Jeremy Paxman. In his foreword to the river fly census, produced by Salmon & Trout Conservation, he mentions what my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) referred to: insect armageddon, the really quite staggering reduction of insect life in this country. My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne made the point clearly that we have to understand where those insects come from and what they depend on. Jeremy Paxman says in his foreword:

“No-one much cares about it, because creepy crawlies find it harder to make allies than do soft and cuddlies. Ludicrously, even pests like grey squirrels have more friends.”

We in this House have to be a friend to the insects. Some 80% of species on our planet are invertebrates and the foundations of food webs.

The river fly census shows some alarming facts. Species loss in any environment indicates ecosystem distress. Across 12 chalk streams in England there has been a 75% decline in caddisfly species, a 54% decline in stonefly species, a 44% decline in dragonfly and damselfly species, and a 40% decline in mayfly species. A river in my constituency, the Lambourn, a most beautiful and precious river with overlaying European designations—a site of special scientific interest, an area of outstanding natural beauty and every conceivable designation one can think of—is effectively in crisis.

My contribution tonight is really this: the management of our rivers, particularly the fragile ecosystems that are chalk streams, needs to be perfect. There is no margin for error in how we manage chalk streams. I am therefore concerned when I read that a salad washing company in the upper Itchen, Bakkavor Salad Washing, has found itself in difficulties with the Environment Agency over its own sewage works. I gather that it has now addressed them, following discharges that were reported to the Environment Agency. The EA’s investigation, however, also exposed a potential pesticide threat. The EA has not been able to rule out damage caused by traces of pesticide present on the salad leaves used by Bakkavor, which were subsequently being washed into the upper Itchen. I understand that the EA is monitoring the situation, but that cannot be allowed to happen. In an ecosystem as precious as this, which is suffering from really low flows, there is no justification whatever for a company to be polluting an environment as rare as this.

Vicky Ford: I have heard stories from fishermen about salad washing. They tell me that the salad is not even grown in the UK, but has been brought to the UK for washing in our rivers and then packaging. If that is true, that is even more shocking, but maybe it is a fisherman’s tale.

Richard Benyon: I have heard similar stories, and I do not know the circumstances of this. I wrote to the company before this debate asking for it to give its side of the argument, but I did not hear back. I am not necessarily criticising the company, as I approached it only at the end of last week.

My point is this: in our management of these rare systems, we need not just to be getting the sort of thing I was just discussing right, but to be looking at agriculture.

Sir Oliver Heald: I wonder whether my right hon. Friend would wish to comment on the state of the River Kennet, which is a precious chalk stream close to him. Where does he think the Kennet is going—is it improving? Some attempts were made to improve its condition. Secondly, when he was preparing the water White Paper, I think he was hoping that it would be possible for water companies to move water more easily from one area to another. Has he any take on how that has been going?

Richard Benyon: One of the most enjoyable things I did in government was writing the water White Paper, and I refer my right hon. and learned Friend to page 35—I think that was the one. It showed a scene of good farming on one side of a river and bad farming on another, so that figuratively laid out before us was what we needed to see more of and what we had to stop happening. I bore my civil servants with that and I bore most of my family, with my wife referring to the River Pung as my mid-life crisis, but the River Kennet is in such trouble. A few years ago, someone spilled about an egg cup-worth of Chlorpyrifos into the system somewhere and it effectively killed several miles of life. That shows us just how extraordinarily vulnerable these ecosystems are.

We can debate great matters of state in this place, and we often do, but rivers are about people’s sense of place. As has been said, we can hold our heads high internationally if we are getting it right on rivers and we cannot if we are getting it wrong. What is shaming is that, while 85% of the chalk streams in the world are in the UK, we are getting it wrong. Wonderful things are done by organisations such as Action for the River Kennet and many of the other organisations that hon. Members in all parts of the House have talked about, but I believe the recommendations at the end of the river fly census are really worth reading.

In the context of the water framework directive, which we are transposing, correctly and with more ambition than exists in that directive as it stands, we should have a special designation for chalk streams. We should also look at the impact of phosphorus spilt and recognise that after we leave the European Union the world is our oyster and we do not have to be stuck by the same rules that govern rivers in southern France and northern Spain. This is our ecosystem, and we have to get it right.

Dame Cheryl Gillan rose—

Richard Benyon: I will give way for a final time, then I will conclude.
Dame Cheryl Gillan: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. We are reviewing the position on national parks and the designations that we make around the country. I have asked for the Chilterns AONB to have a stronger designation to give it protection. Does he agree that we should see whether the chalk streams in our country could get a higher designation for protection? Does he agree that this would be a golden opportunity to lift that level of protection, particularly for this rare habitat and environment?

Richard Benyon: My right hon. Friend is right. We look forward with interest to what the Glover review will deliver, because it is an opportunity to look at our most precious landscapes and to see whether we are protecting them in the right way. We have an enormous number of designatory tools at our disposal, but they do not seem to stop the problems happening or result in protecting them in the right way. We have an enormous opportunity to stand up for what we believe in on the natural environment and say, “Here is something really special, and we are going to get it right.”

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman, I and many others in the Chamber agree on and appreciate the wonderful work of the National Farmers Union and the Northern Irish Ulster Farmers Union on habitat, climate change, their commitment to carbon zero and many things. Should we not have on record in this debate the good work of the NFU and farmers who are committed to changes to make things better and preserve the environment for the future, which he and I believe in?

Richard Benyon: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Perhaps I can conclude by entirely endorsing what the farming unions of these islands have agreed, and Minette Batters’ very brave and clear statement about moving to net zero considerably before the rest of the country and making sure that agriculture fulfils its responsibilities. Part of that is about looking at catchments and saying, “How can we lock up more carbon?” The clear, easy way of doing that is to have a more broken-up mosaic of land use, which includes grass as part of the rotations. With encouragement for minimum tillage, not only can we start to see more carbon being locked up, but our rivers will be protected from many of the things that are causing problems at the moment.

8.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I genuinely apologise to the House for not being here at the start of this important debate, because I know how passionate right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken about this issue are. One of the joys of being the Minister responsible for the Environment Agency is seeing that the environment matters to so many people in different ways and seeing the important role of the Environment Agency. I hope, by the end of the debate, that I will have been able to persuade hon. Members and those still watching—there were four people in the Public Gallery at the start of it—on this matter, including Feargal Sharkey who is a great advocate of what we need to do to support chalk streams. The Environment Agency also has other roles and I was stopped on the way here to talk about Grenfell and some of the situations in which we are involved there. I apologise to the Chamber for that.

I have had three years in this very special role as Minister for the environment. I am very fortunate that, by and large, neither an official drought nor an official flood has been declared. I am conscious of the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on what happened recently in Wainfleet. I visited his constituency to discuss floods. The issues that have been raised about drought worry many of our farmers around the country, who are also considering the impacts of abstraction reform. I am very conscious that my constituency of Suffolk Coastal is one of the driest in the country. That said, at the Latitude festival, which was held this weekend in my constituency, there was a hailstorm, in the middle of July. Who would have thought that in Suffolk, when we are all having a heatwave? That just shows how important it is that we look after the habitat that is special to our country and to our world, while the impacts of climate change do what they do.

I will come to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) shortly, but I want first to refer to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who was in the Chamber for much of the debate, because he has one of the most special chalk streams in his constituency—the River Test, which many people have mentioned and in fact fished in, including my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). The Test is regarded as one of the most special chalk streams in the country, as right hon. and hon. Members will recognise. I used to live in Whitchurch, which is 2 miles from the source of the river, so I am well aware of how special it is.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne on securing today’s debate. It is well known in the House that he is an active champion of chalk streams and that he recognises their importance for nature and for good fishing. I will never forget the day after the 2017 election, when I was not sure if I would be reappointed to this role, when I joined him in Hampshire on the River Itchen. He had a good day’s fishing and I had a good day being shown around by the WWF and being told about the importance of chalk streams. Having lived in Hampshire, I was aware of this, but it brought to my attention some of the particular challenges that the Environment Agency regularly faces from water companies wanting to abstract more water further upstream, which has a damaging impact on the environment and the flow, as others have mentioned, as well as on the quality of fishing. That is when I met the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas), who was also very passionate on this topic, which is why he contributed to the debate on 12 December 2018 on the Thames Water reservoir in Abingdon and why he strongly supported that measure.

On this matter, I have been given a very strong message by my civil servants, who are in the Box and provide excellent advice, and I am conscious that the water resource management process has not yet been finalised, but I can genuinely say, even though the Secretary of State has not yet agreed the plans, that I believe that Thames Water and Affinity Water, both of which are promoting the reservoir in their preferred plans, will receive a very warm welcome when those are
put forward, so that, as many others have mentioned, we can finally get on with the Abingdon reservoir, which will do a lot of good for the people of south-east England. I am conscious that when speaking in the House I have some leeway with parliamentary privilege and that my comments will not prejudice any quasi-judicial decision that the Secretary of State might take in the future.

I return to the main topic of the debate. While chalk streams contribute to our health and wellbeing, they are principally unique habitats supporting a diverse range of invertebrate and fish species and have long been held in high regard for the quality of the fisheries they support. Only 200 chalk rivers are known globally, and it is amazing to think that 85% of them are found in the UK in the southern and eastern parts of England. It is well recognised, however, that our water resources are under pressure and that this pressure is growing as the climate changes and the demand for water increases from a growing population and greater housing need. As my hon. Friend outlined, our chalk streams are facing an unprecedented challenge, having been heavily affected by human activity, including abstraction, pollution and historic modification.

Mr Charles Walker: The role of Ofwat has not been mentioned yet. It has no duty to have any environmental regard. Its only interest is in driving down bills, but it should take a great deal more interest in the environment. I think we have all had enough of Ofwat in this place. I hope the Minister will take that on board.

Dr Coffey: I hear what my hon. Friend says. Ofwat is a champion of the consumer, and I hope that in its recent interventions with the water companies he will recognise some of the progress it has made, but I hear what he says. The Environment Agency challenged Ofwat in its initial 2019 price review over the fact that it and some of the companies that had come up with particular plans and made some good progress were none the less not fulfilling their environmental obligations. I am pleased therefore that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State last week met the water companies and challenged them by saying that, while we recognised the strength of the investment they had brought to the water industry in the last 25 years, they must not forget the environment and we would continue to press them on that point. I am pleased that the Environment Agency is pressing the case with Ofwat so strongly. I hope that the next Government, to be formed this week, will proceed with the environment Bill, which will strengthen Ofwat’s powers. Who knows? There may be opportunities for even further consideration of a duty relating to the environment.

Mr Charles Walker: It is really important for there to be people in Ofwat who share the Minister’s passion for the environment and the passion displayed by so many colleagues here, not only in this debate but in others.

Dr Coffey: I entirely agree, and I hope that that will happen. I think that the term of the current chair of Ofwat, who is a doughty defender of the consumer, is due for a short extension until 2020. I also genuinely believe that any future holder of the great office of Secretary of State—if that person is not our excellent right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), who has done so much for the environment and, indeed, so much in challenging water companies—will take that point into account.

Jim Shannon: No one has mentioned one issue so far tonight, but it is important for it to be on the record in Hansard. I refer to the issue of water leakages. If there is a demand for more water—which clearly there is—water companies need to address the issue. Will the Minister make that a priority, so that water is not wasted as it clearly is being wasted now, and we can use that precious resource much better?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. For several years there has been an economic calculation about the cost of repairing the causes of leakages rather than doing something else to keep water flowing. I will not say that the price of repairs is irrelevant, but it is not the only factor under consideration. Water users struggle. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) spoke extensively about the water consumption of residents, and the need for us to consume less. If the water companies are allowed not to take the issue quite as seriously as they have been, why should the end user make a difference? I think that the situation is changing, but we need to recognise that the economics do not always add up.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, this matter is devolved. Our 25-year environment plan for England, which concerns reserved matters, sets out our commitment to protect our water environment and how we will do that, to ensure that there is enough water for the environment as well as for homes and businesses.

Our abstraction reform plan, launched in 2017, explains how we will ensure that abstractors can access the water that they need, and that there is enough water in our rivers, and groundwater, to maintain habitats and water quality. That includes reducing the damaging abstraction of water from rivers and groundwater, so that by 2021 the proportion of water bodies with enough water to support environmental standards will increase from 82% to 90% for surface water bodies, and from 72% to 77% for groundwater bodies. Earlier this year we published our abstraction reform progress report to Parliament, which shows that the Environment Agency is on track to meet those targets.

The Environment Agency has already reviewed thousands of abstraction licences, and has changed many of the most damaging. Seventy-one abstraction licences on 15 chalk streams across England have now been changed. Those changes will return 16 million cubic metres of water per year to the chalk streams, and will remove the risk of another 8 million cubic metres per year being taken. This is equivalent to the average annual domestic water use of approximately 200,000 people, the approximate population of Oxford.

Developing a stronger catchment focus is a key aspect of abstraction reform. The Environment Agency is now testing innovative solutions to protect the environment and improve access to water in priority catchments. The Cam and Ely Ouse and the East Suffolk priority catchments both contain rivers that are fed by chalk groundwater. In these priority catchments, there are now stakeholder groups, which are made up of a wide variety of abstractors with an Environment Agency co-ordinator, who are
working together to develop and trial new solutions to address sustainability issues. I look forward to the Environment Agency launching more of these water resource catchments later this year.

The River Bulbourne in Hertfordshire is impacted by the Canal and River Trust operations, including groundwater abstractions. The Environment Agency is presently negotiating delivery of recommended solutions with the trust. Affinity Water has also completed an investigation for the River Bulbourne and as a result will implement river restoration projects in the catchment by 2025, subject to its business plan being approved by Ofwat, and I see no reason for Ofwat to reject it. The Environment Agency’s chalk stream partnership “Bringing Back the Bulbourne” has been an award-winning success story.

Turning to the River Kennet in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), the Environment Agency, working with Thames Water, has changed abstraction licences that impact the Kennet, Wye and Hughenden stream. This includes reducing Thames Water’s licence at Axford to restrict groundwater abstraction when flows are low, revoking its Ogbourne licence, and investing in a £30 million pipeline that prevents up to 10 million litres of groundwater from being abstracted when river levels are low.

Turning to parts of north London and an issue not directly in the constituency of the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham but close to the heart of Feargal Sharkey, the River Lee below Ware weir lock splits between the old River Lee and the Lee navigation. The loop was the original course of the River Lee and is the site of two fisheries clubs. Flows in the loop are influenced by the volumes abstracted upstream from the Lee by Thames Water and by navigation activities. The Environment Agency seeks to manage flows on the Lee between Thames Water, the Canal and River Trust and the Amwell Magna loop. Thames Water operates under a voluntary flow trigger to reduce its abstraction volumes. This assists with downstream flows but its abstraction is still a significant volume of the available flow. Thames Water has invested in habitat enhancement improvements in the loop, working with the fisheries and the Environment Agency.

Several contributors to the debate talked about the impact of dry weather on chalk streams. Some of our chalk streams are showing flow impacts that could be attributed to the prolonged dry weather we have experienced over the last couple of years. Impacts are visible in chalk streams in Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, north London, Lincolnshire and Northampton, but I have to admit that the national picture is variable.

The impacts we are seeing in chalk streams include changes to fish movement, a decline in the numbers of invertebrates and an increase in algae. The Environment Agency’s current actions include leading and co-ordinating the National Drought Group, which brings together a wide range of stakeholders responsible for water and for those who need the water. This partnership includes water companies, the Government and non-governmental organisations, including the National Farmers Union, environmental groups and business groups. The Environment Agency also collates and monitors evidence of impacts of dry weather on chalk streams and actions undertaken to protect the streams.

If required, the Environment Agency will implement abstraction restrictions to protect the environment. For example, as we have heard, the Environment Agency is likely to implement restrictions in a number of places, including the River Stour catchment in Essex, which is a chalk stream. That will affect 16 abstraction licences, and there will be a reduction of 25% to their weekly abstraction limit. The Environment Agency is discussing these matters with individual abstraction licence holders in other parts of the country, particularly Hertfordshire, Berkshire and Herefordshire.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham referred to the designation of sites. The Government have designated 11 high priority chalk rivers as sites of special scientific interest to protect them from the pressures they are under and to begin work to restore them. Each of those 11 designated chalk rivers that has been assessed to be in an unfavourable condition has a river restoration plan. For the record, those rivers are the Kennet, the Nar, the Test, the Frome, the Hull headwaters, the Lambourn, the Itchen, the Wensum, the Bere streams, the Moors rivers system and the Avon system. By implementing these action plans, we have enhanced more than 40 miles of priority chalk river habitat through 60 projects since 2011.

Chalk rivers are protected from harmful effluent discharges by a rigorous permitting process. When an operator seeks to discharge effluent, they must first get a licence from the Environment Agency. In consultation with Natural England, civil society and the public, the agency will then grant the permit to discharge into a priority chalk stream only if the environmental risk is low. I am conscious of the example that was used earlier, and I will draw it to the attention of the Environment Agency so that it can investigate further the concerns about discharges.

Natural England has been delivering catchment-sensitive farming, offering a combination of grants and advice to help to reduce pollution from farms within priority catchments, including chalk streams, across the country. There is clear evidence that this advice has led to improvements in water quality and a reduction in serious water pollution incidents, and ecological communities have responded positively to the reductions in sediment pressure. However, it is important to stress that all water companies also have a significant role to play in protecting the environment. A large proportion of companies look after the chalk aquifer, which is the major aquifer of southern and eastern England. These companies include Thames, Affinity, Southern and Anglian. Apparently, South East is also included, as is Yorkshire, for some reason. This just goes to show how far the power of Yorkshire stretches, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton will know.

There are good examples of partnership work in action. The Environment Agency’s work with Affinity Water to reduce abstractions at 11 pumping stations across seven chalk streams means that 70 million litres of water a day will be kept in the environment by 2025, and they have reduced abstraction from the River Mimram and the River Beane by over 40%. In the north London and Hertfordshire area alone, the Environment Agency is working to improve more than 150 miles of chalk streams by 2025. The agency also hopes to remove or bypass 50 weirs or other structures to improve fish passage and habitats in the north London area.
Sir Oliver Heald: When I spoke earlier, I made the point that builders and developers have suggested that it is possible for new homes to achieve water use of perhaps 120 litres per person per day. At the moment, in my constituency and others, the figure is about 175 litres. What does the Minister make of that? Does she think that such a reduction is realistic?

Dr Coffey: It is entirely realistic. Indeed, we want to go further and get the figure down to 110 litres. We believe that that is entirely possible, and I will address that further in my contribution, especially as the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) referred to it as well.

Work has also been done by water companies to improve the water quality of chalk streams, which my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne also identified as an issue. More than £3.4 billion has been invested between 2010 and 2015 to support the achievement of the water framework directive environmental objectives. I shall repeat that figure. £3.4 billion has been invested by water companies this has contributed to substantial reductions in phosphate pollution, to which chalk streams are particularly sensitive, and additional investment is proposed to secure further improvements. Water companies are also engaged in research to overcome technical limitations on phosphorus reduction. Additionally, 650 sewage treatment works across England, serving 24 million people, have phosphate removal in place, and many of them are on chalk streams.

The Government expect to see a multi-sector approach to managing water resources and want water companies to continue to engage in the catchment that they serve. We want them to take the lead on developing local catchment solutions to address the needs of all water users in their region. We are already seeing how this can work. I am particularly proud of Anglian Water, as Water Resources East is taking an innovative cross-sector approach and making important links to improve water abstraction management.

As my hon. Friend said, a large proportion of the water that is abstracted is for public supplies. Reducing the pressure on such supplies will also help to protect the environment. To do this, we need a twin-track approach of reducing demand for water, including driving down leakages, while increasing supply. That is why we recently launched a consultation, to which I hope my right hon. and hon. Friends will contribute, to understand how much we can reduce personal water use by 2050 and the measures we need to implement to get there, including tightening building regulations, the labelling of water-using products and metering. This autumn, we plan to lay our national policy statement for water resources infrastructure, which will streamline the planning process for nationally significant water resource infrastructure projects, helping to increase water supplies.

I hope my hon. Friend will appreciate that Thames Water and Affinity Water are still developing their water resources management plans. They recently referred their statement of responses to their consultations to DEFRA, which the Department and the Environment Agency are assessing. That process is ongoing, and that assessment includes the proposed reservoir near Abingdon.

The evidence from the National Infrastructure Commission is clear that new water infrastructure is required alongside a reduction in leakage, and I welcome the proposals from Thames Water, Affinity Water and others to develop regional strategic solutions for the south-east.

We want to see water companies taking more of a regional approach to water resource planning. They will need to make an assessment of the needs of different water users, including the owners of new homes, and the needs of the environment. That will be informed by the Environment Agency’s national framework, which is due to be published at the end of this year and will illustrate the regional and national challenge of water availability, as well as the needs of different water-using sectors.

I am pleased to say that we have also consulted on legislative improvements to ensure that water companies’ plans are informed by effective collaboration, taking into account the plans of regional groups. We also recently consulted on a number of additional legislative measures regarding abstraction. Ofwat, the Environment Agency, and the Drinking Water Inspectorate all recognise the importance of a regional approach, which is why they set up the water Regulators Alliance for Progressing Infrastructure Development—water RAPID—team to ensure a smooth regulatory path for strategic water transfers and joint infrastructure projects.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) mentioned several streams in his constituency, and he is a champion on this matter. Anyone who looks at his website will see the long list of actions that he has taken, and he is right to praise the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust for its important work. I have already referred to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire and the fact that I grew up in Whitchurch, so I know about the importance of the River Test. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham referred to the important Ox-Cam issue, and my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire is the Minister for that project and is aware of the importance not only of environmental issue, but of the water needs of households in that area.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne started to talk about windscreens, insects and so on, and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services report recognises the biodiversity challenge that we face. The main problem is with habitats and the change in land use. Rivers also face challenges, and he is right to stress that. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) pointed out, 80% of species under threat of extinction are invertebrates, which is why we must cherish habitats such as chalk streams.

I should also point out to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire that the aerodynamics of modern cars also contribute to our seeing fewer dead insects on our windscreens, but we are also driving somewhat slower because we are complying with speed limits when compared with what we might have got away with in the past—not “we”; I should not attribute that comment to any person in this House. He also talked about soil erosion and no-till farming, and I completely agree with him and the others who made this point. They should be champions for no-till farming, but they also need to be champions for glyphosate, as the people who advocate no-till farming rely on glyphosate. Indeed, its existence is under threat from 2022.
Sir Oliver Heald: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr Coffey: I am afraid that I will not give way on that point, because I am still trying to answer the points raised by other hon. Members. We may have time at the end of this debate, but I feel there is another time for another debate on the glory of glyphosate—I am sure that I will be slandered on social media tonight for having said those words. My right hon. and learned Friend also mentioned how long it has taken to get a new Thames reservoir, and I genuinely hope we will see the plan come forward soon.

The hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington referred to his childhood roots, and in this House it is always important to recognise that, although we represent very special parts of the country, we sometimes have our roots elsewhere, which I think makes us better politicians. I appreciate that he has stayed here to talk about the impacts. He also mentioned grey water resources and how they might help water consumption. Indeed, there is a theory that the consumer is not keen on grey water, and we might need to do more work to promote the use of grey water resources in the water challenge of new homes, which I am sure he will recognise are important to his constituency, as they are to other parts of the country.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham also talked about water consumption, and I hope she will participate in the consultation. Importantly, she mentioned the challenges faced by the River Chess and the River Misbourne. It is astonishing to hear that the average consumption is 173 litres, which we need to change. I am sure she will be an active champion on that matter, as we already know she is an active champion on behalf of her constituents when it comes to High Speed 2. She referred to a number of different issues, but I am conscious that her work on the possible impacts on Ox-Cam will not have been lost on the Housing Minister, who was present for the majority of the debate—he had the wisdom perhaps to leave for my contribution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) told us of her intention to go up the River Chelmer on a canoe, and I hope she returns with a paddle. My right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury, who I am delighted to say is leading a review on highly protected marine areas, does not forget the rivers and streams in his own constituency. Indeed, he referred to a number of them, including the River Lambourn.

On the number of years of drought—just make it rain—it is perhaps of some comfort to the Prime Minister that, in her three years in office, she has never had to worry about a flood or a drought. Who knows how long that luck can last?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury highlighted that 80% of species are invertebrates, which get ignored in our debate on the environment, and I am glad he is here today. He also talked about chemicals going into the water. That is important, and in the development of our chemical strategy over the next year, the Government will take account of how we get the balance right on chemicals, which produce much magic for our everyday lives, but we need to be very conscious of the impact they can have. Of course, he also referred to the River Kennet and to water transfer.

A number of issues have been raised about how we need to preserve these habitats, and I fully agree. The habitats in our country are so special. They are quite a small part of our British Isles, but they are so important to the world, which is why this Government will continue, in the 25-year plan, to make sure we pass on an environment that is in a better state than this generation inherited. We will do that domestically and internationally.

I thank the House. I know this has been a long debate, but one of the special things about this Chamber is that something that might seem quite parochial has huge global significance, and I am delighted to have shared this debate with so many right hon. and hon. Members tonight.

Mr Charles Walker: That was a great debate.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Indeed it was. Very informative indeed.

Question put and agreed to.

9.19 pm

House adjourned.
The Secretary of State was asked—
Leaving the EU: Access to Drugs

1. John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): What steps he is taking to ensure access to drugs after the UK leaves the EU.

2. John McNally: Concerned breast cancer charities have asked me and others to ask the Secretary of State if he will confirm to us, and to them, whether he is taking to ensure access to drugs after the UK leaves the EU.

3. Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What steps he is taking to ensure access to drugs after the UK leaves the EU.

4. Jonathan Fisher (Vale of York) (Ind Con): What guarantees can he give that we will have access to those specialist medicines?

5. Stephen Hammond: The assurance I can give is that, ahead of 29 March, we put in place the measures that are necessary to ensure that the hon. Gentleman’s constituent and others get the medicines they need, and we have taken forward those proposals and that work ahead of an exit from the European Union on 31 October.

6. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware of the expert evidence, including from the BioIndustry Association, warning that, although we may be able to stockpile the bog-standard drugs, it will be very difficult to do so for specialist treatments. What guarantees can he give that we will have access to those specialist medicines?

7. Matt Hancock: Ahead of 29 March, we managed to put in place a full programme to ensure access to drugs. Of course, the approach is not just about ensuring stockpiles—there are adequate stockpiles for so many medicines all the time—but is about ensuring the flow of materials and finished drugs across the channel via ferries and, where necessary, aircraft.
Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right, which is why the Green Paper will have long-term plans on mental health and, indeed, dementia. I think he will be pleased to see that when the Green Paper is released shortly.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What can the Minister do to expedite the provision of primary care services in those rural areas where the population is growing fast as a consequence of new housing?

Stephen Hammond: My right hon. Friend is right to raise that point, which has been raised with me several times. The new funding formula that the independent advisory committee is setting up will take into account the growth in population. It will look at the growth in the electoral register every year, rather than over a five-year period, as it does now, so it will be able to respond more quickly than is currently the case.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Will the Minister bear in mind the fact that dementia comes in many different forms? My mother had one form and she lasted a number of years, but it finally took hold. My sister, on the other hand, went within a short period of time, because she would not eat at all. My best friend at the time in the National Union of Mineworkers, Peter Heathfield, finished his life being violent, struggling with three people who tried to get him to the toilet. Bear that in mind carefully, Minister. Dementia is not a static illness; it is very different for different people.

Stephen Hammond: I do not always agree with the hon. Gentleman, but he is right to make that point. I know from very personal experience that dementia affects people in different ways, which is why I am proud to be part of a Government who are committed to delivering in full on the challenge on dementia 2020, to make England the best country in the world for dementia care.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The huge rural area covered by the Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust has and needs three hospitals, but it is funded as if it had only one. As a result, the trust has been fined more than £4 million in debt interest over the past three years. That money could have been spent on nurses, paramedics or doctors. Will the Minister intervene to stop this at once?

Stephen Hammond: I met the hon. Gentleman recently to talk about ambulance provision in his constituency and the Morecambe bay area, and I hope he is now satisfied with the progress we are making on that. I will look into the individual case he mentions and respond to him.

Rural Areas: Access to Health Care

3. Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): What steps is his Department taking to ensure the accessibility of health services for rural populations.

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): The long-term plan that the Department published in January commits to delivering fully integrated community-based healthcare in primary and community hubs. It confirms that the standard model of delivery will be developed for use in smaller acute hospitals that serve rural populations.

Anne Marie Morris: I thank the Minister for his answer, but some rural villages, including some in Devon, have no ambulance service at all—a fact masked by high-level statistical reporting. Will the Government work with me and the National Centre for Rural Health and Care to expose the real rural healthcare deficit, which is so masked, and work with us to rectify the situation and provide the appropriate care and medical support necessary by putting in place a robust and accountable rural health and care strategy and plan?

Stephen Hammond: I know that my hon. Friend has worked with the National Centre for Rural Health and Care and chairs the all-party group on rural health and social care. She is right to mention the fact that there are particular challenges in the delivery of the best-quality healthcare that we want to see in rural areas. I would be delighted to work with her and the all-party group on the matter.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): It has now been almost 18 months since health commissioners proposed that the two options for acute medical care in east Kent be put forward for public consultation. My constituents, particularly those in rural areas, are simply fed up with waiting for a new hospital. Will the Minister please confirm for me today just when a full public consultation on the future provision of acute services in east Kent will finally take place?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady asks a good question on behalf of her constituents. I cannot confirm today when that will happen, but I will look into the matter and write to her to make sure that she gets the answer.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): One in 10 women have endometriosis. The average wait for diagnosis is seven and a half years and can be even longer in rural areas, and there is currently no test for it. Researchers at the University of Hull previously developed biomarkers for cancer testing and have recently developed a project to test for biomarkers in urine to help to identify endometriosis. They need £10,000 in seed funding to get the project off the ground; will the Minister please meet me to discuss how we can secure the funding?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady has invited me to meet her to discuss that funding. She will be pleased to hear that I will be delighted to do so.

Cystic Fibrosis Treatment

4. Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Ind): What steps he is taking to ensure that people with cystic fibrosis receive the latest treatment for that condition.

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): I am delighted to work with her and the all-party group on rural areas. I would be delighted to work with her and the all-party group on the matter.

Rosie Duffield: I thank the Minister for his answer, but some rural villages, including some in Devon, have no ambulance service at all—a fact masked by high-level statistical reporting. Will the Government work with me and the National Centre for Rural Health and Care to expose the real rural healthcare deficit, which is so masked, and work with us to rectify the situation and provide the appropriate care and medical support necessary by putting in place a robust and accountable rural health and care strategy and plan?

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Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady has invited me to meet her to discuss that funding. She will be pleased to hear that I will be delighted to do so.

Cystic Fibrosis Treatment
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): We want patients living with cystic fibrosis to get the best care possible. Progress in specialised treatment for patients with CF means that people are living healthier and longer lives, but I recognise that it is frustrating for everyone, in particular patients and their families, that a deal on Orkambi has not been reached. It is for Vertex and NHS England to enter negotiations. I urge Vertex to consider the latest offer from NHSE.

Ian Austin: I have heard from people in Dudley and across the country about the difference that those new treatments make, but patients have been waiting for three and a half years now. Some families are having to take extreme measures to secure access to the drugs. Will the Minister and the Secretary of State meet me, people with cystic fibrosis or their parents, and the Cystic Fibrosis Trust so that we can get the whole thing sorted out and the wait for the drugs is not drawn out any longer with another summer or year of impasse?

Seema Kennedy: I recognise and share the frustration of patients and their families. The situation has been going on for far too long. I again urge Vertex to accept the offer. The hon. Gentleman has been in touch about a meeting, and I understand that we have responded to say that we will give him a firm date shortly.

James Frith: Sufferers of CF, as we have heard, are well used to the new hope of changes in the Government, but it soon becomes yet another false dawn: they are left drowning in their disease without access to Orkambi. The Minister has to lean in on the business end of the job that she has to do. Will the Government use their leverage, support the buyers’ club—the drastic action that CF sufferers are having to take—and supplement access to the equivalent of Orkambi? That might finally get Vertex to the table to do a deal on this important issue.

Seema Kennedy: As I said to the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members in the Westminster Hall debate on the drug, a deal is the preferred option. However, the attitude taken by Vertex, which has been called an outlier in this situation, means that my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary has instructed NHS England to look at other options.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Over the past three years, all of us in this House have heard the numerous calls for Orkambi to be made available to cystic fibrosis patients. The Minister could go down in history if she takes the all-important step this week, while still in her job—I hope she will still be in the job tomorrow—of announcing an alternative route to access cystic fibrosis drugs, such as a Crown use licence or clinical trials. Today, before we break for recess, will she commit to that so that families can have Orkambi now?

Seema Kennedy: The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence process is important, because it is an independent expert review and the way in which we allocate resources sensibly. The Crown use licence is not a quick or easy solution, and it is open to legal challenge, which might delay things even more. Vertex has been offered the biggest settlement in NHS history, and I urge the company to accept it. However—I have said this on numerous occasions from this Dispatch Box and in Westminster Hall—the Secretary of State has urged and asked NHS England to look at other options, such as the ones to which the shadow Minister has referred.

Healthcare Staffing Levels

5. Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): What assessment he has made of trends in staffing levels of registered (a) doctors and (b) nurses since 2010.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Across the UK, the number of registered nurses and doctors has increased over the past nine years. In England, there were over 112,000 doctors in NHS trusts in March 2019, 17,000 more than in March 2010, and over 8,000 more nurses than in 2010. There is more to do, and the NHS people plan will ensure a sustainable workforce for the long-term future of the NHS.

Kirstene Hair: As the Secretary of State may be aware, earlier this month—conveniently in the Holyrood recess—we learnt that medical students who come from the rest of the United Kingdom and want to apply for an undergraduate course at Scottish universities will find their chances greatly diminished. Most Scots are appalled by this policy. In fact, the British Medical Association, the Royal College of General Practitioners and medical schools are all expressing concern. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Scottish Government need to be attracting the brightest and the best—no matter where they come from across the United Kingdom—to address the GP crisis?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I do. I was surprised by the recent news that I read about medical schools in Scotland being told to discriminate against medical students from elsewhere in the UK. I understand that the Scottish National party itself accepts that this is discriminatory. I doubt that the policy will last and I look forward to an SNP U-turn.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Mitie recently signed a £150 million contract at St George’s Hospital, but staff are already facing job cuts. My union, the GMB, balloted its members; 99.6% of them voted to take industrial action. Will the Secretary of State commit to visiting staff on the frontline and show them solidarity during this very difficult time?

Matt Hancock: I am always very happy to visit hospitals around the country, including St George’s. Of course, the individual management of staff is a matter for the hospital itself. I look forward to discussing with the hon. Lady what more we can do.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The Secretary of State has quite rightly outlined the global progress that has been made on the medical and nursing workforces, but he will be aware that the picture is very different in mental health services, with the loss of 4,000 mental health nurses over the last decade. Indeed, the fill-rate for doctors entering higher training in child and adolescent mental health services
this August is only 63% and only half the higher trainee posts in general adult mental health have been filled. What is the Secretary of State going to do to turn the very good rhetoric on mental health into a reality on the ground for patients?

**Matt Hancock:** The increase in funding for mental health services, which is the largest increase as part of the overall £33.9 billion increase, goes to mental health services. Of course, the vast majority of that will go towards employing more people. As my hon. Friend says, we need to encourage more people into training in mental health services and psychiatry, as well as mental health nursing, which is also under pressure. The expansion of these services ultimately means that we need to have more people doing the work: supporting people to improve their mental health and supporting people with mental ill health. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue, which is right at the top of the priorities for the NHS people plan.

**Peter Kyle** (Hove) (Lab): Sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis and gonorrhoea are on the rise. Will the Secretary of State target more resources at staffing and investment to ensure that we tackle this rise?

**Matt Hancock:** We have recently announced that the way in which we are going to proceed with regard to sexual health services is co-commissioning between local authorities and the local NHS. This is the best way to ensure that we get the services on the ground. I would just slightly caution the hon. Gentleman; although he mentioned that some sexually transmitted diseases have been on the rise, others have been falling quite sharply. We have to ensure that we get the details of what we try to implement right, but I support the direction of travel that he proposes.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What can we do to make the workload terms and conditions more attractive for salaried GPs and GP partners compared with locums? GPs in my constituency tell me that a great number want to be locums, but that not so many want to be salaried or GP partners because of the workload. What can we do about that?

**Matt Hancock:** My hon. Friend is dead right. This is an important part of the work that Baroness Dido Harding is leading in the NHS people plan to ensure that we can make careers in the NHS—whether as doctors, other clinicians or more broadly—the most attractive that they possibly can be. This week we announced a pay rise for doctors and earlier this month we announced a long-term agreement with junior doctors, which I am delighted they accepted in a referendum with over 80% support. But there is more work to do.

**Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): The rules around annual and lifetime allowances are having an impact on the NHS workforce in Scotland, and the options contained in the recent consultation on doctors’ pensions do not provide the level of flexibility necessary to resolve this situation. We know that the solution lies with the Treasury, so what pressure can the current Secretary of State put on the Chancellor to ensure that urgent reform takes place to stop this terrible impact on our NHS workforce?

**Matt Hancock:** I have been working hard with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to ensure that we can resolve this important issue. The hon. Gentleman will have seen the consultation document that we put out yesterday to resolve the problem. The consultation is open and asks open questions about the best way to fix it. I am absolutely determined that we will fix it to remove some of the unintended consequences of changes in pension tax law. It is a pity, though, that the SNP spokesman did not stand up to accept that the proposal mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), which would discriminate against people from outside of Scotland, is wrong and should be withdrawn.

**Julie Cooper** (Burnley) (Lab): The Secretary of State is in denial. There is a crisis in GP retention. In fact, there are now 1,200 fewer fully qualified permanent GPs than there were in 2010. Because of this, patients are waiting longer than ever to get a GP appointment. He has promised, as he did again today, to address this, but it is a fact that the situation is getting worse, with a pension system that is effectively charging GPs to work extra hours. Does he really believe that this is the best way to retain GPs in the NHS? Does he have a detailed plan, and can he explain how he is going to sort out this mess?

**Matt Hancock:** I think it is worth starting with a few facts. One fact is that I published a detailed plan yesterday, on which we are consulting, to tackle the pension issue. The other two facts that are worth noting, and that the House will want to know about, are the following. First, there is a record number of GPs in training—3,473. Secondly, the overall number of GPs is rising, with, as of March 2019, 300 more doctors working in general practice than a year earlier. I want to see that number continue to rise.

**Social Care Services: Accessibility**

7. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the number of people unable to access social care services.

8. **Eleanor Smith** (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the number of people unable to access social care services.

**The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage):** All councils have a statutory duty to look after people’s care and support needs in their areas. In total, between 2016 and 2017, and in 2019-20, the Government have given councils access to £10 billion more social care funding.

**Afzal Khan:** Given that the Government have promised a spending increase for the NHS in the regions, is the Minister aware that at the current funding levels, Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership will be operating on a predicted deficit of £2 billion by 2021? Will she advise on what work has been done in partnership with the GMHSCP to avoid this huge deficit?

**Caroline Dinenage:** There is no doubt that the system is under pressure, but that is why the Government have been putting an enormous amount of money into local giving councils access to additional funding to be able to address the growing need—up to £10 billion over the past three years. We know that people are living longer
and living with much more complex conditions. This situation is only going to get worse, so we do need to find a more sustainable way to deal with it in the long term. The hon. Gentleman will be interested to know that Manchester will receive an additional £42.9 million for adult social care funding in 2019-20.

Eleanor Smith: Figures from the Care and Support Alliance and Age UK show that at least 1.4 million older people in England are not receiving the care and support they need. We know that this figure will be much, much higher owing to the number of working-age disabled people who are being denied the care and support they need to lead better lives. Speaking as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on adult social care, how much longer do we need to wait until the Government publish the long-awaited Green Paper on social care and finally start to show some much needed leadership in this vitally important area of public policy?

Caroline Dinenage: First, I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her work in the APPG on adult social care. It is really important that we have an APPG that represents this really important issue. As I said, the fact that we have an ageing population is a growing issue that we have to face as a nation, and, in fact, as a world. Her area of Wolverhampton will receive an additional £22.1 million for adult social care in 2019, but we know that that is not a long-term solution and we will be publishing a Green Paper at the earliest opportunity.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): The Government’s utter chaos over Brexit has already impacted on recruitment in the social care sector. Scottish Care told the Scottish Affairs Committee that providers have lost 67% of their intake from the European economic area. The fact is that this Government’s actions are putting the health of the sick and elderly at risk. Will the Government make an assessment of how the staffing crisis in social care is impacting on the rate of hospital admissions?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman is right; we do have a number of vacancies—a large number of vacancies—in adult social care. That is why, earlier in the year, the Government announced a recruitment campaign, “Every day is different”. It ran for a few months, with enormous success. There have been 14% more apply clicks on the relevant Government jobs site as a result, so we have just announced that we are going to expand and extend that recruitment campaign, with an additional £4 million of funding.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Among those most affected by lack of access to social care are the 2,300 autistic people and people with learning disabilities stuck in inappropriate in-patient settings. That is why the NHS long-term plan commits to an extra £4.5 billion a year for primary and community health services, and local areas will be expected to use this investment to develop the sort of specialist services and community crisis care that will help divert people away from in-patient care settings.

Mental Health: Young People

8. John Howell (Henley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help prevent mental health illness among young people.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): We are committed to improving early intervention and prevention to ensure that young people with mental health problems do get the best start and the earliest possible treatment. To that end, we are introducing new school-based mental health support teams. The first 59 of these will start being operational by the end of December this year. The next wave of 124 more teams was announced on 12 July.

John Howell: With half of all lifetime cases of mental ill health beginning at the age of 14, will the Minister say how well the training promised to constituencies such as mine will help to stop these problems worsening as people get older?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend is right: people with mental health conditions do tend to develop them as children. Clearly, the earlier we can give them support to help them manage those conditions, the better for their long-term wellbeing. Equally, however, we need to make sure we have sufficient community services when they leave school and get older, so that having invested in their wellbeing, it can be continued through later life.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): Is the Minister confident that the mental health of the 5,000 children with special educational needs who spent time in school isolation booths last year was not harmed, and if not, what representations has she made to the Secretary of State for Education about this practice?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Gentleman, as usual, raises a very important issue indeed. Of course, people with special educational needs will be at risk of mental ill health more than any other cohort of children. I am having regular meetings with the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), who has responsibility for children and families, about this very vulnerable group. Having targeted mental health provision across mainstream schooling generally and put in such investment, we now really need to home in on the groups at highest risk.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister outline what discussions have taken place with the devolved Administrations to ensure that best practice and best results are implemented UK-wide, especially...
considering that Northern Ireland has the highest level of mental health issues pro rata in the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Jackie Doyle-Price: As usual, the hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important point. Of course, health is a devolved matter, but that is not to say that all four nations cannot learn more from best practice in each place. I am pleased to say that we are now increasing our contact with representatives of the devolved Governments, and we will very much be sharing such best practice.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Referrals to child mental health units from primary schools for pupils aged 11 and under have risen by nearly 50% in three years. BBC research last week also found that primary school children are self-harming at school, and in four cases children under 11 had attempted suicide while at school. This is deeply shocking, so what is the Minister doing to ensure that primary school children will have support from trained mental health professionals when they return in September?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady is quite right to raise that, and it is incredibly troubling to see those figures. The investment we are making in mental health support teams will be of assistance. For primary schools that are well led and gripping this issue, there is some very imaginative and innovative practice to bring emotional wellbeing into the classroom from the moment pupils arrive. We need to make sure that those mental health teams start acting as soon as possible. This is something that we need to address collectively with schools and as a society to make sure that we get treatment to people at the earliest possible time.

NHS Facilities

9. Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve NHS facilities. [912122]

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): Modern, fit-for-purpose facilities are better for patients, the NHS staff who work in them and the taxpayer, so the Government have already provided £3.9 billion of new capital investment to deliver new, upgraded facilities across the country.

Jack Brereton: I thank the Minister for visiting the site of the proposed new Longton health centre in my constituency recently. Does he agree that we must deliver new primary care facilities such as this to make sure that improvements in health in my local community continue?

Stephen Hammond: I very much enjoyed the visit. The new £5 million Longton medical centre will provide general practice service for more than 12,000 patients, and it will be a fantastic community health scheme. My hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that yesterday I wrote to him outlining the capital options that might be available. He is right, and that is why this Government believe in transforming the primary care estate. It is a key enabler for delivering the long-term plan, and it provides better care for patients.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): A year on, NHS Property Services is now having to remarket the site of Bootham Park Hospital. In the light of this complete failure and the failure to listen to health professionals locally, will the Minister ensure that the One Public Estate bid is seriously considered as the sale moves forward?

Stephen Hammond: I met the hon. Lady about this disposal last December, and I have followed the matter carefully. The local health system has not wanted to continue using the site, but I am happy to assure her that I will look at bids from all comers. It is not my decision; it is a decision for local healthcare bodies and NHS Property Services.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): The Minister will be aware that our general district hospital was closed to new admissions in recent weeks, and the reason given was delayed transfers of care. Ever since I was elected, many others have joined me in looking at how we can provide a step-down, step-up facility—a community healthcare hub—with beds in the St Ives constituency. I wonder what funding is available to achieve that aim.

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is right. He will have heard me say in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) that we are already making available £3.9 billion extra to provide these facilities. We should not be complacent, however, and it is important to recognise that we want world-class facilities for world-class care. One of the benefits of the long-term plan is that we can create a stable environment for capital investment, and we can make the case for more capital investment at the spending review.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Government cuts have already resulted in significant downgrading and loss of vital services at South Tyneside District Hospital. Since the Department refused to fund the next phase of downgrading, the trust has approached the local authority to borrow £35 million from the treasury to see it through. Does the Minister agree with me and my incensed constituents that it is wrong that we are now being asked to pay for further cuts to our hospital?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady will know that the Government are putting more cash and more money into the NHS than at any other time in its history. There will be £33.9 billion extra going in by 2023-24.

NHS Workforce Vacancies

10. Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the number of NHS workforce vacancies. [912124]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Question 10 is about workforce vacancies, and I can tell the House that one workforce vacancy has just been filled, because Boris Johnson has just been elected as the leader of the Conservative party.
The NHS employs more staff now than at any time in its 70-year history, with significant growth in newly qualified staff from 2012. Our full people plan will help to tackle these issues for the long term.

Karen Lee: Words are all well and good, but it is actions that actually count, and the Government are not creating a health service that supports its workforce. The striking health visitors in Lincolnshire have each lost more than £2,000 a year since they were transferred from the NHS to the Conservative-controlled county council and many have had their professional status downgraded. Does the Secretary of State agree that rather than shifting the responsibility for cuts to health services on to local government, the NHS should deliver fully resourced healthcare services and pay its staff properly?

Matt Hancock: The NHS is delivering healthcare services and it is paying its staff properly. It is working with local authorities to deliver the best possible health services right across the country. We absolutely need to recruit more people to the NHS and we are recruiting more people to the NHS.

Vulnerable Older People

12. Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to ensure that (a) adequate resources and (b) highly trained personnel are allocated to health services for vulnerable older people.  [912126]

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): The NHS is responsible for ensuring adequate resources and a high-quality workforce that can deliver a comprehensive health service for all people, including vulnerable older people. That is clearly happening. We are supporting that through investing an extra £33.9 billion in the NHS.

Mr Sheerman: I have also just heard the news that we have a new Prime Minister. I am thinking of the man who stands outside with a sign saying that the end of the world is nigh.

The fact of the matter is that the end of life for many of my constituents is tough, because the people in the care sector who support them are poorly paid, poorly resourced and poorly trained. Surely we should go for well-managed, highly trained, highly skilled people in the NHS for every age?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right, which is why we have ensured that we are putting more money into the NHS and more money into primary care, with £4.5 billion in real terms on primary medical care and community health services. It is why we commissioned Baroness Dido Harding to produce the “Interim NHS People Plan”, which she has done, and why we are working on ensuring that we have the health service workers to provide excellent care for all people in the community.

Health Inequalities

13. Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of public health services on reducing health inequalities.  [912127]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): The Government recognise the importance of reducing inequalities and have included a commitment to that in the NHS long-term plan. We know that public health services, such as immunisation, screening programmes, smoking cessation services and many other initiatives, can significantly improve health outcomes to combat some of the inequalities faced by ethnic minorities and those living in less affluent areas.

Mr Sharma: I thank the Minister for her response. After nine years of Tory austerity, advances in life expectancy, which steadily increased for 100 years, have now ground to a halt and have even gone backwards in some of the poorest areas. How does the Minister plan to reverse that damning trend?

Jackie Doyle-Price: Life expectancy has been increasing year on year, but it is also true that it is an international phenomenon that that rate of increase is coming to a halt. None the less, life expectancy in England is the highest it has ever been: 79.5 years for men and 83.1 years for women. We will continue to invest in our public health programmes and look at the wider issues facing society that can also contribute to good health outcomes, such as housing, work and so on. There is a lot that can be done; it is not just about NHS spending.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): One of the best ways of getting early public health help across the doorstep is by investing in health visitors to give that much needed early support, especially to new parents to help to ensure that every child gets the best start in life. One of the best achievements of the Cameron Government was the creation of 4,200 additional health visitors. Does the Minister share my concern that since 2015, with the responsibility now having gone to local government, there has been a 26% reduction in the number of health visitors? That is something of a false economy.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I do share my hon. Friend’s belief that health visitors are probably the most important army in the war against health inequalities. They provide an intervention that is very family-based and not intimidating. It is based on good relationships and means we can provide intervention at the earliest possible time. He is right to highlight the massive investment we made during the Cameron Government. There has been a decline since, which we really must address if we are to get the earliest possible intervention and the best health outcomes for children.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): We finally got to see the prevention Green Paper yesterday evening, and it rightly highlights the appalling inequality in healthy life expectancy and the fact that being overweight or obese is now the leading risk factor for disability and years lived with disability. Will the Secretary of State please reassure the House that he will act on the evidence? The prevention Green Paper makes it very clear: “The Soft Drinks Industry Levy...has been hugely successful in removing the equivalent of over 45,000 tonnes of sugar from our shelves.”

The House really needs to hear reassurance that we will not roll back on those kinds of issues.
Jackie Doyle-Price: I reassure the hon. Lady that the Government are committed to following the evidence; that is very much a theme in the prevention Green Paper. The evidence will speak for itself. Clearly, she is absolutely right to highlight obesity as the biggest risk factor in impeding healthy life expectancy. That is why, across Government, we should be vigilant about tackling it.

King George Hospital A&E Department

14. Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (IGC): Whether his Department’s decision of October 2011 to close the A&E department at King George Hospital, Ilford, has been rescinded; and if he will make a statement on future services at that hospital.

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear that I can confirm that there will continue to be an A&E at King George Hospital, Ilford. The NHS has concluded that there is need for such provision now and in future.

Mike Gapes: I thank the Minister for that reply. I hope that it will stop some of the more lurid scaremongering and campaigning, which is unfortunately diverting people in my constituency from looking at the most important issue: how we use the King George Hospital site in future. Will he confirm that steps are being taken to integrate North East London NHS Foundation Trust and King George Hospital services to deal with social care and other matters?

Stephen Hammond: I am happy to confirm that.

Autism and Learning Disabilities

15. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What additional funding he plans to allocate to the NHS to reduce the number of people with autism and learning disabilities held in in-patient settings.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): The NHS long-term plan commits to an extra £4.5 billion a year for primary and community health services by 2023-24. Local areas will be expected to use part of this investment to develop specialist services and community crisis care to reduce avoidable admissions and lengths of stay for autistic people and those with learning disabilities.

Kerry McCarthy: I do not know whether the Minister has seen the report from the Children’s Commissioner, but it says that the number of children with autism or learning difficulties in mental health hospitals has doubled in recent years. Many are very far from home. Their parents are not consulted properly on their care, and they are in for much longer than they need to be. What proportion of the money that she mentions will go towards trying to ensure that children can have support in their home, so that they are not in this situation?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady has hit on a really important point. The truth is that a lot of children who end up in an in-patient setting are not diagnosed with autism or a learning disability until they are there; they normally come in on a mental health diagnosis. There are a few points to make here. One is on making sure that early intervention is there as early as when a child is in school. That is why the Government have made a commitment to having mental health support available from a very early age, in schools. This is also about making sure that families do not get to crisis point, and that the investment is there in the community, so that children get the support that they need at every possible step.

Missed GP Appointments

16. Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce the number of missed GP appointments.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): Missed appointments are a waste of NHS resources, and we believe that encouraging patients to use the NHS sensibly and responsibly is the right approach. We are encouraging a range of local schemes to help to reduce missed appointments, with clinical commissioning groups and practices embracing technology and adopting a variety of approaches, such as text reminders, patient-recorded bookings and the increased use of online systems that make it quick and easy for patients to change and cancel appointments.

Gordon Henderson: A GP surgery in my constituency has reported that in one month this year, 78 people failed to keep their appointment and failed to cancel it. Those failures led to the surgery losing 11 hours’ working time. The surgery has announced that it will consider removing patients from its register if they miss three consecutive appointments. Does my hon. Friend support that proposal, and does she think that the policy should be rolled out across other surgeries?

Seema Kennedy: Local NHS organisations know their populations best, and that is why the Government support locally led initiatives to reduce missed appointments. The evidence shows us that people are less likely to miss an appointment if they have a convenient option. Swale CCG has a “Did Not Attend” campaign, which will run across the region this summer and support his constituents in making sure that they use their appointments responsibly.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Is the Minister aware of any research that has been done, not just on missed appointments, but on repeat offenders who periodically miss their appointments, and the effect that has? What can be done to ensure that that is not repeated beyond today?

Seema Kennedy: There is no overall estimate of the number of people who miss their appointments. We want to encourage people to be responsible, but we also want to make booking appointments as easy as possible by having things such as online and text booking. NHS England will shortly conduct an access review, which will look at ways of developing a coherent offer to patients in terms of how they access their practice appointments. We will therefore make things easier, and hopefully bring down the number of people who miss an appointment.
Strategy and Action Plan: Improving Lives


The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I am pleased to say that we have made strong progress against the commitments in the Command Paper my hon. Friend refers to, and I thank her for her role in delivering those advances. I can advise the House that the number of disabled people in employment is now 400,000 higher than it was in 2017. There is, however, much more to do, and on 15 July we launched a consultation on measures to reduce ill health-related job loss. We are seeking views on how employers can best support people with disabilities and people with long-term health conditions to stay and thrive in work.

Sarah Newton: I thank the Minister for her really helpful response, and I congratulate her on the fantastic work she has done in her position. Last week, the next Prime Minister announced his intention to look again at the tax treatment of at-work referral health services as a benefit in kind to employees, given how crucial fast access to health and support is to so many people. Will the Secretary of State and the Minister work with the new Prime Minister in bringing forward an urgent review, as the current tax regime goes against our focus on prevention and reducing demand on the NHS?

Jackie Doyle-Price: Absolutely. We will continue with the emphasis on work being good for people’s health. We need to look at what we can do to make it easier for employers to help their employees, which is good for everybody—it means that everyone can still make an economic contribution, and that we retain the existing workforce, and it is good for people’s wellbeing. We absolutely will look at what we can do to incentivise best practice.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It is difficult to see how lives will be improved and people supported to stay in work by NHS England’s decision, supported by Ministers, to encourage CCGs to phase out their walk-in centres—I am thinking, in particular, of the three walk-in centres that serve my constituents. I urge Ministers, even at this late stage, to set aside new funding streams so that Alexandra Avenue, the Pinn and Belmont Health Centre can continue to provide a 365-day, 8 am to 8 pm walk-in service to my constituents.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I do not share the hon. Gentleman’s view on this. Clearly, it is important for CCGs to have the freedom to determine their best primary care arrangements. Walk-in centres are convenient for people who are in work and who perhaps work away from home, but ultimately, we keep people with disabilities in work by having bespoke support for them, and that is better organised by having good primary care services near the home.

Topical Questions

T1. [912134] Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): This week, the Department has released a consultation on the future of clinicians’ pensions, a new five-year deal to support our approach to community pharmacy, the Government’s prevention Green Paper and a £20 million collaboration with the Prince’s Trust on the NHS widening participation initiative, which will allow and support more apprentices into the NHS. There has been a lot done just this week, and there is a lot more still to do.

Mr Sweeney: Another item for the Secretary of State’s list might be to engage with his counterpart in Scotland on the issue of the NHS taper on the pensions programme. When I raised the issue with a Treasury Minister, she seemed unaware that there was more than one NHS in the UK. If there is some co-ordination and joint representation to the Treasury, that might assist matters. Would the Secretary of State agree?

Matt Hancock: Of course, in solving this problem, many of the changes can take place within the NHS, and we are working on that with the Treasury. I am happy to ensure that discussions take place with devolved colleagues, but of course, the NHS is devolved in Scotland.

T2. [912136] Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Provision of in vitro fertilisation in Redditch has been reduced from two cycles to one. I warmly welcome the work that the Minister has done to increase equity across the country, but what more can she do to address the postcode lottery in this and other areas, such as hip and knee surgery?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): My hon. Friend is right: the postcode lottery is not acceptable, and patients manage to get around it; my local clinical commissioning group, having funded three courses of IVF, has had to reduce that to two, because demand has doubled owing to the lack of provision in neighbouring CCGs. I have made it very clear that it is unacceptable for any CCG to offer no IVF cycles at all; I have given them that guidance.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): My I pursue the question asked by the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston)? We know that obesity is a major cause of cancer and other diseases, and we know that we have severe rates of childhood obesity, so why does the prevention Green Paper say only that the sugar tax “may” be extended to milkshakes? The evidence is clear. Is the Secretary of State not kicking this into the long grass?

Matt Hancock: I have asked the chief medical officer to review the evidence to ensure that our policy for tackling obesity is evidence-driven. Follow the evidence: that is what we do on this side of the House.
Jonathan Ashworth: A year ago the Secretary of State said, to great fanfare, that prevention was one of his priorities. Now the prevention Green Paper has been sneaked out in the night on the Cabinet Office website. Health inequalities are getting wider and wider, and life expectancy is stalling, but the Secretary of State still cannot give us any clarification on the future of the public health ring-fenced grant. Is it not the truth that he has buckled under pressure from the sugar industry, is not taking on the alcohol industry, and is not taking on the tobacco industry? That is more about trying to get in with the new Prime Minister than putting the health needs of the nation first.

Matt Hancock: I thought that the hon. Gentleman would welcome the prevention Green Paper, which was published yesterday. We have been working very hard to publish a huge amount of policy, including the Green Paper, which contains about 80 different policies to ensure that we prevent people from becoming ill in the first place. However, it is also part of a broader drive, which Conservative Members support, to ensure that we are the healthiest of nations, and that people can take personal responsibility for their health, as well as relying on the NHS, so that it is always there when people need it.

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): My hon. Friend has campaigned on this matter for a while, and I was pleased to meet him to discuss it earlier in the year. We absolutely recognise the challenge that small acute providers face, and over the past two years the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation has been considering how we might meet that challenge. The committee has endorsed a new community services formula to reflect the pressure in remote areas, which may help the two hospitals mentioned by my hon. Friend.

T7.[912143] Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Has the Secretary of State given further consideration to providing extra funds to meet the challenges of running unavoidably small hospitals, such as Scarborough and the Friarage in Northallerton?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Government have produced an interim people plan setting out the course and the trajectory that will mean more doctors and nurses being trained. He will also know that we have opened new medical schools this year, and that more doctors are now being trained.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am not going to shout at the Secretary of State this morning, but I will say to him that Huddersfield is a typical town, and a lovely place in which to live and work. Given that it is so attractive, why is it so difficult for us to find doctors and dentists who can give a good service to my constituents under this modern NHS?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): When drugs have been approved by NICE, there is an obligation to prescribe them. If the hon. Lady will write to me, I shall be able to look into this matter more closely.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I welcome the consultation on NHS pensions that was announced this week, and while I do not think that 50:50 is the ultimate solution, I welcome the invitation to present other proposals. However, given that this is causing an issue now, how quickly does the Department think that it will be able to turn the outcome of the consultation into action?

Matt Hancock: We are working very hard to turn it into action as soon as possible, and I can give my hon. Friend an absolute commitment that the new rules will be in place in time for the new financial year.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I should declare that I am chair of the all-party group on eating disorders. Despite eating disorders affecting 1.25 million people across the UK and being the most deadly of mental health issues, the average time dedicated to training about eating disorders in a five-year medical degree was found to be only three or four hours; in some cases, there was none at all. Will the Minister agree to look into this and perhaps report back to the all-party group?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I certainly will. This recommendation was also made by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee following its report into the death of Averil Hart, and we are in discussions with the royal colleges to see what more can be done, in terms of training medical staff and doctors in mental health, because we want to make sure that intervention happens at the earliest possible stage, which means that all our medical professionals need to understand it better.

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): I certainly will. This recommendation into action?

T5.[912141] Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Constituents of mine recovering from mental health problems have told me that when they have shared their desire to return to work with jobcentre staff, jobcentre staff have used that as a trigger to move them from employment support allowance to jobseeker’s allowance, with, obviously, the financial loss involved in that. Do Ministers agree that whoever is still in their job by the end of the week could usefully talk to the Department for Work and Pensions team about how people with mental health problems can be supported back into work without being penalised?

Jackie Doyle-Price: Yes is the short answer, and the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that I have regular discussions with colleagues in the DWP to see what we can do to humanise all our processes for benefits claimants, because it is important that when people suffering from mental ill health interact with
 organisations of the state, we are not causing them harm. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that that is very high on the list of things in my in-tray.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I greatly welcome the publication of the prevention Green Paper. How will that strategy enable people to keep well by living in warm homes?

Matt Hancock: Clearly, the need for join-up across Departments of Government is a vital part of this agenda, as my hon. Friend knows from her work across different Departments; the specific point she raises is one example of that, and we must drive it forward.

T6. [912142] Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): In the north-east, we die on average two years younger than those in the south. The Northern Health Science Alliance estimates that that costs our economy £13 billion a year, on top of the emotional and personal costs. The Secretary of State talks a lot about technology in health, but what is he doing about equality in health—or should I ask Alexa?

Matt Hancock: Technology and the data that show these inequalities are an important part of the answer, but of course it is much broader than that, and tackling health inequalities is an underpinning part of the long-term plan for the NHS; it is absolutely critical in order to address the sorts of inequalities that the hon. Lady rightly raises.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Life skills courses can be key to helping people out of depression, loneliness and isolation, and into work and training, yet the course in Glossop in my local area has been cut by the county council, in spite of it having a £2.8 million underspend this year. Do Ministers agree that local authorities should be looking to spend the public health money that they have, and to use it effectively?

Matt Hancock: Yes, emphatically we do, and there is a drive across the country for more of the sort of social prescribing that the hon. Lady talks about. The clinical solution to many people’s health issues, and in particular mental health challenges, is often about changes in behaviour and activity, and the support people are given, rather than just drugs. On the face of it, the project the hon. Lady mentions sounds very good; of course I do not know the details, but I would be very happy to look into it. However, we wholeheartedly and emphatically support the broad direction of travel of helping people to tackle mental illness both through drugs where they are needed and through activity and social prescribing.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I recently met three care workers who work for Sanctuary Care. Between them, they have 60 years of experience of, and dedication to, caring for vulnerable people, but Sanctuary Care has decided to cut their pay and conditions because they were TUPE-ed over from the Borough of Greenwich. Is this the way to treat dedicated care staff? Will the Minister meet me and those care staff to discuss what is going on at Sanctuary Care, whose chief executive gets a handout of almost a quarter of a million pounds a year, while it cuts low-paid staff’s wages?

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that, because one of the things that I have learned in this role is that working in care should never be described as unskilled. It is probably one of the most skilled professions, and it requires people with exactly the right principles and values to deliver it. We are clear that people should be paid a fair and decent wage, and I am more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss it further.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Minister with responsibility for mental health is a very sympathetic person. Unfortunately, that does not seem to translate into action. Our clinical commissioning group has stopped funding the voluntary sector to provide counselling, and now it is taking counselling services out of GP surgeries as well. Will she look into that?

Jackie Doyle-Price: Yes. What the hon. Lady has just outlined to me flies in the face of the advice that I and the clinical directors of NHS England are giving CCGs. We are clear that voluntary sector provision of additional services is crucial in the support of people with mental ill health. Unfortunately, some commissioners seem to want to medicalise everything, but that is not the key to good treatments, and I will look into it.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The prevention Green Paper talks about the risk of an opioid epidemic. In Scotland, we feel that that is already here, with 1,187 deaths in Scotland last year, 394 of them in Glasgow. Will the Secretary of State work with the Scottish Government and Glasgow health and social care partnership and support the opening of a medically supervised drug consumption room in Glasgow?

Matt Hancock: Yes, the risk of an opioid epidemic across the UK is a serious one. We have seen that risk materialise in the United States. I was as shocked as anyone to see the recent figures for the growth in opioid addiction in Scotland. While public health and the NHS are devolved to the Scottish Government, and they must lead on tackling this issue, for the UK elements of my responsibilities, we in England will do absolutely everything we can and put aside all party politics to tackle this serious problem.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Two hon. Members who are standing have not been heard this morning.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): In January the Health Secretary declared air pollution a health emergency, yet today, tomorrow and Thursday we will see ozone layers in the south and south-east of England that will be a health hazard to the old, the young and the sick. Unlike in equivalent situations in other countries, the Government have released no warnings to people or advised how they should take appropriate action. How bad does air pollution have to get before the Government use their not inconsiderable communications budget to warn people to take appropriate action?

Matt Hancock: We have. Through Public Health England, which is the responsible agency, we have absolutely put out communications, which I heard this morning.
The communications that the hon. Lady asks for are out there. Of course air pollution is a significant risk to public health. I am delighted that it is falling to its lowest levels since the industrial revolution, but there is clearly much more that we need to do.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the Care Quality Commission has recently inspected Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Foundation Trust, and that patient safety was raised as an issue during that inspection? If that is the case, what action is he taking?

Caroline Dinenage: Clearly, patient safety is a massive priority for the Government. I do not know the exact details of the site that the hon. Lady is talking about, but if she would like to drop me a line, I will definitely find out and get back to her.
Personal Independence Payments: Supreme Court Ruling

12.39 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if she will make a statement on last week’s Supreme Court ruling on personal independence payments for those with mental health issues.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): The Supreme Court has ruled on the case of Secretary of State for Work and Pensions v. MM, which is known as MM. The case was about the definition of “social support” when engaging with other people face to face in the PIP assessment, and how far in advance that support can be provided.

We took the case to the Supreme Court because we wanted clarity on the issue and the judgment gives us that clarity. We welcome the Court’s judgment. We are pleased it accepted that there is a difference between “prompting” and “social support”, and that there must be a need for social support to be provided by someone who is trained or experienced in providing such support.

PIP is already a better benefit for people with mental health conditions than the legacy disability living allowance. The proportion of them who get the higher rate of PIP is five times higher than under DLA, with PIP at 33% and DLA at 6%.

It is clear that there is an increasing understanding in society about mental health and how important it is to make sure that individuals with poor mental health get the right help. It is not an exact science, but the desire for an increased understanding of mental health issues is one of the few areas that have cross-party support.

Getting this clarity ensures that even more people who need help to engage face to face may now be eligible to benefit under PIP. I want to be clear that supporting disabled people and those with mental health conditions continues to be a priority for this Government. That is why we will now carefully consider the full judgment and, working with disabled people and engaging with Mind and other stakeholders, implement it fully and fairly so that claimants get the PIP support they are entitled to.

Chris Stephens: I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question and the Minister for his response.

The individual concerned in the case is a Glasgow South West constituent. As the Minister said, the Department appealed the decision by the Scottish courts.

Will the Minister confirm that the judgment means that ongoing encouragement from a family member to help someone leave their house and engage socially will result in additional points in the PIP process? Does he accept that it is now clear that PIP assessments need to be overhauled and that, once again, we have found that the process discriminates against those with psychological conditions?

The Minister appears to accept the judgment, so will he tell us whether any estimate has been made of the number of people who will be affected by the decision and how long it will take to initiate any back payments? Will he confirm that that will be new money and that it will not come out of existing budgets?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. I pay tribute to him, because through his constituency work and as a valued member of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, he has been a real champion in this area.

I repeat that the Government are committed to supporting people with mental health conditions. I push back on the suggestion that PIP needs fundamental reform, because only 6% of claimants with a mental health condition were able to access the highest rate of support on legacy benefits, compared with 33% under PIP.

We recognise that there is more to do. That is why we will engage with stakeholders and disabled people. We have already met Mind since the judgment was passed down. We want to get this right and to ensure that people are treated fairly and are fully supported. I cannot give an exact timeline but, as with all legal judgments, we will update the House once we have had time to consider it. We do, however, take this very, very seriously.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for the excellent job he is doing and for his statement. He is right that more people with mental health conditions are receiving more support than ever before, but clearly there is more to do. Will he kindly update the House on the progress that is being made on training Department for Work and Pensions staff—not just the PIP assessors, but the people in the jobcentres and the people who pick up the phones—to make sure that everybody has a positive experience and is treated with respect and dignity?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend, who did so much in this role before me and is widely respected across the House. She is right to highlight how much more is done in terms of training. I am grateful for the support of the stakeholders who helped to shape that training. One of the biggest improvements is that we now have a mental health champion in each PIP assessment centre who can support claimants who may be more anxious when they arrive to make sure that their experience is as positive as can be.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): This landmark judgment by the Supreme Court should act as a serious wake-up call for the Government.

According to Mind, more than 425,000 people with conditions classed as psychiatric disorders have been turned down for PIP. What percentage of those people would have been successful in the light of this judgment? Will the Minister be clear that the Government will look again at those cases where people have been turned down?

The assessment framework for PIP is not fit for purpose and has created a hostile environment for disabled people. After the ruling, Mind commented: “Far too many are struggling to claim benefits they need because of draconian assessments, which often fail to take fully into account the impact a mental health problem can have.”

Does the Minister agree? Many people with mental health problems can feel socially isolated, so surely the Government should be providing a system that supports people in need.
It was revealed recently that more than 60,000 appeals against the tests for PIP ruled against the Government in 2018. That is 72% of all tribunals. Clearly this is wholly unjust. The fact that such a high proportion of PIP assessments are overturned on appeal speaks volumes about the failings of the Government’s record when it comes to providing support to disabled people. Ill and disabled people should not have to fight through the courts to receive the support that they are entitled to.

Ministers at the Ministry of Justice recently revealed that the Government spent £26.5 million in 2018 on PIP hearings that ruled against the Department. The Minister must surely also be aware that the introduction of PIP has ended up costing the taxpayer more than the system it replaced, so will he commit today to scrapping the cruel and discredited PIP assessment framework and replacing it with one that treats disabled people with the respect they deserve and provides them with the support they need?

Justin Tomlinson: To repeat: we do welcome the judgment. It was the Government who referred this matter to the Supreme Court to get clarity. Across society, there is a deeper understanding of mental health, and that is welcome. This is not an exact science, but it is one of the few areas where there is cross-party support. Together, we get a better understanding of how to identify and support people with mental health conditions. This will be a complex exercise, and we will need to work carefully through the detail of the judgment before we start the exercise of checking claims. We are committed to doing that as soon as we can, working with disabled people and stakeholders, so that we can pay people as quickly as possible. I remind the hon. Lady that we are committed to supporting those with disabilities and long-term health conditions. We are now spending £10 billion more than when we came into office in 2010 on supporting people with long-term health conditions and disabilities. This represents a record high of 6% of Government spending, and we are committed to seeing that rise in every single year for the rest of this Parliament.

On the specific point of appeals, we know that the vast majority of successful appeals are because of additional written and oral evidence, but we recognise that the independent appeal process is too long and that it adds anxiety for claimants who are in too many cases having those decisions changed over. We are therefore determined to improve the mandatory reconsideration stage so that we can proactively contact claimants to get that additional written and oral evidence at that point. We have already piloted this in all the PIP mandatory reconsideration assessment centres, and that has been so encouragingly positive that we will do the same with the work capability assessment mandatory reconsiderations. This is a really important area of work, and we are determined to get it right for all claimants as quickly as possible.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Many people will be unaware of the way in which PIP supports people who have mental health conditions far better than the predecessor benefit, disability living allowance, but mental health conditions can fluctuate and people can find it very difficult to get the right support and advice. How is my hon. Friend ensuring that PIP best supports those people, particularly in finding their way through what can be a very complicated and difficult application system?

Justin Tomlinson: My right hon. Friend raises the really powerful point that we collectively need to do more to support claimants with mental health conditions. This is why we now have mental health champions in all the PIP assessments, and we are putting videos online so that people can see what to expect. We encourage claimants to bring a trusted third party—family, friends or a support worker—with them during the process, and we are working with the Department of Health and Social Care to identify ways to get hold of the crucial medical evidence that can improve the decision making at the first time of asking.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): Will the Minister please answer the question that the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) asked him at the beginning: how many more claimants will now be eligible for PIP who previously were not? Also, will he again clarify a commitment that he will look at all those claimants who have had their PIP application turned down, to see whether they are now eligible under the new rules?

Justin Tomlinson: We must consider the detail of the judgment and how it needs to be implemented before we can estimate how many people will be affected, but we will look back at cases. We are committed to engaging with stakeholders and disabled people, utilising their expertise, to ensure that the people who should receive support get it fully, fairly and as quickly as possible.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Liberal Democrats welcome the Supreme Court judgment, and I welcome much of what the Minister has said today about making things easier and more appropriate. However, does he accept that, as has already been mentioned, mental health assessments bring with them a particularly difficult set of circumstances? People’s conditions may fluctuate, and assessments affect individuals in different ways, so will he consider, yet again, bringing assessments back in-house and having specialists who deal specifically with mental health cases to ensure that individuals get not only a mental health champion, but an appropriate champion with knowledge of their particular condition?

Justin Tomlinson: I understand the thrust of the hon. Lady’s point, and I know that she works hard in this area. As I have said, our collective understanding is getting better, and we are working with stakeholders—people with real frontline experience—to help shape our training. All the assessors—trained health professionals—have people behind them who are experts in all conditions, not just mental health. Remember, many claimants have a menu of health conditions to be navigated. Where an assessor feels that they need additional support, they will get it from those experts before the assessment and while writing the report afterwards.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): To be dragged to the courts yet again in relation to PIP and the totally inadequate support that it provides to disabled people is a shame on this Government. According to Mind, two thirds of people on DLA for
mental health conditions have had their PIP refused or reduced, which is just not good enough. On top of that, 60 disabled people a month—a month—die after being refused PIP. To say that PIP is an okay support system for the most vulnerable people in this country is an absolute disgrace, so will the Minister write to me and answer the questions that I put to him in my letter of over two months ago?

Justin Tomlinson: I remind the hon. Lady that the Government took this case to the Supreme Court because we wanted to get clarity on this important issue. I also remind her that, under DLA, only 6% of claimants with a mental health condition got access to the highest rate of support. Under PIP, 33% of claimants are getting that support—more than five times higher than under DLA. We are doing everything we can to support people, and we are continuing to work with stakeholders and disabled people to ensure that the process continues to improve. I am proud that this Government are spending a record amount of money on supporting the most vulnerable people in society, something that Opposition Members continue to vote against at each Budget.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Ind): The judgment is welcome, of course, because it will provide more support to people with mental health conditions, but it does prompt a question, regardless of who brought the case, about whether the PIP and ESA assessment processes still contain significant flaws. I was under the impression that the Government were looking at the processes, potentially bringing them back in-house, and I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) that there should be more specific assessments for people with certain types of health conditions. Why are the contracts with Atos and Capita being extended for another two years when they are not meeting their targets?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The key thing is that we will continue to engage with stakeholders and disabled people and be held to account by the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, of which the hon. Lady is an active member. We will continue to make improvements, which is why increasing amounts of money are rightly being spent on vulnerable people in society. The Secretary of State is personally committed to improving the process, and we will do all that we can to do so.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The change from DLA to PIP has meant that my constituents have lost £2 million collectively. [Interruption.] That is a matter of fact, so I do not know why the Secretary of State is shaking his head. There is clearly a lot of despair behind that figure, and the recent judgment clearly proves that the situation is unsound. What is the Secretary of State going to do to fix it?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this with me. I am just a Minister of State, but he is very kind. To be clear, 33% of people with a mental health condition will now access the highest rate of support under PIP, compared with just 6% under the legacy benefit. That is significant progress, but we are committed to work with stakeholders and disabled people to continue the improvements that we are proud to be making.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Just last week, I had a constituent in my surgery who had not been awarded points in their PIP assessment for which I could clearly see that they were eligible. After the ruling, and considering that people have hidden and fluctuating conditions, what can my constituent now expect?

Justin Tomlinson: As I have set out, we will be looking carefully at the judgment, but the hon. Gentleman highlights something. As constituency MPs, we all have cases in which it is clear that, with additional written and oral evidence, a different decision could come about. That is why it is right—it is a departmental priority—to improve the mandatory reconsideration stage, so that more people can get the correct decision much quicker, without the long independent appeal process.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): There is a letter in the post to the Minister about this case, but I do not know whether he will be there to receive it, so I thought that I would ask about it here. My constituent has a long-standing diagnosis of Asperger’s, but her PIP assessor ignored the detailed medical evidence that she had provided and performed a five-minute mental state test involving taking 25p away from £1 and spelling the word “world” backwards. Her decision letter stated that she had “no cognitive sensory impairment diagnosed” and “no evidence of a cognitive impairment”.

Surely constituents should not have to come to their MP to get such evident mistakes overturned. The Minister should be getting things right first time, rather than going for mandatory reconsiderations.

Justin Tomlinson: I have gone from being the Secretary of State to potentially not having a job in the next couple of days in the space of one question, but I will look at that letter carefully. I actually agree with the hon. Lady’s point that we want the right decision the first time. We want claimants to be able to access the crucial medical evidence that can assist with assessments. Assessments are right more often than not, and only a small percentage of claims ultimately need to be appealed, but we need to learn lessons wherever there are mistakes, and I will take that case seriously.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I also welcome the ruling, but it is important not just that we get rulings, but that people on PIP get the support that they deserve. I was concerned by the release of figures a couple of weeks ago showing that the Department’s own equality impact assessment expected 14% of the 1.6 million people on PIP who were reviewed after previous court rulings to get an additional award, but just 0.8% of people reviewed have actually received an increase in their entitlement. Will the Minister commit to an urgent audit of what is going on in those reviews to ensure that people affected by this case do not see their awards quashed yet again?

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Lady refers to the mental health estimates, which were done before the final guidance was implemented. We have consulted with Mind and
other key stakeholders on the revised guidance, and we will continue to ensure that those who are entitled to additional support get it as quickly as possible. We are on track to complete that work by next year, as initially set out.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): We all have casework in our surgeries involving people suffering from mental health issues who have been denied PIP or have had it taken away from them, but the situation goes beyond that. I have a profoundly deaf constituent who was transferred from DLA to PIP, but they were then denied PIP. Other people with chronic illnesses have failed to score enough points through the question and answer system. Will the Minister take on board the fact that other people in the system will be suffering similarly? We need a fundamental review to ensure that those people do not suffer in the way that they are currently.

Justin Tomlinson: We have made a real commitment, and we work closely with stakeholders representing a huge variety of disability and health conditions, empowering them to challenge, to make suggestions, and to work with our teams to help shape the training guidance. That is why an increasing amount of money is being spent each year on supporting people with disabilities and long-term health conditions. As I said, at £55 billion a year, spending is up £10 billion since we came to office. That is a record high, and it will continue to increase as we work, listen and engage with the people who have frontline experience, which is a role that the Government have committed to do.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I have a constituent who is rebuilding his life after spending some time in jail. His mental health condition means that he has communication issues and that crowds are a problem for him, which makes travel on public transport more problematic. All of that makes it difficult for him to maintain family contact and access the necessary support groups. He was denied PIP despite my office sending supporting letters and trying to help him hit the PIP descriptors. What changes will the Government make to the system so that my constituent will get the support that he deserves, as in the Supreme Court ruling, and be able to go forward and fully integrate into society?

Justin Tomlinson: I would be happy to look at that specific case. On the broader point of supporting people transitioning from prison back into society, I pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who has responsibility for family support. He has been working with the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland), the prisons Minister, to make sure it is joined up. We have had successful trials to make sure that work coaches go into prison in advance of a person’s leaving, as it is key that those who need the support can access it as quickly and as smoothly as possible. The case raised by the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) highlights why that is so important.

Decriminalisation of Abortion

1 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on the repeal of sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 in England and Wales, in consequence of the decriminalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I have been asked to answer this question. As with other matters of conscience, abortion is an issue on which the Government adopt a neutral stance and allow Members to vote according to their moral, ethical or religious beliefs. As the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, I have responsibility for abortion policy, I am an instrument of the House in that regard and I will discharge the instructions of the House in the best interests of patient safety.

The Government have a duty to see that the provisions of the Abortion Act 1967 are properly applied until, and unless, Parliament chooses further to amend that law. The hon. Lady will be aware that the Abortion Act—the legislation affecting England and Wales—is an amendment to the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. Notwithstanding the issues in Northern Ireland, the Government currently have no plans to amend sections 58 and 59 of the 1861 Act in England and Wales.

Abortion is an extremely sensitive issue, and there are very strongly held views on all sides of the debate. Given this, any significant changes to the law require careful consideration and full consultation with the medical profession and others. Moreover, it is right that MPs and peers—or the devolved legislatures, as the case may be—have adequate opportunity to scrutinise any legislation fully. The Joint Committee on the draft Domestic Abuse Bill has also made it clear that abortion is not a matter for the Domestic Abuse Bill, which the House will consider shortly.

The question of potential reform to Northern Ireland’s abortion laws, through the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill, if no restored Government are in place, should not be cause to reform the system in England and Wales. Abortion in England and Wales is already accessible and serves the needs of women seeking to access such services. The law also provides protection for the medical profession in carrying out its functions and duty of care to women.

As abortion is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, the Government’s preference remains that a restored Executive and a functioning Assembly take forward any reforms to the law and policy on this issue. It is our hope that devolved government will be restored at the earliest opportunity through the current talks process.

We do, however, recognise the strength of feeling expressed by the House in the amendments to the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill, which place a duty on the Government to make regulations to reform Northern Ireland’s abortion laws if there is no restored Executive by 21 October 2019. The Government will work expeditiously to take forward this work, should that duty come into effect in the absence of devolved government.
The Government will also work with service providers to ensure that, in the meantime, the scheme provided in England for women from Northern Ireland continues to be fully accessible and that appropriate information is provided to those seeking to access those services. It remains my priority to provide safe access to abortion services under the law, as set by Parliament.

I appreciate this is an emotive issue, on which there are strongly held views, and I am sure it is something we will continue to debate in Parliament over the coming months, but I end by reminding the House that, over the past 50 years, the Abortion Act has ensured that women have access to legal safe abortion, which has contributed to a significant reduction in maternal mortality and has helped to empower women to make informed choices at what can be a very sensitive and difficult time in their lives.

**Diana Johnson** (for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for and the urgent question. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for granting this debate. My hon. Friend reminds us that from the perspective of the safety of women accessing abortion services, the issues raised by the hon. Lady do concern me. It is not good for the welfare of women that pills are being accessed online. I also observe that the Abortion Act is more than 50 years old and was the product of a very different time. Abortions were then entirely surgical, and the medical abortions to which we now have access are clearly far safer.

This is very much a personal view, and I am not speaking for the Government in advancing this view, but I think that making provision for early abortion and for recognising medical abortion in law will get us much further. We need to make sure we have a safe regime that enables women to access abortion services as safely as possible.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I supported decriminalisation, I supported the regularising of the abortion law in Northern Ireland last week, and, on Friday I shall visit my local BPAS clinic. But changing the law is only part of it. Last year, I was out with an ambulance crew and we were called out to a woman who had been at an abortion clinic and taken the pills. She was bleeding heavily and had been taken very ill, and there was no out-of-hours service—this was on a Friday evening. Does the Minister agree, particularly in respect of the availability of ‘do-it-yourself’ pills on the internet, that it is absolutely essential that, at a very difficult time for a woman who has taken that decision, the ongoing support is there 24 hours a day, seven days a week?

**Jackie Doyle-Price**: My hon. Friend reminds us that this is not always an easy process for women to go through. As with any medical procedure, full consent must be given, based on full information. As long as pills can be accessed via the internet rather than via medical professionals, it is clearly more likely that women will not be informed of the risks of taking the pills. Any medication can have risks and consequences, and women need to be fully advised so that they can manage what they are going through.

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for granting this urgent question. I thank her for her tireless campaigning on this issue. I share her disappointment that no Home Office Minister
was available to respond to this urgent question; waiting for a call is obviously more important. I thank the British Pregnancy Advisory Service for its excellent work on this issue, and for its new campaign, launched today, called #PunishedForPills.

Following the passage yesterday of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill, we find ourselves with a discrepancy across the UK when it comes to abortion. As we have heard, sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 no longer apply in Northern Ireland, but still apply in England and Wales, which means that if a woman does not seek the permission of two doctors before having an abortion, she could face up to life imprisonment in Britain, but not in Northern Ireland. The same goes for women who access abortion pills online. There are a whole host of reasons why women may do that, including not being able to get an appointment at a clinic, which now happens more and more often; not having childcare; living in a rural area; or being in an abusive relationship. Although women in Northern Ireland will no longer be persecuted for accessing abortion pills, the same cannot be said for women in Britain. I know this issue does not fall under the Minister's brief, but will she ensure that abortion will be decriminalised, but not deregulated, throughout the UK? That would increase access to and the safety of abortions for women throughout the UK.

No one takes abortion lightly—this is a very sensitive issue—but I am sure that we in the House can all agree that women deserve access to safe and legal health procedures, and that includes abortion. A woman's right to choose is a human rights matter. We need to seize on the momentum of the great result in the Republic of Ireland and deliver equality of rights for women throughout the UK and equality of resources across the whole NHS. The Government need to make this a landmark year in which women's reproductive rights are fully respected and realised. That is why I call on the Government to repeal sections 58 and 59 today, to make abortion rights equal throughout the UK.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank the hon. Lady for the characteristically constructive spirit in which she has engaged with this issue. The rub of the point she makes is that decriminalisation must not be met with deregulation. Whatever we do, we must make sure that in repealing those sections of the 1861 Act—if that is what Parliament chooses to do—the regime that replaces it must not only guarantee the rights of women to take decisions for themselves but protect them and keep them safe. That is my priority in addressing this issue.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): My hon. Friend is aware—isn’t she?—that any proposal for repeal will be resisted as passionately in the country and on the Government Back Benches as it has just been advocated by those on the Opposition Benches?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am very aware that this issue rouses passions on both sides of the argument, which is why I reassure the House that, from my perspective, I just want to make sure that I deliver Parliament's instructions in a way that is safe. I should add that perhaps the way in which both sides of the argument have been debated in the House has not led to good lawmaking, because it has meant that the law has not been revisited in 50 years and has not kept pace with medical advancement.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister herself just made exactly the case that my good and hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) made so powerfully about the need to make sure that the law works for the 21st century. The votes we had in this place in the past two weeks were to recognise that human rights are not a devolved matter and should be available to every UK citizen. Although I enjoy the irony that potentially we could end up with the most progressive abortion laws in Northern Ireland, my constituents in Walthamstow and, indeed, all our constituents in England and Wales deserve to be treated equally as an adult, able to make their own choices.

In reading out what I believe someone had given to her as the Government’s stated position on this legislation, which puts having an abortion on the same level as child stealing and using gunpowder to blow up a building, the Minister said that there would need to be a consultation with medical bodies “and others”. Will she tell us who the others are and why, when it comes to something medical, it is only women who seem to have non-medical professionals getting involved in deciding what their rights to access treatment might be?

Jackie Doyle-Price: As with any consultation, “others” would include all members of the public, and everyone here is a representative of members of the public. There are a number of ways that we can get to the outcome of legislation fit for the 21st century. It is the Government’s position that the simple repeal of those two aspects of the 1861 Act is not sufficient to guarantee safe legislation for women in this country. We have an Abortion Act that empowers women to take decisions themselves. Again, I come back to the fact that this is an issue of conscience. As Minister, I will implement the law as decided by Parliament.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I have great respect for the Minister, but I do not think there is any case at all for inviting amateurs to comment on what should be medical, clinical assessments. The criminal law always bears down most harshly on the most vulnerable and marginalised women: very young women, those with literacy or learning difficulties, those with poor language skills and those who may be in an abusive relationship. Will the Minister therefore consider again her stance—the Government’s stance—on the impact of encompassing this offence in our criminal law, and look at steps that can be taken urgently to repeal it?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The specific offences to which the hon. Lady refers are a matter for the Home Office. The Government’s position is that they should not be repealed for England and Wales at this point. I absolutely understand the issue she raises with regard to the most vulnerable, and she and I have had discussions on that basis, but that is also a reason why simple repeal is not necessarily the best tool. To have a safe regime in place is also to protect exactly the people she identified. As I have said, from a personal perspective I do not think
that the current law is in any way satisfactory, and I hope that in future we can have sensible discussions about how we might modernise it.

**Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab):** In my role as a member of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, the committee on which I serve, which is chaired by the noble Lord Dubs, has for the past two years been looking at abortion policy across the whole of Ireland and Britain. Our report should have been available already, but there was some disagreement as to its final content. We will be updating it, hopefully for publishing in October. It would be helpful to discuss that report with the Government. As well as online medication, we have found other particularly concerning issues: we need to remember that there are no borders for healthcare for women across these islands, and there are no borders for how women across these islands will continue to support each other. We want to see more equality. Of real concern are the often very traumatic cases of late terminations. The workforce across our islands are not skilled—there are not enough of them and there are not enough good-quality skills. Does the Minister agree that the Government should at least look into those points regarding workforce?

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** Yes, absolutely. I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady about her report. That there is difficulty in getting agreement comes as no surprise to me but, given the intentions of the people behind it, having that discussion would be useful. Yes, I have heard concerns expressed about skills levels, in particular to perform late-stage terminations, which are incredibly dangerous, as she is aware. I will endeavour to take that forward with the relevant bodies.

**Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Ind):** I sense that the Minister is genuinely trying to help. There is some irony in that we have been trying for so long to amend legislation in Northern Ireland to reflect what we have here, but now it has gone the other way—in the absence of any Executive, with the repeal of sections 58 and 59, Northern Ireland will in fact have more modernised legislation than we have. May I ask her explicitly what she thinks—personally, I suspect—would be the most effective tool to modernise abortion law right across the UK, which the majority of Members want?

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** That is a difficult question to answer given that the matter is now completely devolved. In respect of England and Wales, I think that the most effective method would be to revisit the Abortion Act, which is itself an amendment to the Offences Against the Person Act providing an exemption for women seeking an abortion. That is the difference. If we make it about the Offences Against the Person Act, we are missing the point about England and Wales.

**Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab):** Will the Minister give us an example of any other medical procedure or treatment that is a human right that is criminalised by the law in England and Wales?

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** We need to look at exactly what the Offences Against the Person Act says, which is not in the context of a medical procedure. That is why we have the Abortion Act, which provides for a specific exemption by treating abortion as a medical procedure. The Offences Against the Person Act is in effect about foeticide; the Abortion Act amends that to decriminalise women seeking an abortion. That is the difference. If we make it about the Offences Against the Person Act, we are devolving that to the devolved Administrations.

**BILLS PRESENTED**

**Low Carbon Domestic Heating Bill**

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Sir David Amess, supported by Ian Austin, Mr Adrian Bailey, Sir Graham Brady, Tom Brake, Maria Caulfield, Mr Roger Godsiff, Zac Goldsmith, John Grogan, Tim Loughton, Sarah Newton and Alex Sobel, presented a Bill to make provision about low carbon domestic heating systems.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 427).*

**Asylum Seekers (Accommodation Eviction Procedures) Bill**

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to make provision for asylum seekers to challenge the proportionality of a proposed eviction from accommodation before an independent court or tribunal; to establish asylum seeker eviction accommodation procedures for public authorities; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 428).*

**Mr Speaker:** Suggestive of a busy “tomorrow”—we shall await the development of events. Meanwhile, we have an item of considerable parliamentary excitement, namely the ten-minute rule motion, which the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) has been patiently waiting to move.
Tibet (Reciprocal Access)

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

1.24 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con):

I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to report annually on restrictions on access by UK nationals to Tibet in comparison with other regions of China; to make provision to deny persons involved in imposing such restrictions permission to enter the UK; and for connected purposes.

In May, in my role as chair of the all-party group for Tibet, I attended the seventh world parliamentary convention in Riga, Latvia, together with the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), who I am delighted is in the Chamber today. We joined parliamentarians from around the world, representatives of the Tibetan Parliament in exile based in Dharamshala, and His Excellency Lobsang Sangay, the Sikyong or President of the Central Tibetan Administration since 2012. We were pleased to receive the Sikyong in this place, and that he met you, Mr Speaker, just a few weeks ago.

At the convention, we discussed continued human rights abuses of Tibetans at the hands of Chinese security forces; the routine intimidation of Tibetans, their supporters and the Dalai Lama himself around the world; the assaults on the Tibetan language, and the culture, religious practices and way of life of Tibetans generally; and the continued population transfer of Chinese into Tibet to dilute and smother further the Tibetan identity. We also debated at length the environmental degradation being waged on the Tibetan plateau, which has led to an unprecedented number of natural disasters, caused by the impact of excessive and unsustainable mineral extraction and dam construction in an area whose rivers service some 40% of the world’s population; as well as the accumulation of waste and the dumping of toxic waste on the plateau and in Tibet’s waters. We discussed, too, the tragic self-immolation of more than 150 Tibetans in protest against Chinese persecution in Tibet, and the continued human rights abuses generally.

We all signed up to the Riga declaration, which requests China

“give unimpeded access to Tibet to foreign journalists, scholars and researchers, diplomats and other foreign citizens, including those of Tibetan origin.

To cease its policies and practices that harm the natural environment of the Tibetan Plateau.

And to resume the dialogue with envoys of His Holiness the Dalai Lama without preconditions”.

because the Tibetan struggle has always been a peaceful one.

A few days before the convention, I received a phone call from a senior official at the Chinese embassy in London, strongly suggesting that I should not be going to Riga, that I should not be consorting with such people and that I should rethink my plans, because everything is fine in Tibet, and that is plain for all to see. Basically, I was told, “You don’t want to go Riga, Mr Loughton, do you?” I responded politely that his entreaties had made me even more determined to attend the convention and I asked why, rather than intimidating parliamentarians, the Chinese Government do not sit down to talk to us.

I again invited the Chinese ambassador to attend a meeting of the all-party group for Tibet and indicated that a group of us would be delighted to be hosted in Tibet so that the Chinese Government can show us at first hand how everything in Tibet is just fine. Subsequently, I wrote twice to His Excellency Liu Xiaoming, the Chinese ambassador in London, but I await a reply, even though the ambassador has found time to attend numerous other all-party group meetings in this place and various other events in recent months.

We should not be surprised, however, by that behaviour by the Chinese. Their record on human rights, cultural tolerance and the environment is deplorable, which is why they do not want people from outside finding out what goes on in the inside. Foreigners including British and EU citizens, and Americans require a number of special authorisations and permits in addition to a Chinese visa to enter the Tibet autonomous region, which spans about half of Tibet. For those who do get in, a Government-appointed guide must accompany them, and during politically sensitive periods the region is completely closed to foreigners. Such closures have occurred regularly since a wave of mostly peaceful protest swept across the Tibetan plateau ahead of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Foreign diplomats, parliamentarians, journalists and even UN officials are almost always denied visits to the region, other than on rare official tours carefully orchestrated by the Chinese authorities. At the same time, Tibetans are regularly prevented from travelling outside China, and those passing information abroad are punished severely. A prominent example is Tashi Wangchuk, a young language rights advocate who last year was sentenced to five years in prison, just for giving an interview to The New York Times about his efforts to protect Tibetans’ mother tongue. The UK ambassador in Beijing has not been able to visit the Tibet autonomous region since 2017, and is still waiting for permission to travel. Trips by officials and tourists are always closely managed, and travel permits are often withdrawn at short notice.

Sadly, such restrictions are even harsher for European citizens of Tibetan heritage, many of whom are refugees who escaped from Tibet and are specifically targeted by and discriminated against by Chinese embassies and consulates when they apply for a travel permit. That cruelly prevents many of them being able to see their families, from whom in many cases they have been separated for a long time.

Recently we have seen the latest attempts at repression by the Chinese authorities in Hong Kong, and the brave resistance of millions of Hong Kong citizens. Less graphically we have been given limited access to the appalling abuses in the Xinjiang region of China, where more than 1 million Uighurs, Kazakhs and other primarily Muslim minorities are detained in concentration camps that are cynically dressed up as re-education schools. Families are being split up and thousands of children are being taken into state care. But we must not be distracted from the long-term protracted suffering of the Tibetan people; in the 60 years since the occupation and invasion, more than 1 million Tibetans have lost and continue to lose their lives.
We can no longer sit idly by. All attempts to shed light on human rights abuses through the universal periodic review of the UN Human Rights Council have been snubbed, and they continue unabated and largely in secret. The Foreign Press Association has reported that it is easier for Beijing-based journalists to visit North Korea than to visit Tibet.

Chinese authorities take advantage of our freedoms in the west to travel freely and spread their propaganda, but routinely refuse to reciprocate. That must stop. Recognising this, in December 2018 the United States adopted the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act, which promotes access to Tibetan areas for American diplomats, journalists and ordinary citizens—just as their Chinese counterparts enjoy in the US. Despite Chinese denunciation of this law, the legislation already appears to have made an impact, as Chinese state media are now reporting that Beijing has decided to adopt a faster process for foreign tourists to receive permits to enter Tibet. This landmark Act had cross-party support and was unanimously approved by the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in December. It was sponsored by Republican Senator Rubio and Democrat Senator Bob Menendez, and even President Trump welcomed it.

My Bill mirrors the US Act. I will shortly be publishing the draft Bill, replacing references to “US” with “UK” and “State Department” with “Foreign Office”, and making other appropriate adjustments. It will also include a recommendation for the UK Government formally to request that the UN Special Committee on Decolonization considers Tibet. Given that China is part of that committee, it would therefore need to recuse itself. I hope that request will be taken seriously.

My Bill requires the Foreign Office to report to Parliament annually regarding the level of access that Chinese authorities grant to UK diplomats, journalists and tourists to Tibetan areas in China. Such assessment shall include: a comparison with the level of access granted to other areas of China; a comparison between the levels of access granted to Tibetan and non-Tibetan areas in relevant provinces; a comparison of the level of access in the reporting year and the previous year; and a description of the measures that impede the freedom to travel in Tibetan areas.

Under this legislation, no individual who is substantially involved in the formulation or execution of policies related to access for foreigners to Tibetan areas may enter the United Kingdom if: the requirement that foreigners must receive official permission to enter the Tibet autonomous region remains in effect or has been replaced by a similar regulation that also requires foreigners to gain a level of permission to enter the Tibet autonomous region that is not required for other provinces; and travel restrictions on United Kingdom diplomats, officials, journalists and citizens to Tibet autonomous areas in Sichuan, Qinghai, Yunnan and Gansu provinces—I apologise to Hansard—are greater than travel restrictions to other areas.

The Bill will also require the Foreign Office to report to Parliament annually, identifying individuals who were blocked from United Kingdom entry during the preceding year and a list of Chinese officials who are substantially involved in the formulation or execution of policies to restrict the access of UK diplomats, journalists and citizens to Tibetan areas.

The Bill mirrors the legislation that has already been passed unanimously by the US Congress. It is time for us, in Europe and the United Kingdom, to take a similar stand to show categorically to China that its continued abuses in Tibet do not go unnoticed or unappreciated, and that we will tolerate them no more.

I am pleased to report that the Bill is co-sponsored by Members representing all the main political parties who have more than one Member in this House—demonstrating the widespread sense of outrage at what China continues to get away with in its continued persecution of Tibet and Tibetans the world over. I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Tim Loughton, Chris Law, Sir Peter Bottomley, Jim Shannon, Kerry McCarthy, Christine Jardine, Jonathan Edwards, Mike Gapes, Maria Caulfield, Catherine West, Fiona Bruce and Marion Fellows present the Bill.

Tim Loughton accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 429).
Exiting the European Union (Transport)

1.35 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): I beg to move,

That the draft Cableway Installations (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 2 July, be approved.

These regulations will be needed in the event that the UK leaves the EU without an agreement. They are being made under powers conferred by the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, and will give clarity and certainty to industry by fixing deficiencies that will arise in two pieces of legislation when the UK leaves the EU: namely, EU regulation 2016/424, which is a directly applicable EU regulation; and the Cableway Installations Regulations 2018, which implemented the EU regulation.

It may be helpful if I provide some background. Cableways are a mixture of funicular railways and aerial transport systems such as ski lifts for the transport of passengers. They are important for tourism and communities, and we support their continued success. The majority are in snow sports resorts in Scotland, but they also include the Emirates line in London. Those that entered into service before 1 January 1986 are in a few years’ time if we have no snow and no ski resorts because of climate change.

The EU regulation is in part directly applicable in the UK, so it forms part of domestic law. The 2018 regulations supplement the EU regulation where further detail is required—for example, on the authorisation process for the construction or modification of and entry into service of cableway installations, and in providing for the enforcement of the regulatory framework. The EU regulation and the 2018 regulations ensure conformity of standards of cableway components across the EU; require the Secretary of State to notify the EU Commission of the notified body responsible for carrying out conformity assessments to ensure that cableway systems, subsystems and their components meet EU standards; and require the Secretary of State to set rules on the design, construction and entry into service of new cableway installations.

The 2018 regulations and the EU regulation contain a number of elements that will be inappropriate after the UK leaves the European Union. If left unamended, these would render the 2018 regulations and the EU regulation deficient in certain respects post-exit. This instrument will ensure that the legislation on cableway installations will continue to function correctly in the future—as I am sure the House would approve—providing reassurance that the components used in new cableways, or for maintaining or repairing existing cableways, are safe and that they comply with EU standards. Given the reassurance provided by the current standards, we have no current plans to diverge from them. However, if the UK ever wanted to diverge from EU harmonised standards, the instrument contains a power for the Secretary of State to designate standards in future. The instrument enables the Secretary of State to designate standards by means of a technical specification for cableways installations, their systems or subsystems, and publish that standard in a manner which he considers appropriate.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I am listening intently to the Minister’s remarks about this extremely interesting and important SI that we are about to pass. Has he considered the impact of climate change on the use of cableways in, particularly, Scottish ski resorts, which are probably the biggest users of such technology? These regulations may be completely redundant in a few years’ time if we have no snow and no ski resorts because of climate change.

Michael Ellis: I am so grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. Of course, everything that I do in the Department for Transport considers these important issues of climate change, and my officials are very alive to this issue.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Very frequently in the measure, the words “notified body” are replaced with “approved body”. Why is that so common a feature?

Michael Ellis: I am going to come to that right now.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Elaborating on the point made by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), one can actually have artificial snow ski resorts.

Michael Ellis: Yes, indeed, but even then, one would still need a cableway in order to reach the required area.

The use of this power would be subject to full consultation with the industry and the appropriate technical and safety bodies, such as the Health and Safety Executive.

As the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) mentioned, this instrument replaces the definition of “notified body” with “approved body”. This will allow the Secretary of State to approve bodies to carry out cableways conformity assessments. It should be noted that currently there are no such approved bodies in the UK, so until such time as a body is approved, we will continue to recognise EU notified bodies. I hope that is clear.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): When my hon. Friend was considering rolling over these standards, did he look at American and other world standards compared with European ones? Were they higher or lower, and might we lose out if we adopt only European standards in terms of imports?

Michael Ellis: Of course we keep under advisement all the safety standards. The officials in my Department are constantly looking at issues of safety. Historical and heritage cableway apparatus, for example, is subject to different regulations under the Health and Safety at
Work etc. Act 1974. General safety is of paramount importance, and we always look at international comparisons.

All the other changes being made by the instrument are minor and technical in nature—for example, removing references to member states and changing the terminology where applicable.

In summary, cableways are important to communities across the UK and are part of the economy in many areas. These draft regulations will give industry the clarity and certainty it needs that the current standards will continue to apply if the UK leaves the EU without an agreement.

1.43 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I rise in support of the Cableway Installations (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019. These regulations would come into force if the UK were to leave the EU without a deal, which would clearly be catastrophic for the economy and our future.

However, why are we debating these regulations only now, nearly four months after the UK was due to leave the EU? If we had left with no deal at that time, what would have happened to the cableway sector and its regulation? It seems extraordinary that the Government are only now discovering regulations that need to be debated. How many more are at the back of the cupboard in the Minister’s Department and are yet to come to the Floor of the House? That is especially important as safety is paramount in these regulations. So much for no-deal preparations; even legislation protecting vital things like safety has been forgotten.

We have demonstratively seen how poor preparations for no deal are in the Minister’s Department—let us not forget the Operation Stack demonstration, for example. Clearly, his Department is not ready for no deal. Perhaps he can assure the House today, as I have asked his colleagues to do previously, that this is the very last regulation to come on to the Floor of this House to ensure that EU law is enshrined in UK law in the adverse event of the UK leaving the European Union. If it is not, how many more regulations can the House expect?

These regulations deal with the components necessary for the installation of cableways such as ski lifts, the Emirates line and funicular railways, and seek to establish parallel processes to those in the EU, with the Health and Safety Executive and the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland taking over the role of the enforcement body. The United Kingdom Accreditation Service will then ensure that an assessment is made by an approved body—not by the Secretary of State—so that the components for installation meet the required standard. The setting of standards will sit with the Secretary of State, as a new extended power, but he will, in reality, work with industry to set the standards, which will sit under the British Standards Institute.

The CE—Conformité Européenne—certification marker will transfer to the UK, to be replaced by a UK marker. This transfer of functions is a practical solution should we end up with no deal. If we do, it is expected that there will be no divergence from EU standards for the industry. At least not to start with. However, it is not clear whether parity with EU standards will be maintained if EU standards advance. Can the Minister confirm this, and set out in what instances he believes there could be divergence, and how his Government will respond to that? Will he ensure that in that scenario, UK legislation will keep pace with EU legislation? Clearly, for the industry in this specialist field, and the resultant supply chain, it is in the interests of manufacturing and safety standards that there be no divergence, although we can always have better safety regulations, and that we are not forced into a no-deal scenario under the new Prime Minister.

Concern has been raised about fee setting for this process, not least by the Scottish snow sports sector and Transport for London. I note that the Department highlights that that does not come within the scope of the regulations, but will the Minister tell the House how this will operate in a no-deal Brexit scenario, since a transfer of authoritative bodies, inspection bodies and the enforcement body could impact on fees?

Labour will support these regulations this afternoon, but I hope to have some clarity from the Minister on the issues that I have raised.

1.48 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Here we go again: the Government have thought it fit to bring this very minor statutory instrument to the main Chamber for debate. Why has a straightforward cut-and-paste job, which simply substitutes references to the EU with references to the UK, merited an allocation of 90 minutes in the main Chamber—or is the Minister trying to big it up? He said that the instrument is about fixing deficiencies and providing clarity and certainty for business, and that the Government developed it in close association with industry and the Health and Safety Executive, but that is not the case; it is a cut-and-paste and substitute job.

There is one slight difference: paragraph 2.8 of the explanatory notes details a “significant change”, in that there is a power for the Secretary of State to designate standards after Brexit day. So there we have it—there is a Brexit dividend: more powers for the Transport Secretary! However, he does not intend to wield these powers, fortunately; there is enough chaos and uncertainty due to Brexit without him intervening and creating further chaos, in line with his legacy.

As the shadow Minister said, we have to ask why, if the Government claimed they were ready for a no-deal Brexit in March, this measure has come forward four months after the original exit day. How on earth can the Government claim that they will pull off a no-deal Brexit deal in October when there is some really heavy legislation that we need to pass through this House in order to achieve that?

Paragraph 2.8 of the explanatory notes also advises that there are no approved bodies in the UK that can carry out conformity assessment, so the EU notified bodies will continue to be recognised. This is actually sensible, but again it shows the absurdity of exiting the EU. Will the Minister advise whether there are any plans to set up a new body?

As has been said, this SI covers 100 cableway installations in operation in the UK, the majority of which are for the ski industry in Scotland. Paragraph 10.3 of the explanatory notes details that, following the consultation, the “Scottish Snow Sports Sector expressed concern about the fee structure for the inspection of small cableways such as chair lifts.”
Yet a change in fees is not proposed, so can the Minister advise what assessment has been made of the fairness and level of fees, and is there any scope for reductions? Surely if we are to have any Brexit dividend, and the reduction in red tape that we keep hearing about, there must be scope for a reduction in the fees charged to the industry.

It is clear that this SI does absolutely nothing but allow some form of continuity by recognising the EU bodies involved, and changing some references. I will therefore certainly not oppose it, especially as it is particularly relevant to Scotland. I end by repeating my request for the Minister to engage with the ski sector, to see what movement can be made on the inspection fees charged to the industry.

1.51 pm

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): It’s a strange old world, isn’t it? This must be the strangest Parliament in many years. We are debating Bills that are no more than clauses, in effect, and we now have on the Floor of the House a measure that would normally have been taken in a Committee Room upstairs. It is actually a measure that the Government—or certainly today’s Government—hope they will never have to implement, because they are hopeful that some kind of deal will be done, so that we are not in the no-deal scenario in which this would be necessary.

There is a fundamental complexity in what the Government are arguing. In the explanatory notes, the Government say that the SI’s whole aim is to mirror precisely what the EU is doing. One therefore presumes, as my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) said, that if there are amendments to EU regulations in this area in the future, the UK Government will immediately implement them in the UK. That hardly feels like seizing back control; if anything, it feels more like ceding control to a body on which we will no longer be sitting. If there are to be European-wide measures on ski lifts—because, I guess, lots of people from across the European Union who travel from one country to another will want to know, when they get on a ski lift, that it is safe—one would have thought the UK would want to take part in establishing those rules and regulations.

The regulation has been admirably and beautifully expounded on by the Minister, who has had more than a wry smile, I would say, on his puckered lips.

**Michael Ellis:** I always look like this.

**Chris Bryant:** No, the Minister does not always look quite like that. This proves yet again what many of us have felt for a long time: that Brexit is proving far more complicated than anybody ever thought it would be, and is using an awful lot of our time and energy. Whether it will produce anything more than wind is difficult to know.

1.53 pm

**Michael Ellis:** The hon. Members for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) said the SI was allegedly unimportant, but that did not stop them talking to the Chamber about it at some length.

May I say to the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) that my Department is actually extremely advanced in the matter of statutory instruments? It has been focusing very strongly on this, and is in a very good place on it. Safety is of paramount importance; these are not minor matters. They are matters of considerable significance, not just for ski lifts but for funicular railways and the other areas we have discussed, including the Emirates line.

We at the Department for Transport have prioritised our SI programme. We have consulted the industry and the devolved Assemblies. We are confident that there will be no impact on safety of not having these regulations in place for exit day, but it is right that we bring them forward now and give the industry clarity, because that is common sense. Standards will not change. Provision will be made for the Secretary of State to set designated standards in future. As ever, that will be subject to full consultation with all the devolved Assemblies.

When it comes to the requirements and duties placed on cableway operators transporting passengers, maintaining the status quo after exit day is perfectly proper and necessary to ensure continuity of operations and safety. The objective of Her Majesty’s Government is to maintain the status quo in order to avoid uncertainty for cableway operators following exit day. I hope Members agree that that is a sensible approach that will benefit communities and the users of these services. I commend this statutory instrument to the House.

**Question put and agreed to.**
Electoral Commission


1.55 pm
The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride): I beg to move,

That an humble address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will re-appoint Rob Vincent CBE as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 January 2020 for the period ending 31 December 2023.

The motion proposes that a Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty praying that Her Majesty will reappoint Rob Vincent CBE as an electoral commissioner for a period of four years from 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2023. Mr Vincent has served as an electoral commissioner since 1 January 2016, and his current term expires on 31 December 2019.

It may help if I set out some of the background to this appointment. Electoral commissioners are appointed under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, as amended by the Political Parties and Elections Act 2009. Under the Act, the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission has a responsibility to oversee the selection of candidates for appointment to the Electoral Commission, including the reappointment of commissioners. The Speaker's committee has produced a report, its first report of 2019, in relation to this motion.

The Electoral Commission includes up to six ordinary commissioners, who are subject to restrictions as to political activity. They are recruited by open competition, under a procedure put in place and overseen by the Speaker's committee. The Electoral Commission also has four nominated commissioners, who are persons put forward by the registered leader of a qualifying party for consideration for appointment. Mr Vincent is an ordinary commissioner and was recruited through an open and fair competition conducted in 2015.

The Speaker's committee is required by section 3 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, as amended, to oversee the procedure for selecting candidates for appointment to the Electoral Commission. Under section 3(5A) of the Act, this duty encompasses the recommendation of candidates for reappointment to the Electoral Commission. There is no presumption in the statute either for or against reappointment.

At its meeting in March 2019, the Speaker's committee considered a request from Sir John Holmes, the chair of the Electoral Commission, seeking Mr Vincent's reappointment for a second term. In considering the question, the committee had regard to the report on Mr Vincent's effectiveness in the role, as submitted by Sir John. In particular, the committee was informed that Mr Vincent's previous experience as a returning officer in a local authority, and the practical understanding of this work he was able to bring to the work of the commission, had been extremely valuable.

Having carefully considered Sir John's report, the Speaker's committee concluded that it was content to recommend Mr Vincent for reappointment. Once the Speaker's committee has reached a decision, statute requires that the Speaker consult the registered leader of each registered party, provided that that party commands at least two Members of this House. The Speaker therefore accordingly wrote to the leaders of the qualifying parties in April, consulting them on Mr Vincent's reappointment.

No objections or concerns were received by the Speaker in response to this consultation. The Speaker's committee therefore commends the reappointment of Mr Vincent to the House. If the appointment is made, Rob Vincent will continue to serve on the Electoral Commission until 31 December 2023. I am sure that, should this motion pass today, his expertise will continue to be appreciated by the commission.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Given the importance of this reappointment to the Electoral Commission's work, will the Government start working on the Electoral Commission's recommendations, including the recommendation that electoral fines are too small and seen as normal, day-to-day business by the major UK parties; and the recommendation about revealing donations in Northern Ireland further back than the cut-off date set by the Government?

Mel Stride: I will say two things in response to the hon. Gentleman's question. The first is that it is slightly out of the scope of this debate on a motion concerning the reappointment of an electoral commissioner. I will, however, indulge the hon. Gentleman with my second observation, which is that the wider issues that he has raised would be best taken up with the Minister with responsibility for the constitution, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster).

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for moving the motion. I thank the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission for overseeing the procedure for selecting candidates for appointment to the Electoral Commission, and for producing its report, “Re-appointment of an Electoral Commissioner”, which was published on 8 July 2019. I thank Mr Speaker for chairing the committee and I thank the other members: the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington); the hon. Members for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns); and my hon. Friend the Members for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridge Phillipson).

Rob Vincent CBE has served as an electoral commissioner since 1 January 2016, and his current term of office expires on 31 December 2019. At its meeting on 18 March 2019, the Speaker's committee considered a letter from the chair of the Electoral Commission, Sir John Holmes, seeking Mr Vincent's reappointment for a second term. Sir John told the committee that Mr Vincent had consistently achieved the objectives agreed with him since his appointment, and that he had offered valuable contributions to the board's debates on strategy and resources.

Sir John also noted Mr Vincent's past experience, which the Leader of the House has outlined, as a returning officer in a local authority, and the practical understanding of that work that he had been able to bring to board meetings. Mr Vincent was chief executive of Kirklees Council between 2004 and 2010, and of Doncaster Council between 2010 and 2011.
After considering Sir John’s letter, the committee recommended that Mr Vincent be reappointed with effect from 1 January 2020 for the period ending 31 December 2023. Mr Speaker wrote to the leaders of the qualifying parties on 4 April 2019 on the committee’s recommendation. No objections or concerns were received from Her Majesty’s Official Opposition—the Labour party—or, as I understand it, from other parties, so the Opposition support the motion.

2.2 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I want briefly, and for the record, to associate myself with the observations made by the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House concerning the suitability of Mr Vincent for his current and future position. The third party has no objection to the motion, and we look forward to Mr Vincent continuing in his role in the Electoral Commission.

Question put and agreed to.

2.3 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): I beg to move,

That the draft British Nationality Act 1981 (Remedial) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 2 May, be approved.

In this day and age, I think we can all agree that the law should not discriminate against people simply because their parents were not married when they were born, and that we should not discriminate against people just because it was their mother who was British, not their father. The draft British Nationality Act 1981 (Remedial) Order 2019 is designed to remove discriminatory provisions in the British Nationality Act 1981 for those applying for British citizenship under specific routes introduced to address historical discrimination against those whose parents were not married, or against those whose mother was British, as opposed to their father. The draft order was first laid in Parliament in March 2018.

Once the law has been changed, those who seek to register as British citizens and who were born to an unmarried British father before July 2006, or to a British mother before 1983, will no longer need to demonstrate that they are of good character where it would be discriminatory to require them to do so. In two separate cases, the courts declared the good character requirement to be unlawful and made a declaration of incompatibility with the European convention on human rights. This legislation will correct incompatibilities identified by the domestic courts by removing the good character requirement for those applying for British citizenship via certain routes on the basis of historical discrimination. I am grateful to the Joint Committee on Human Rights for its scrutiny of the order and its careful consideration of this hugely complex and sensitive issue.

The remedial order process to correct incompatibilities in primary legislation with the European convention on human rights is rarely used. It is therefore right that each order is scrutinised carefully to ensure compliance with the procedure laid down in the Human Rights Act 1998, and to ensure that the incompatibilities found by the courts are addressed.

The Government welcome the Committee’s recommendation that Parliament approve the order. It remains our position that some of the issues raised by the Committee go beyond the incompatibility rulings and are therefore outwith the scope of the order. I commend this order to the House.

2.5 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The good character requirement has wrongly blocked children from registering for their right to British citizenship. We support the statutory instrument because it corrects a discriminatory and wrongful requirement. This requirement in relation to citizenship is highly controversial and, simply put, it is outdated in the present climate. British nationality law granted automatic citizenship by descent only to children born in wedlock to British fathers.
Although previous changes have allowed children born to British mothers or fathers to become British citizens by descent whether their parents were married or not, discrimination remained because they were required to prove good character.

Concerns raised by the Joint Committee on Human Rights, the courts, numerous organisations and young people themselves all indicate that it is inappropriate to apply the good character test to children who have a right to be British. The statutory changes proposed today would address those concerns by removing the requirement to prove good character. It is disappointing that the Home Office had to be taken to court to be forced to make this change. I hope the Home Office will not wait for another court ruling to address the other glaring problems with UK nationality law, especially in relation to children.

We believe that the good character requirement has led to serious discrimination. Children from BME backgrounds, as well as children in care, are much more likely to be denied citizenship because of unequal treatment in the criminal justice system. The root of the problem came about when the Government began blurring the distinction between registration and naturalisation. The original good character requirement was not defined, and it related to adult migrants applying to naturalise as British citizens. Since then, the requirement has been applied to children who were born and grew up in the country of which they wish to register citizenship, thereby wrongly denying them their rights to register British citizenship.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I strongly agree with my hon. Friend, who has raised an important point about discrimination. Lots of children came to this country, possibly as refugees, and are in care. When they reach a certain age, they have difficulty getting British citizenship. Surely, that has to be put right.

Afzal Khan: I agree with my hon. Friend. Denying someone their right to citizenship of the only country they have ever known is a heinous overreaction to a policy caution, especially for children as young as 10.

Concerns remain about citizenship, most prominently in relation to cost and access to legal aid. The JCHR recommended that the Home Office should not charge an application fee to those who have previously been discriminated against. Can the Minister confirm that that is the Government’s intention? When we can expect that to be made clear in legislation? The Government are making a profit on fees charged to children who are registering their right to British citizenship, and those who cannot afford the fee will effectively be denied their right to citizenship. We believe that that is wrong. Will the Minister set the fee for citizenship at cost price, and will she make sure that full fee waivers are available to any child who cannot afford the fee?

As we approach the deadline for EU settled status, there will be a number of children in local authority care who will need to be registered. That brings into sharp relief how little we know about the immigration status of children in care of the state. Many children will be entitled to citizenship, but not aware of it. What steps is the Minister taking to work with local authorities to identify those children with insecure immigration status, and ensure they receive proper legal advice?

2.10 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): First, I apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to the Minister and colleagues for my late arrival in the Chamber. I have learnt a lesson on not overestimating how long previous debates will take. My apologies to everybody.

The order is not controversial. I am grateful to the Joint Committee on Human Rights for all its work on the draft order proposed today. It recommended that the order be passed, and I fully agree. It seeks to put right discriminations that still exist in nationality law and that is something we all support. I will make a couple of brief points on that. The Joint Committee report, in chapter 4, points out that as it stands the order will not fix the apparent discriminations highlighted in the Committee’s first report, and leaves the Home Office open to potential legal challenge. Specifically, it raises that issue in relation to children who were discriminated against solely because their parents were not married and adults who were discriminated against when they were children. The Home Office will have to look at that again.

The Committee flagged up, in chapter 6 of the report, that the very same discriminations are still being faced by British overseas territories citizens. If they face the same discriminations, why are they not being provided with the same remedies? It is time for the Home Office to look at that issue again, too.

The Joint Committee also raised two more general points. First, there is a serious question about whether it is even remotely appropriate to ever apply good character tests in many of these situations at all, especially in relation to children. Personally, I find the whole notion of testing good character in children troubling and pretty awful. Attempting to wash our hands of “problem kids” via nationality law is disturbing. It seems to me that the Home Office has lost its grasp of, and become confused by, the different types of nationality applications. I think few Members would argue that having such a test apply in naturalisation applications, for example, is perfectly reasonable. Nobody would quibble with that, but since changes were introduced in 2006 and 2009 successive Governments have presided over the application of a good character test way beyond its appropriate use. In particular, it has even been applied to kids over 10 who otherwise have an entitlement to British citizenship.

Finally, I agree wholeheartedly with what the shadow Minister said about fees. In 1981, when there was a radical reform of British nationality law, this place was extremely protective of the rights of kids who, although not born here, had an entitlement to become British citizens afterwards. They have been denied that entitlement because of exorbitant fees for applications. We need radical reform on that by the Home Office.

2.13 pm

Caroline Nokes: I am grateful for the considered debate today and the interest that Opposition Members have shown in this remedial order.

As I said earlier, the scope of the remedial order is to make changes to nationality legislation and it is therefore narrow. It is limited to addressing the specific incompatibilities that have been identified by the courts.
The Government will monitor any remaining potentially unlawful discriminatory aspects of nationality legislation, a point picked up on by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), and will consult as appropriate if it becomes apparent that further changes are necessary.

The Government are committed to ensuring that those individuals affected by the order do not face further discrimination. In its first report on the remedial order, the Joint Committee on Human Rights recommended that those who had citizenship applications previously refused, because of the discriminatory provisions in the British Nationality Act 1981, which this order seeks to remedy, should not have to pay the application fee for a repeat application. I am pleased to say that I have written to the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the Chair of the Committee, confirming that I plan to amend the fees regulation at the next opportunity to waive the application fee for this particular cohort.

Turning to the points raised by the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), he commented on children having to meet the good character test. This is a requirement for British citizenship as set out in the 1981 Act. It applies to those seeking to register as British who are aged 10 years and over at the time of application. That is because 10 is the age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales. Children as young as 10 can and do commit very serious acts of criminality, sad though that is and undoubtedly tragic for their victims. It cannot be right that such offences are disregarded when assessing a child’s suitability for citizenship.

Stuart C. McDonald: I do not agree with the Minister on that point of principle, but even putting that to one side 50% of kids over 10 who are denied citizenship on those grounds have had that done on the basis of nothing more than a police caution, as I understand it. Surely it cannot be right to deny someone the right to citizenship on such a flimsy basis.

Caroline Nokes: I was just moving on to that particular point. The Government do not believe that the good character requirement for children is at odds with the statutory obligation in section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009, but I want to make it very clear that having a criminal conviction does not necessarily mean an application for citizenship is automatically refused, particularly in the case of minor offences attracting an out-of-court disposal, for example, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, a youth caution. Each case is considered on its individual merits and guidance for caseworkers makes it clear where discretion can be exercised.

On British overseas territories, we are very proud of our heritage in Britain and this pride extends to many people around the world who identify as British. The JCHR expressed concerns that the discriminatory provisions that this remedial order seeks to remedy will still apply to British overseas territories citizens. Regrettably, this is true. When changes to nationality legislation were made, they were introduced at a very late stage in the parliamentary process and there was no time to consult fully with the territories about introducing similar provisions for British overseas territories citizens’ status. It would not have been right to introduce legislation that would affect the territories, and potentially the status of those living there, without consultation. We recognise the difficulties that the British Nationality Act still presents for some British overseas territories citizens, who may wish to pass on their citizenship to their children and are considering how best to address those concerns, taking into account the opportunities for doing so. I commend the order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.
Body Image and Mental Health

2.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I beg to move,

That this House has considered body image and mental health.

I am delighted to open this debate on this very important matter about which a number of parliamentary colleagues are showing increasing concern. How we think and feel about our bodies can affect any one of us at any point in our lives. I am sure I am not alone in not liking my body shape and in wanting to lose more weight. Frankly, we know there is no magic route to that. We just need to eat less and drink more—[Laughter.] I should say: eat less, drink less and exercise more. Too often, however, people are seduced into seeking body shapes that are less than attainable. While for most of us that is an aspiration, for some people it becomes uncomfortable and an obsession that does them no good.

This is a particular issue today, because the pressure on people, especially young people, to achieve an idealised image is everywhere. Often, the images that people are being subjected to are unattainable because those images have been airbrushed and touched up. Those shapes are really not what any normal person could begin to achieve.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The Minister is quite right. Some of the television reality shows today put pressure on young people, particularly young girls, to imitate shapes, weight and size, and all that goes with that. This is a timely debate and we need to have a good look at this issue. At the end of the day, young people get very disappointed and that can have an effect on their mental health. That is the important point we should not lose track of.

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Gentleman raises an issue close to my heart. When we talk about so-called reality TV programmes, it is as if the people participating in them are normal people. The reality, however, is that they are not normal people. They are semi-professional celebrities who have often undergone enhancements to become attractive to be chosen to go on these television programmes. The whole thing starts to develop insidiously in a culture, making people think that they should aspire to look like that and that it is normal. Everyone is chasing a lifestyle that is frankly not attainable.

We have all enjoyed watching such programmes. I often say that we have become a nation of voyeurs, but perhaps we all need to remind society that there is no quick route to fame, fortune and success—that comes as a result of hard work—and that spending a bit of money on a nip and tuck and a lip filler will not be the route to earning a lot of money. We all need to start to address that, because we have allowed magazines and our media to develop this image. We have been complicit in it happening, because we have enjoyed that entertainment, but we are reaching a position where our society is extremely unhealthy.

The problem has been made particularly acute by the growth of social and digital media, which have increased exposure to unrealistic and unattainable images of beauty. As we all know, when we are browsing on our iPad we can look at one thing and straight away be bombarded with sites that squirrel us down a route where we are exposed to more and more such content. People who are looking at unrealistic body images will see ever more images that they aspire to. There is another insidious thing: a friend of mine was speaking to me only last night and said that she was looking at cosmetic procedures when, all of a sudden, an advert popped on to her screen encouraging her to spend a few thousand pounds so that she could learn to administer lip fillers herself. She thought how horrendous it is that our social media does that.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Is the Minister aware of the Be Real campaign’s latest report, “The Curate Escape”, which looks at young people and their images on social media? Two thirds of young people edit pictures of themselves before they put them on social media, and the report makes a lot of really good recommendations. The Be Real campaign has been fantastic in recent years, focusing on health and wellbeing, rather than weight and people watching their weight. If she is not aware of the report, would she like a copy?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that point—I have heard of that campaign. It is disturbing that so many people alter their images. None of us is perfect—God help us if we all were—but for people to think that they need to alter their appearance because they are unhappy with it, and for that to become normalised, is quite a sinister development in society. At the risk of being trite, perhaps we should be telling everyone to learn to love themselves.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Is the Minister aware of the Good Childhood report, which states that girls who share pictures or videos of themselves are less happy with their appearance than those who do not? Is she aware that the Children’s Society is campaigning for a greater understanding of what makes children unhappy, and does she agree that we need to focus on that?

Jackie Doyle-Price: Yes. The Children’s Society is doing some excellent work in this space and it always has a lot of expertise to share. We have to address this issue collectively as a society, because if we do not start equipping children with the tools to look after themselves and the right attitudes, that damage is set up for life. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise that point and I encourage the Children’s Society to engage with us more on what we can do to support it.

The Government recognise that poor body image is a common problem. Approximately 70% of adolescent girls and 45% of adolescent boys want to change their body weight or shape. We also recognise the impact that idealised body image can have on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people particularly, on ethnic minorities, and on those with disabilities or serious illnesses.

The Mental Health Foundation recently published a very informative report on body image. Some of its findings are shocking: 20% of adults feel shame, 19% feel disgusted, and 37% of teenagers feel shame in relation to their body image. This should make us all stop and think. When it comes to teenagers, we all recognise that going through adolescence is a difficult time, when we
are at our most vulnerable, including to the outside influences that tell us that our body shape is not as it should be and that we are not as perfect as we could be. I welcome the recommendations made in the foundation’s report, which is aimed at public and commercial organisations and gives us things that we can do to help ourselves.

Having a negative body image affects the way that we feel about ourselves and it can affect people’s aspirations and confidence. In the most extreme cases, it can lead to eating disorders, depression and even feeling suicidal. I know that the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) is as concerned as I am about this issue, and I commend the work that she has been doing specifically on eating disorders. The increases that we are seeing in suicide and self-harm among young people are incredibly worrying. Much of this is being driven by young women and girls, but we must not forget the boys either. It is important that we work to raise awareness of the problems of body image that many people face and hopefully prevent them from developing issues in future.

Clearly, social and digital media companies are key players in this debate, because they contribute to the volume of material that encourages people to think negatively about themselves. Young people are put under such pressure to have the perfect image, the perfect body, the perfect relationship and the perfect clothes—the perfect everything —and that places unrealistic expectations on them. As hon. Members will know, we are in close dialogue with social media companies to encourage them to act more responsibly over the content on their platforms. We have held three summits so far; the most recent was only last week. We have said that, ultimately, we will consider legislation if they do not clean up their act. That said, Governments can always be three steps behind the development of technology, so I would much rather that we worked collaboratively and co-operatively to address this content.

So far, I have been encouraged that the companies have committed to increasing their efforts to protect users from harmful suicide and self-harm content online by coming together to establish and fund a strategic partnership with the Samaritans. That work is commencing. They will look not only at self-harm and suicide, but at pro-eating disorder content. We will continue our meetings with social media companies.

I was particularly concerned to see that a number of sites and materials are available that contain harmful content such as pro-anorexia messages. It is completely unacceptable that this sort of content is easily accessible to vulnerable young people. We are having talks with Amazon about removing books from its retail sites, but we need to ensure that social media companies are vigilant about taking down content published on their sites as well.

In the face of these modern challenges, central to tackling the problems in future is empowering our young people to improve their emotional resilience and wellbeing, so that they feel confident in themselves and in seeking support if they feel they need it. We are investing in massive improvements in mental health provision in schools. We have a new workforce that we are rolling out. We also need to make sure that children can access mental health support and we are investing in more provision in child and adolescent mental health services. As part of making health education compulsory in schools from September next year, it will be absolutely essential that we teach children how to protect their mental wellbeing. That will cover unrealistic expectations about body image. I hope that that will allow young people to recognise what is normal—what is normal, and is there any such thing as normal?—and what is an issue for them and others, as well as to know how to seek the right support when issues arise and to know that it is accessible to them.

Another issue I would like to talk about is gender identity, which has been the subject of quite a number of negative reports in our newspapers in recent months and, indeed, on Radio 4 this week. This is about people’s sense of self and physical appearance and about them wanting to change their gender identity. We have been aware of the issue of gender dysphoria, but there has been quite a lot of comment, and the House and the public need reassurance that the treatments available on the NHS, particularly for children, are appropriate.

To put the issue in context, gender dysphoria is where a person experiences discomfort or distress because there is a mismatch between their biological sex and their gender identity. That is incredibly difficult for anyone to deal with, but young people, in particular, will find it difficult. Many Members will have had representations from constituents about access to services to cope with gender dysphoria—I know that because I have signed many letters on the issue. It is essential that someone suffering with gender dysphoria receives the right support—support that really considers their holistic needs—because gender dysphoria often exists alongside other morbidities, and we must make sure we treat the whole person. Where appropriate, people should receive specialist treatment.

The Gender Identity Development Service for children and young people is provided by the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust. There has been lots of concern in the press about that trust, but having discussed the service with NHS England and visited it, I would like to try to give Members some reassurance and to address some of the points that have been made about the service.

The first thing I think the service would like to get across is that gender should be seen as a spectrum. The whole treatment pathway is based on allowing children to explore their feelings in a safe environment. Not all children referred to the service will go on to transition. That is an important point to recognise, because if children have the time and space to work through their feelings, that will perhaps lead to a different treatment pathway.

I know there has been lots of concern that too many children are being referred to the service, but I would like to reassure the House that the service takes children through treatment in a very exploratory way around gender, and more than half of the children referred do not go on to transition. The service will treat each case as individual and complex and will address some of the co-morbidities that come along with gender dysphoria—lots of concern has been raised about the fact that some of these children are also on the autism spectrum.

It is important to recognise that, compared with services internationally, the service is very much at the conservative end of provision, which has led to it being
criticised as far too conservative by some aspects of the lobby in favour of more services. However, where we are dealing with children who have not reached the age of majority, and where some of the treatments they may go through may be irreversible, the whole issue of consent is clearly important.

It is important to note that this aspect of service has grown quickly, and it has done so in an absence of public scrutiny. I can understand why there will be some public concern about it, so I would like to reassure the House that I am working with NHS England to do a proper review of the research around this service and the ethics of it to establish a proper framework for consent, recognising that we are looking at treatments that may have long-term consequences.

I can assure the House that the service works hard to ensure that consent is robust and that young people who might receive hormone therapy receive adequate information about the nature and consequences of that treatment. Such consent is not a one-off decision; it requires ongoing dialogue with the service. It will also require some assessment of the capacity and competence of the individuals consenting.

It is important to assure the House that this issue is very much under review. My starting point is that nothing should be undertaken in this space that would be irreversible for anyone under the age of 18. With that in mind, NHS England is putting in place a new policy and a new service specification for children’s services, and will thoroughly consider the issues that have come up in the press recently. Clearly, those issues will be a matter for debate, and many Members will have an interest in them. It is important for public confidence, as well as to enable access to services, that we have a proper, ethical debate around consent and the clinical evidence behind prescribing long-term hormone treatments.

Finally, I want to say a little about cosmetic procedures and regulation. I am pleased to see the right hon. Member for North Durham in his place—he is my interest in them. It is important for public confidence, as well as to enable access to services, that we have a proper, ethical debate around consent and the clinical evidence behind describing long-term hormone treatments.

I was pleased to launch an awareness campaign around cosmetic procedures earlier this year, which I have driven forward to make sure not only that we encourage people to properly consider the risks of any procedure they might undertake, but that they do not just wander down to the hairdressers and book a Botox appointment or a filler but really take steps to make sure they are going to a reputable provider. It is important that people fully understand the risks and where to look for a safe procedure. We have made sure that there is good material on the NHS website, and we are encouraging people to access that information when they are considering having any kind of procedure.

However, there is a really important message that we must give, which is that anyone considering having anything done to their appearance should not seek an operation overseas. There are some very disreputable operators advertising—for example, there are holidays in Turkey with a procedure. That is hugely dangerous, and I am afraid that the NHS is picking up the costs of those procedures. That is obviously something we need to address properly.

We will look at stronger regulation of the sector. Again, I would say that no one under the age of 18 should seek a cosmetic procedure. We have come to think that having some kind of lip filler is just like going to have a haircut, but when it goes wrong the results are much worse than having to let our hair grow back. Therefore, no one under the age of 18 should be seeking such procedures, and we need to do a lot more to make people realise exactly what the risks are.

**Bambos Charalambous**: Obviously, the harm is done with young people early on, and they are very impressionable—we have mentioned reality TV, and the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee is looking at its impact. Does the Minister not think that we should try to teach positive body image at school and provide support at school for people who have concerns about their body image? That would be a wise investment of Government funds and would actually help young people to address their concerns and anxieties at every stage.

**Jackie Doyle-Price**: I agree with that. Through the new personal education that will be rolled out next year, we will have the ability to address that issue. I would just say that we need to be careful about this and to give some scrutiny to what the content of that might be. We have to really make sure that people respect the fact that we are all different and we all come in odd shapes and sizes, but everyone is beautiful. That is a really important message to convey. It will be incredibly challenging to get that content right, and we do need to bring some scrutiny to that.

Body image is clearly a strong contributory factor in many cases of mental ill health. I am pleased that we are starting to tackle some of these issues, but there is a long way to go. We have reached a stage at which the herd has gone so far down the road that the idealised view that everyone is a size zero model, whose perfectly coiffed, long, naturally blonde or brunette hair has no shades of grey and no curls, has taken hold. It will take a long time to turn that juggernaut around, but in the interests of a healthy society we all need to get a grip.

2.40 pm

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): Let me start by welcoming the Minister to the Front Bench. I am glad that she is still in her post, and I sincerely hope that this is not her last appearance at the Dispatch Box in her current role. She has been collegial, engaging and very co-operative, and I thank her for her kind words about eating disorders. I agree with most of what she has said this afternoon.

“Body image” is the term that is used to describe the way we think and feel about our bodies, which can have an impact on us throughout our lives and cause poor mental health and a lack of wellbeing. While the association between body image concerns and poor mental health is definitely not new—we have been discussing it for decades, and I am sure that we will still be discussing it for decades to come—I think it is fair to say that the problem is worse now than it was just 10 years ago. There is a far greater exposure to the media and to...
social media, and there is also our need to have everything, right here and right now, in the impatient and judgmental world in which we live. As the Minister said a few moments ago, we still have a long way to go in tackling this issue. Would it not be great if we recognised that, literally, one size does not fit all?

Body image concerns are extremely common, and vary in severity. Not all body image issues will affect mental health. However, it is important to be aware of the risk factor, especially among young people, as the risk of developing an eating disorder is closely associated with poor body image. The Mental Health Foundation has undertaken a great deal of research in this area, and recently conducted a survey of 4,505 UK adults aged 18 and above and 1,118 UK teenagers aged between 13 and 19. The results showed that one in five adults felt shame about their body image, 34% felt down or low, and 19% said that they had felt disgusted because of their body image in the last year, with 13% saying, very worryingly, that they had experienced suicidal thoughts and feelings. The survey of teenagers revealed that 37% felt upset and 31% felt ashamed in relation to their body image.

Perhaps more worrying are the results from Be Real’s Somebody Like Me campaign. The researchers spoke to more than 2,000 secondary school pupils aged 11 to 16 from across the UK, and found that 52% regularly worried about how they looked, 30% isolated themselves because of body image anxiety, and 36% said that they would do “whatever it takes” to look good, including considering cosmetic surgery. Similarly, 10% of boys surveyed by the Mental Health Foundation said that they would consider taking steroids to achieve their goals.

As the Minister said earlier, we must recognise that body image challenges affect boys as well as girls, and men as well as women. Unfortunately, my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) is not present, but he has previously spoken powerfully about the body image challenges that he faced as a younger man, and I think that he is a great ambassador for this issue.

It is a shame that more Members on both sides of the House are not present for such an important debate. I understand the significance of today and the fact that other things are obviously going on, but for the benefit of those who are watching in the Public Gallery and others who may be watching at home, I want to reiterate my support, and that of the Minister and other Members in relation to this issue.

The shocking statistics that I have cited highlight the need for more support and help. Perhaps most worrying is the finding that a desire for the option of cosmetic surgery appears to be more and more widespread. I welcome what the Minister said about the need for stronger regulation, because cosmetic surgery has almost become normalised. Many of my friends have had lip fillers and Botox treatments. I have not succumbed to either as yet, but people are now moving away from breast augmentation and talking of “bum lifts” and “Brazilian butts”.

A young and beautiful lady from a constituency not a million miles from mine, in Leeds, went to Turkey—last year, I believe—to undergo one of those procedures, which involves the injection of fat into the bum. I am not sure whether that is parliamentary language, Madam Deputy Speaker. She was a mum of three beautiful boys, and she never came home. She died during the procedure. I understand that regulation will be pending in that case, but it is very worrying that people are going overseas to seek cheaper treatments when there may be issues relating to, for instance, regulation.

Given mainstream television programmes such as “Love Island”, which shows girls as young as 21 who have already undergone plastic and cosmetic surgery, it is hardly surprising that those who watch such programmes aspire to the same treatments. The same applies to tanning salons. In those reality programmes, everyone is bronzed and slim, and the people watching think, “I want to go to one of those.” It is very worrying, partly because some of the less scrupulous tanning salons do not necessarily follow the regulations that are so important to avoiding skin cancer.

It has been widely accepted in many different body image studies that those who are most at risk of developing mental health problems associated with poor body image are women and members of the LGBT community, but, as has already been pointed out today, that does not mean that we should dismiss the incidence of such problems among other groups, although they are not as prevalent. There is no group of people who have not been identified as having certain risk factors or anxieties associated with how they view their body image.

Airbrushed photos have appeared for decades in the media, from the early glossy magazines such as “Just 17” in the 1980s to the internet today. Throughout the internet, images are portrayed that invade people’s lives daily. Indeed, when undertaking research on this subject, I found that the search results on the internet were not giving information about the history of airbrushing, but were offering tips and trying to sell software enabling people to airbrush their own photographs. It should come as no surprise that the increased number of airbrushed images across the internet that are accessible to millions of young people has played a part in the huge increase in the number of people suffering from body-image anxieties in recent years.

During the Minister’s speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and I were looking at an internet picture of Serena Williams, the famous and phenomenal tennis player. She recently appeared on the front page of “Harper’s Bazaar”, and had specified that she did not want the images to be airbrushed. I should add that those images were themselves phenomenal. It was a great lesson, and I hope that other celebrities will consider doing the same. Some have had their pictures taken make-up free, which is also a great thing to do.

We have also seen an increase in the number of television programmes that heavily promote the idea of a “perfect body type”. As I said earlier, “Love Island” is probably the most topical and talked-about programme of the moment. It focuses primarily on young men and women, all of whom can only be described as nothing less than beautiful. Even the show’s host allegedly admitted in 2017 that it portrayed unrealistic body image standards, and, at the start of the current season, Twitter was alight with comments from viewers about how inadequate the contestants were making them feel. I understand that a “plus size” person has featured in the programme this year. I have to say that I have never watched it—my
research evidence comes from the internet, and from friends and, dare I say, staff members who do watch it—but I understand that the producers’ concept of “plus size” may not be the same as ours.

I love to read glossy magazines—many of us do when we get the time—and sometimes looking at the models I do think, as somebody who would love to lose a bit of weight, “Criskey, could they even put in someone who is average-sized?” The average UK female dress size is 16, and some of these models, frankly, look unhealthy.

I want to share a story. I went to a big department store in London just before Christmas last year, and I asked for a dress that was out on the rail in a concession in the store. The size I wanted was not available and the lady working there said to me, “Oh, I’ll have a look in the back for you, as that doesn’t mean we haven’t got it; we just only display sizes eight, 10 and 12.” There is so much that we can do working with the corporate world as well to change these attitudes, and it is very important. We cannot overestimate the impact of little things like not displaying bigger sizes because the designers do not want that look.

“Love Island” is far from the only culprit in the world of television. In recent years there have been many programmes, including “The Only Way is Essex,” “Geordie Shore” and “Made in Chelsea”, that seem to focus on what for many is an unattainable body type. It is almost an oxymoron to call them reality shows when in actual fact they do not portray the reality of the way the average person looks.

The TV programme “Loose Women” has to be applauded for its body confidence campaign last year. It is easy to think that people in later life do not suffer from body image anxieties, but a Mental Health Foundation study found the contrary: approximately 20% of adults aged 55 or over admitted to feeling anxious or depressed specifically because of their body image. Campaigns such as this are incredibly important in helping to show people that their anxieties are shared by many. Indeed, a friend of mine will often say that everyone is too busy worrying about how they look themselves to ever notice how someone else looks, and I do wonder how much truth there is in that.

Sadly, however, that does not appear to be true of how people in the public eye are judged. Body-shaming and trolling of celebrities are prevalent in the media and are on the increase. When Gemma Collins took to our screens last year as a contestant in “Dancing on Ice” she received the most appalling treatment from not only the public but also, disappointingly, one of the judges, most of it based solely on how she looked.

Sadly, it almost appears to be acceptable in today’s times for those we unaffectionately term “keyboard warriors” to hound and troll people who are well known. As politicians, we all, sadly, suffer abuse on social media too, and I am certainly not immune from that. Reference is often made to the fact that I am overweight, by saying, for instance, “You fat cow.” That is absolutely unacceptable, as it also would be if the trolls were referring to somebody as too thin. It saddens me greatly to see that.

All too often the social media companies are turning a blind eye and refusing to take action over comments that are ruining lives. I am sure we will all at some point have received a message after reporting a post on social media saying, “It does not contravene our rules and regulations.” Indeed, I reported something to Facebook a couple of weeks ago and the reply was, “It does not contravene our community standards,” which raises the question of what on earth its community standards are. The term “standards” here is an oxymoron, perhaps. I have often wondered how far someone would have to go before these companies took any action. A Mental Health Foundation study found that 22% of adults and 40% of teenagers said that images on social media cause them to worry about their body image. Personally, I would like to see much more regulation around social media and much more robust complaint mechanisms that make reporting easier, with more complaints upheld and firm action taken.

It is no coincidence that an increase in social media use is accompanied by an increase in body image issues, which in turn is accompanied by low self-esteem and poor mental health. While I appreciate that social media also has many positive aspects, we must ensure that these are not outweighed by the negatives. As parliamentarians, we all have a duty to do whatever we can to hold social media companies, TV producers, advertisers, magazines and individuals to account when they are seen to be promoting negative or unachievable body images. We also have a duty to ensure that the correct help is available so that everyone, specifically our young people, are able to use vital services and support to help combat the growing link between body image and poor mental health.

2.54 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a privilege to speak in this debate. Indeed, it is always a privilege to speak in debates about mental health, and, having worked as a psychologist prior to coming into Parliament, I always think my timing has been good, because 10 or 15 years ago we would not have been speaking about mental health, and the doors to any conversation about it would have been firmly closed.

I am always grateful that these issues are prioritised by Government. The Minister has been doing a fantastic job in this regard, working cross-party, and she has all our support. I thank her for the work that she has done and I too hope she continues in her position; if I could send in a recommendation or something, I would be very happy to do so.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): I am not sure a recommendation from the Opposition Benches will help.

Dr Cameron: Indeed.

Body image is a very important issue, and it is an interesting one as well, because it is coming more to the fore through social media and through society in current times, when there is this striving for perfection. As we heard, in the past that might have been about looking through glossy magazines, but now it is all about how glamorous we can look on Facebook or Twitter, how many friends we have, and how many people want to befriend us because of the way we look—because they think that equates with our being some kind of fantastic person, when of course it often does not. And sometimes the most glamorous of people can also be the most shallow, I have to say.
Society is encouraging stereotypes that place great stresses on our young people today, and that has an adverse impact on their mental health. Social media companies must look at this in much more detail in terms of regulation, as we have heard. I have been very pleased to contribute to the work done through the Department, which is looking at issues of social media abuse and the impact of social media on young people’s development and mental health and how they relate to the world. It is almost as if we have become an artificial world rather than engaging with each other in our day-to-day lives just as we are, with all our diverse shapes and sizes being the norm.

Andrew Griffiths: The hon. Lady is raising some very important points, and I think we all recognise that young people are under more stress and pressure than ever before, particularly through social media. Does she agree that schools have a key role to play in trying to provide support for young people? I am sure that, like me, she welcomes the new Trailblazer programme that the Government have offered, but does she agree that if we can ensure that young people feel able to ask for support and help in the classroom—in the school environment—we will have a better opportunity to tackle these issues at the very start and help those young people before the problem gets worse?

Dr Cameron: Yes, those points are well made. We must do much more in the classroom to help young people grapple with social media issues and pressures, and to develop positive mental health and coping strategies so they can do that. We also have to help parents, like me and others here today, to understand social media; often children are far ahead of us and it can be very difficult for us to regulate what is happening online and make sure it is safe and secure.

I also commend the work of the all-party group on mentoring and the Diana Award. I recently went to a number of their events, one up in Scotland at Holyrood and one at Westminster just a few weeks ago. They are doing fantastic work to help young people who are being bullied in school and to provide peer mentors, because often, as we know, young people listen to other young people rather than parents or teachers. The work they are doing is going a long way in giving young people skills to understand how to challenge bullying, and to promote good mental health and to understand that it is very important that we support each other in society, rather than doing each other down. I commend them for their work.

I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group for textiles and fashion, which is undertaking an inquiry into inclusion in the industry. We have started our inquiry sessions, which have been extremely interesting. We have heard that although the industry is trying to become more diverse and to promote more diversity among its models and in the work that it prints, there are still many challenges and barriers for young disabled people and plus-size people in becoming models or getting into the industry at any level. We hope that the inquiry will highlight and raise awareness of the issues and ensure that the industry lives up to our expectations that it should be inclusive and diverse, just as the United Kingdom is.

The all-party parliamentary group on psychology recently conducted a research study that showed that although the number of abusive posts to politicians was almost equal across the genders, the content was quite different. Whereas male politicians were criticised for their position on a policy, female politicians were much more often criticised for the way they looked, held to account for not wearing the right things in Parliament—according to whoever thought they were the fashion guru—or trying to do them down based on their personality or personal appearance. That shows the stereotypes that must be overcome and the challenges in feeling confident in politics. We must support everyone to make sure we have a diverse Parliament moving forward.

When I highlighted this debate online today, my constituents asked me not to forget to mention how men are affected in terms of body image. That is such a good point. We often speak about the impact on women, and I have been doing that in much of my speech. They said, “Please don’t fail to mention how men are impacted because this is increasingly an issue in society, and the same stereotypes apply: having to be really buff, no matter what your day entails or if you are running about trying to juggle lots of different things. Always having time to go to the gym and to look fabulous and have all the best clothes etc.—these things also put pressure on young men.” I attended a very sad but poignant tribute at the weekend to my constituent Ryan Coleman, who sadly took his own life. We really must not underestimate the pressures on young men’s mental health nowadays in society. It is incumbent on Governments across the United Kingdom to ensure that young men as well as young women feel able to come forward, be referred and take up services; there is often much more stigma for young men in accessing services and acknowledging some of these issues.

We have spoken about cosmetic procedures. I do not have too much detail to speak about on that, but I am aware that there is not much regulation of such procedures and it is important that we get on top of that. As the Minister and the shadow Minister mentioned, when things go wrong, it is not just like having to go back to the hairdressers and getting a different colour put on. Cosmetic procedures can have a permanent impact on people, or affect them for a very long time, so regulation in this market is important. Other markets may be diminishing, but this market is growing exponentially so we definitely need to have regulation in place.

When I worked with people who have eating disorders, we knew from the research that body image was a core part of the issue that people struggled with. It is not just about weight; it is about cognition. It is about how people think about themselves. I worked with young people who were growing thinner by the day and had anorexia nervosa but felt that they were fat. When they looked at themselves in the mirror, they saw themselves as overweight and strove to lose more and more weight. When an eating disorder develops over time, we know that cognition becomes affected. That is why it is very important that people can be referred to local services. I know how difficult that can be.

When I was doing some work in mental health primary care, the problems in referring someone to tertiary care and eating disorder services were almost insurmountable. People had to go through the community mental health
team. Weight comes into it again. They might not be quite at the threshold, but everyone in the family and the clinicians knows that the person is developing an eating disorder. We must have services that accept people, and a clear clinical pathway. Otherwise, by the time people arrive at the service that they need, their condition has deteriorated so much that they may need to be admitted to hospital.

We also need to ensure that we can treat people with eating disorders as close to home as possible. They often need cognitive behaviour therapy or family therapy, and families really need to be involved in that care. If the care is taking place 20 or 30 miles away from where the person lives, it is so difficult for families who are grappling with all the other demands on their time to be as involved as they really want to be.

Ahead of Mental Health Awareness Week this year, the Scottish Government announced a new advisory group on body image and young people’s mental health. It is important to have that group up and working; to be thinking about the issues that test young people today. We need to be ahead of the curve. The Scottish Government also recently announced a package of funds for social media advice for young people. We are very aware of the impact of social media. When we are looking through magazines, we can put them down and go off and do something else, but social media is constant. I see this with young people, including my own children: as soon as their phone rings—ding ding—they have to look. Social media is almost like an addiction. I am sure that the companies love that because people are becoming so reliant on it. We need to make sure that our young people have varied lifestyles; that they get out and about in the fresh air, as my mum used to say. I am repeating my mother now. I hope she is listening. I never thought that I would get to that stage, but there you are, I am. It is important for health.

I am extremely pleased to have spoken in this debate. I am pleased that it has been given time in the main Chamber, where it should be, that we are prioritising mental health and that we are discussing the important issue of body image.

3.7 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I begin by agreeing totally with the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron): the debate is important. Last week we had a debate on mental health; we have two this week, one here today and one in Westminster Hall on Thursday afternoon on the Mental Health Act 1983. That is good because the more we talk about mental health issues, the more we normalise them. The hon. Lady is right. I have been a Member of the House for more than 18 years, and it has changed. The more we talk, the better. She makes a very good point.

Ministers are going into the twilight zone at the moment; seeing whether they are going to come out of the reshuffle. I add my thanks to the Minister to those of my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff). The Minister has been a passionate advocate for mental health and she deeply cares about it. We know when a Minister gets it, and she does. I hope that she survives whatever happens over the next few days. The other thing that is unusual and does not get a great deal of publicity is the fact that she is prepared to work across party and across the House, and to listen to alternative viewpoints. I wish to put that on the record.

I pay tribute to the Mental Health Foundation for its excellent report. I know that the Minister was at the launch. I think it was the first time that body image and mental health had been brought together. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow talked about eating disorders, and the stark facts that come out of the report should concern us all.

It is important to say that it is not just young people who are affected. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury said, 20% of the adult population in the UK feel ashamed of their body image and 34% feel down about it. In some cases, that will not lead to mental health problems, but in a lot of them it will. If people have anxiety about their body image, it leads to related conditions.

According to the report, 34% of young people feel upset about their body image and 31% feel ashamed of it. We cannot insulate young people from society—we should not even attempt to do so. Living in society can be difficult and challenging at times, and young people face the added pressure of social media.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for making such a positive speech in this important debate. Does he believe that social media and advertising have a significant impact on young people, and does he agree that the Government need to take more vigorous steps to ensure that young people are protected from images that can lead them to form negative views of their own body?

Mr Kevan Jones: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I will go on to speak about the role of advertising because, as she will know, it has changed. When we were growing up, adverts were in magazines or on television. Now, they are accessible to young people 24 hours a day, seven days a week on smartphones and tablets. That has changed the pressure on young people, as is highlighted in the Mental Health Foundation’s excellent report.

Before I come on to advertising, I will touch on the issue of cosmetic surgery, which the Minister raised. Members may want to know why I am interested in the subject. It is down to a force of nature, my constituent Dawn Knight, whom the Minister has met. Unfortunately, several years ago a cosmetic procedure on her eyes led to the horrific situation that she can no longer close her eyelids. As the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow said, such procedures are not easily reversible. It is not like someone changing their hair colour and not liking it. The procedure has had a devastating effect on Dawn’s life. I pay credit to her, because she has been determined to campaign on this issue. I know that she has met the Minister on a number of occasions to highlight the dangers of cosmetic surgery.

The Minister referred to regulation. I have been calling for regulation in this area for five years. I do not think there is a lack of political will, and certainly not from this Minister, but I am told that the Department of Health and Social Care is so scarred by the Health and Social Care Act 2012 that it does not want to bring
forward any more health-related legislation. I say to Ministers that they must. This is the wild west because there is no regulation.

The Minister rightly warned people not to go abroad for such procedures, because standards are not high. Sadly, I have to say that they are not very high in this country either. Dawn’s case and the cases of numerous women that Dawn has documented over the years show that surgery that takes place in this country is sold like a commodity. It is not sold as something that could threaten or change people’s lives; it is sold like any other product. I am sorry, but it is not like any other product. Some of these procedures are very dangerous and can result in death.

The problem is the way the industry is structured. There are groups that give the impression that they employ surgeons and that they are hospitals. One that I have spoken about on behalf of Dawn and other victims—that is what I call them—is the Hospital Group. One would think that it is a hospital that employs surgeons and nurses, but it is not. It is a sort of marketing facility company that has a hospital and flies in surgeons from Europe, sometimes on a daily basis. They fly in, operate and fly out again. The aftercare treatment is non-existent in some cases. As Dawn’s case shows, when people try to sue the individual, they find that their indemnity insurance does not cover the resulting legal case.

What we need is a properly regulated system. The fly-in, fly-out surgeons need to be banned. I am sorry, but it is not acceptable. People say, “We have the General Medical Council,” but that is another of my hobby-horses. It is an organisation that is ripe for reform. The Government have promised reform of how the GMC operates, but they have not brought legislation forward. We need legislation to reform it because, as I will say in respect of another organisation in a minute, I am never a great fan of self-regulation. I was one of those who campaigned to take regulation away from the Law Society. Self-regulation has clearly failed. Nearly five years on from her complaint against the doctor, Dawn Knight is still fighting. It is not a user-friendly process for anyone to get redress for their complaint and we need to address that as a matter of urgency.

Cosmetic surgery is advertised and sold like any other commodity. There used to be two for one offers on Facebook and elsewhere—buy one procedure and get another procedure free. Those should all be banned; they should not be allowed at all, because some of those procedures are very dangerous and people are often not aware of the dangers. We would argue that such a ban is part of the regulation we need. This is not a multimillion-pound industry, but a multibillion-pound industry and it is exploiting people’s poor body image.

Before anyone had any type of cosmetic surgery, I would insist that they had a mental health assessment. Not only should the risks of the surgery be explained, but we should question whether people actually want the procedure.

Advertisers use “Love Island” to promote the idea of young women having procedures to enhance their appearance. That reinforces the image that somehow there is a perfect body to be had, but also the idea that these procedures are risk free. Having spoken to Dawn and other victims of cosmetic surgery, I know that these are not risk-free procedures. In many cases, they lead to mental health problems afterwards during the recovery process.

As the Minister rightly said, the ones who pick up the tab are us—the taxpayers. Not only do we pick up the bill for the correction of the surgery when these organisations fold themselves into new companies and go into bankruptcy, meaning that people cannot get any redress; we also pay for the mental health services for those individuals afterwards.

I say again that we need more regulation of advertising. The Advertising Standards Authority is a toothless tiger. The Mental Health Foundation’s report says that last year the ASA upheld a complaint against the producers of “Love Island” for promoting cosmetic surgery as part of the advertising package around the show. But anyone who has dealt with the ASA will know that it is slow and that it is not proactive. One of the report’s recommendations is that it should be proactive in looking at adverts in advance to ensure that they are pre-screened before they go out. Again, though, that involves self-regulation, and it does not work.

I accept that we have a Government at the moment who do not like regulation and who want to strip it out. We are possibly going to get more of that nonsense over the coming months from the new Prime Minister, but I take the clear view that the state needs to protect people when they are being exploited. On cosmetic surgery, I take the clear view that people who want to have cosmetic surgery have the right to choose what to do with their money, but they should have a fully informed choice rather than being pressured by glossy advertising.

Online advertising and body image have already been raised in the debate. We have heard about the way in which adverts and other images are photoshopped and that this is somehow a positive thing that every young person should look forward to. The Minister also mentioned Botox and fillers. Those procedures are not cosmetic surgery in the sense of people going under the scalpel, but I would argue that they are equally in need of regulation because of the appalling effects when things go wrong. According to some adverts, people can simply go along in their lunch hour and have a Botox or filler treatment and then walk away in the afternoon, but those are medical procedures. They are advertised on social media and elsewhere, but Botox is a prescription drug, and it is interesting that people seem to have access to it even though they have no qualifications at all. No qualifications are needed for injecting someone. Madam Deputy Speaker, I could inject you with Botox this afternoon—not that you need it—without any qualifications or training whatsoever. The Minister was right to say that the problem with the way in which social media algorithms work is that anyone who enters the term “Botox” into a Facebook search, for example, will then be bombarded by adverts not only for Botox and fillers but for training courses on how to administer them. People can actually sign up for those courses in order to earn money.

The only regulation around this is Facebook. Dawn Knight has raised the matter directly with Facebook, but I understand that the only thing anyone can do is to say to Facebook that they no longer want this on their feed and take it down. I have written to Sir Nick Clegg, who has now gone off to live with the beautiful people...
in California, to ask him why Facebook is carrying those kinds of adverts and bombarding vulnerable people with adverts for Botox and other fillers. Those adverts have no disclaimers about risk, and there is no quality control over the individuals offering the services. As the Minister said, they could be people in hairdressers and other such places. Well, I am sorry, I know Facebook is earning money from those adverts, but it should ban them. I know that the vulnerability of young people is a matter of concern for the Minister, for Dawn Knight and for me. They could be getting access to these procedures without knowing the risks, and they are being targeted by the social media companies. I am waiting to see what response I get from Sir Nick Clegg and the beautiful people in California. Hopefully, they will take some action against this.

This is a serious issue, not just in terms of the way people are personally affected; it costs the taxpayer money when cosmetic surgery goes wrong and when people need mental health support. We also need regulation. We are all focused on Brexit at the moment, and perhaps this is another area that will not be addressed over the next few months. I hope that that is not the case, and I know that the Minister will continue to argue for this reform, as she has already done in Government. I also know that my constituent, Dawn Knight, will not leave this issue alone. I will not do so either, because people are putting themselves at risk and it is the duty of the Government to take action in Parliament to protect individuals when they need it. There is a lot of pressure on young people when it comes to body image. All I would say to those young people today is this: think positively, and be kind to yourself.

3.25 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a real honour to speak in this debate, and I regret that not many people are here to participate in it, but as we know, today is today. Even though I have only recently become a Member of Parliament, I echo the comments about what a pleasure it has been to work with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), and I hope that she will continue in her post.

We have talked about many issues, and I want to pick up on what has been said about the cynicism with which advertising exploits vulnerable people. I will be speaking mostly on eating disorders, and many victims of eating disorders already have a massive problem, even before they go online. If they then order slimming pills online, for example, they will be bombarded by adverts persuading them to buy even more, which they then do. That is nothing short of exploitation, and we need to be alert to that.

We are all ultimately affected by our body image. People might say to me, “Well, you look all right”, but we all think, “Well, this could be better and that could be better.” We all want to please the people around us and ourselves when it comes to what we look like, and that is nothing new. It is only unusual or harmful when and ourselves when it comes to what we look like, and we need to be better.” We all want to please the people around us.

Mr Kevan Jones: The popular image of eating disorders is that they mainly affect young women, but does the hon. Lady agree that young men and people of all ages are increasingly likely to be affected?

Wera Hobhouse: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and that has been explored in several debates on eating disorders. We are somewhat hemmed in by stereotypes, and I wonder whether our age is particularly prone to that. We think eating disorders are a particular thing, so for a long time they have been a problem for young girls, but they affect people of all ages, and men increasingly. As we have explored today, body image and mental health are not gender-specific, but men suffer in silence more, because they are much less likely to talk about things, and subsequently they seek help a lot later, which can be dangerous. In fact, it is well known that the highest number of suicides is among men between the ages of 18 and 25, because men—that is a cultural stereotype that we can hopefully overcome—just do not talk about their body image, anxieties and mental health as much as women.

Research by the Mental Health Foundation published last March shows how common it is to have body image concerns, and we have heard many other statistics today. One in five UK adults have felt anxious or depressed about their bodies in the past year, and that anxiety can turn into long-term mental health problems, such as eating disorders. Across the country, eating disorders affect 1.25 million people, which is probably a conservative estimate. My work in this area supports that suggestion, and the sufferers I have met come from a range of different backgrounds, but they are united by their dissatisfaction with, and need to control, their body image. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) has already talked powerfully about that.
Of course, eating disorders are far more complex than stress over body image. They are serious conditions that ruin, define and, all too often, end lives. However, the seeds of emergent eating disorders can often be spotted in stress or anxiety about body image. For the more than 1 million people who were identified as having an eating disorder, the outlook is not good. On average, it takes 85 weeks between someone realising they have an eating disorder and that individual receiving treatment. That lost time can be the difference between full recovery and living with a permanent disability or disorder. The Government targets introduced to limit child waiting times for eating disorder treatments were a positive step, but thousands of adults across the UK need the same measures. We need to consider the waiting times for adult sufferers of eating disorders, and I know that the Minister has already looked into that.

Understanding eating disorders better is key to improving treatment. Many sufferers still report being turned away and refused referral, because doctors have told them that they are not thin enough to be treated for an eating disorder—I know that the Minister has talked to Hope Virgo, who has been running the ‘Dump the Scales’ campaign—but an eating disorder is not just about someone’s body mass index. By talking about eating disorders, especially in the context of body image, we can start to grasp how damaging that can be. We must educate everyone, from sufferers’ families to doctors, about the many different forms that such conditions can take and how best to treat them. Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental health condition, and our mental health policy must reflect that. This is a crisis, but we are not treating it as such.

Early intervention is key. Schools, doctors and support workers must be equipped with the tools to identify when body image concerns are becoming dangerous. Furthermore, we must change the cultural conversation around body image, which can be done on many levels. As we have already heard today, social media companies have a responsibility to police the content on their websites, ensuring that anything that actively incites self-harm is taken down. Eating disorders are on the rise, and many adult sufferers are failing to receive the early intervention they so desperately need. We must do better for those suffering in silence and start having a conversation about body image, mental health and the awful reality of life with an eating disorder.

3.33 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I think we can all agree that this has been an eye-opening and interesting debate, and I start by thanking all the hon. Members present for making such excellent, personal and candid speeches. I also want to continue the theme of hoping that the Minister will still be in her position at the end of the day, because, as everyone has said, she really takes on board the cross-party consensus on many such issues, doing so with regard to the matter rather than the politics. On these things, there is always more we agree on than disagree on. Having reinforced her embarrassment, I will now move on.

Today we have heard about the impact that negative body image can have on people’s mental health, and I will particularly address the mental health of children and young people. It is clear that more needs to be done to promote healthy body image, which should start as early as possible.

I pay tribute to the Mental Health Foundation for its comprehensive research and campaigning on this topic. It has found that even children under the age of six have reportedly felt dissatisfied with their bodies, so promoting a healthy body image from an early age is therefore a crucial step. It is obvious from what we have heard today that more needs to be done to ensure that happens.

It is heartbreaking to hear that more than half of children and young people have been bullied because of their appearance, and that one third of teenagers say they have felt shame because of their body image. The Children’s Society has found that children’s happiness with how they look has not improved since the mid-1990s, and young people themselves say that body image is their third biggest area of concern in life, after their education and employment prospects. Why, then, are we failing to address poor body image when it is such a crucial issue?

It is clear that educating young people about their bodies is an important step in improving their body confidence, so do the Government have plans to ensure that schools cover body image concerns as part of the introduction of compulsory relationships and sex education in 2020? More needs to be done to promote healthy body image and good mental health among our young people.

Classroom-based teaching should not only extend to teaching children about their bodies; more needs to be done to ensure that children understand how to use social media safely, understand how to improve their self-esteem and understand their emotions. Can the Minister outline how the Department for Education is tackling these issues in schools? I know the Minister is here representing the Department of Health and Social Care, but the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), the Children’s Minister, was here a moment ago, and they should be in close contact on this.

Children who are concerned about their body are less likely to take part in physical activity. We can all remember our school days, and I am sure we were all concerned about that. This is concerning when we know the health benefits of physical activity, so promoting positive body image can have benefits for physical health, as well as for mental health.

The mental health consequences of poor body image can be severe. Although having body image concerns is not a mental health problem in itself, having such concerns can be a risk factor for mental health problems. Mental health support should start where children need it, which is in school. Can the Minister tell the House what interim funding has been offered to schools to provide mental health support, given that the Green Paper’s proposed support package will not be rolled out nationally until 2023? Schools really cannot wait another four years for this support because, as we know, they are already struggling with their current budgets.

Where mental health problems develop, early intervention and support from mental health services is crucial. Too many young people who are not able to access the mental health support they need from child and adolescent mental health services are left waiting for treatment on
waiting lists for far too long or are turned down for help because their condition is deemed to be not bad enough. The best way to stop our young people developing eating disorders is to make sure they do not have to wait until they have an eating disorder and until they are bad enough to get that help. For children and young people who need support from CAMHS, there needs to be specific support to help them with body image concerns. What are the Government doing to ensure that support is in place?

According to a survey of family doctors, nearly all GPs worry that young people with mental health problems will come to harm because of difficulties in accessing treatment on the NHS, which should absolutely not be the case, and I know the Minister agrees. As was said at Health questions earlier, it is time to ring-fence funding for children’s mental health budgets to ensure that mental health services for children are properly funded.

I have spoken mostly about the impact on children and young people, because it is vital that the causes of poor body image are addressed early to ensure that children and young people think positively about their bodies and therefore go on to think positively about their bodies as adults. People with long-term conditions, such as cancer, and new mums can also have particular body image pressures and concerns, so it is important that as well as mental health services, other health services are there to support people when that is required. In some other cases, the issue is not due to mental health but can become a mental health issue if the matter is not addressed earlier.

According to the Mental Health Foundation, cognitive behavioural therapy—CBT—and other talking therapies can help people who are struggling with body image concerns, but we know that access to talking therapies can be a bit of a postcode lottery. Will the Minister explain how the Government plan to try to end that postcode lottery?

It is worrying to hear about body image concerns among lesbian, gay and bisexual people. One third of adults who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual have reported experiencing suicidal feelings in relation to their body image. It is therefore important that lesbian, gay and bisexual people have access to support that is tailored to them. Has the Minister taken steps to ensure that lesbian, gay and bisexual people have access to appropriate mental health support?

As we know, trans body image is often linked to a specific condition called body dysmorphia, which means it is not included in the statistics I just mentioned. Trans people face specific challenges in accessing mental health support, so it is vital that the Government ensure that mental health support tailored to trans people is available throughout the country. Will the Minister explain what steps the Government are taking to provide mental health services for trans people in this regard?

We have heard today about the profound impact that social media, celebrity culture and advertising can have on young people and adults and their views of their bodies. Too often, the content shared on social media is having a negative impact on mental health. That is why it is vital that more is done to protect children and young people and vulnerable people online, including from harmful images that can affect their body image. Far too often, social media companies turn a blind eye to harmful content. More really does need to be done to stop such content appearing online. I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for mentioning Facebook, as well as a former Member of this place and what he might be able to do in that regard.

I am reminded of all those pro-ana websites. I never even used to know what pro-ana meant—I did not realise it was even a thing—but when I see some of those websites and some of those YouTube stars, and the sort of body image that they present as being obtainable and the norm, I think more really should be done to take those images down. I also include in all that the fact that the movie world, Hollywood, TV and Netflix have a responsibility to promote a healthy body image when they cast their shows and movies. I will not name any particular show, movie or artist, but I have in mind a particular example of casting that really does, in my opinion, promote a very wrong body image. That does cause harm. The harms caused online need to be seen and treated as public health concerns, which, as shadow public health Minister, I am passionate about.

Labour is calling for a regulator with teeth that can take serious action against social media companies and for an enforceable duty of care to deal with the harms, hate and fake images that many online companies allow to flourish on their platforms.

The Government heeded Labour’s call and announced a regulator in the online harms White Paper, which is great, so it is now imperative for a regulator to be put in place as soon as possible. Will the Minister let the House know when that regulator might be expected? The process might take many months, and meanwhile children, young people and vulnerable adults are left at risk of severe online harms. The Government need to move faster and to go further, and perhaps we might see that under the new Administration—who knows—but it is clear from this debate that more needs to be done to tackle harmful content and body stigma, and to provide appropriate mental health support for everyone who needs it. Following this debate, as we have all said, I hope that the Minister will still be in her job and able to tackle this.

3.45 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price: I shall not detain the House for too long, because I think it has heard enough from me for one day. I thank Members for their generous comments, even if they might be career-limiting.

In this debate, however, there is consensus across the House. We all fully recognise the problems that we face and the need for decisive action to tackle them. I will certainly continue to work with all Members to do exactly that, because this is too important and—I make this observation—the people out there expect us to work together more often than not. Such subjects should not be a political football, and it is too important to ensure that we are tackling harms.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) made the observation that the debate might not be as well attended as previous ones, but to be fair we have had many such debates in this space. Many Members, even if not present this afternoon, clearly have a keen interest. I am utterly at one with her when she expressed her concern about a context in which we have normalised unrealistic body image. Such images have become so
normalised that it will take a lot of effort to address it. She also referred to the incident of the lady who, sadly, died as a result of accessing a Brazilian butt lift from a surgeon in Turkey. Unfortunately, she is not the only such person from this country. It is the most dangerous cosmetic procedure that can be undertaken and, as a consequence, is banned in this country. None the less, despite the ban, people are still bombarded with images and with adverts for where they can seek the procedure. That brings home the fact that we need to do much more to make people aware of the risks.

Many Members referred to the influence of advertising, and I am afraid that those organisations that profit from hosting advertising ought to have a duty of care and ensure that the material they carry does not expose people to harm. I therefore welcome the engagement that the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) is undertaking with Facebook on exactly that. It is not good enough for social media providers to retreat to the defence of, “Well, we are a liberated platform, regulated by our users.” Where they become a vehicle for things that will cause harm, those social media providers have a duty of care to the people who use their platforms. We must all continue to challenge them on that issue.

We have had lots of references to “Love Island”. Collectively, perhaps we ought to challenge use of the term “reality TV”, because it is not reality TV; it is fantasy TV. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] So that might be the outcome of today’s debate—let us all talk about fantasy TV from now on, because such programmes promote lifestyles that are not normal or achievable. Let us do that.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the Minister challenge the producers of a show such as “Love Island” to produce a series with real people in it, rather than one with the image that they are trying to portray now?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I could give that challenge, but the sad thing is that I do not think that any of us would watch that—although I do not think that many of us watch it now. Frankly, I like my dramas gritty and real. Ultimately, ITV broadcasts “Love Island” because it attracts many viewers—many of them among the most vulnerable group we are talking about. Again, ITV should be much more responsible, although the show is one of its biggest earners. I just regret the fact that we have become such a nation of voyeurs, and we all need to reflect on that point.

It is interesting that, because the people in these so-called reality TV shows are not known to us—they are not celebrities—we do not really see what we are doing to them in these circumstances. I do not know whether any hon. Members used to watch “Big Brother”, but there was an occasion when a contestant on “Celebrity Big Brother” effectively had a meltdown on TV. The public reaction then was very different; I think it seemed more real to people because it was a celebrity and the public were invested in them. That illustrates just how pernicious these so-called reality TV shows are, with their anonymous celebrities. These people suddenly become very exposed, and we have seen the outcome for some people’s mental health when they re-enter the real world.

I know that ITV has reflected on some of those risks, but there is much more to do. As I said, let us start calling them fantasy shows.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury also mentioned the whole issue of body-shaming online. We have accepted as normal some really unpleasant behaviour online. I always use the example of drinking and driving. It did not matter that drinking and driving was made illegal; it was only when it became socially unacceptable that people really stopped doing it. We need to get to that stage when it comes to how people behave online. Again, this happens because people do not see others as real people online. When people make abusive comments online, it is because they feel that they are able to. That has got to stop and we need to lead the way.

The hon. Lady also asked what it takes to make the social media companies actually do something about this. In the context of suicide content, it took a death—and it should not take a death. With regards to other content, I suspect that it will also take deaths to get these companies to do something. That really is not good enough. I pay tribute to those who are brave enough to share their experiences of self-harm and suicide as a result of what they have seen online, because they are really helping us to drag the social media companies to where they need to be.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron)—I never pronounce it right—articulated the fact that this area is an artificial world that becomes more and more intense. When we start using the internet and looking at things on social media, we do find ourselves dragged into a deeper and deeper world of “like” content, and it is easy to cease to be objective in those circumstances. We have certainly seen that with regard to self-harm and anorexia sites; it is just constant. The journeys that some people have been through are akin to grooming. People can find themselves being groomed by online content by sheer accident.

Given that context and given how we use devices these days, it is not difficult to see why people are becoming much more exposed to such risks. Safe ways of using the internet—using iPads and so on to access content—has to be central to any education we give children about looking after themselves because that level of intensity clearly causes harm.

The hon. Members for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow and for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) talked about eating disorders, the clinical pathways available and out-of-area places, all of which are issues that really bother me. It has to be said that we have done well on children’s access to help with eating disorders—and I think it was right to do so because if we can tackle these issues early with children, we are tackling eating disorders—but it has highlighted the risks that exist when children cease to be children and become adults. The level of service is not as good when people enter adulthood, particularly through the whole period of transition, and that in itself can cause harm. We have heard about Hope Virgo’s #DumpTheScales campaign and the fact that different clinical standards are being applied for children and adults. That is clearly something that we really need to fix and it is a key priority for me.

I also fully recognise the danger of out-of-area placements for people with eating disorders. Part of people’s recovery has to be the relationships that they have with family and friends. I have seen that very clearly with children
and young people. Generally, we need to reduce the number of out-of-area placements for people with acute mental health issues, including eating disorders, but I will not be satisfied until we have no out-of-area placements at all. Having people long term in beds in hospitals is not good for their mental health. Clearly, there are cases where there is a need for intensive treatment and we need to do that, but over time, out-of-area placements really should not be a thing.

The right hon. Member for North Durham, as usual, brought to the debate his very well-informed knowledge of this subject. I join him in paying tribute to Dawn Knight and all the campaigning she has done. She has not been shy about sharing the devastating impact of what she did, telling her story of how she just wanted to enhance her appearance and the result has been absolute hell. Neither is she shy about sharing exactly what the impact will be on the NHS as a consequence of the treatment she has had to have to put it right.

This whole area of cosmetic surgery is growing very quickly, and people are quite naive in thinking that perhaps the more money they spend on a procedure, the better it is going to be. Nothing could be further from the truth, because there are the least virtuous of people in this space. As the right hon. Gentleman says, this is the wild west. These people are profiteers. Part and parcel of enabling people to protect themselves in this environment is to really talk about the risks. There are some absolute cowboys out there. The story that Dawn tells about trying to sue the practitioner who undertook her procedure shows that that is frankly impossible. When people want to become engaged in activity that is borderline criminal, they find ways of making sure that they cannot be held to account for it. Whatever our instinctive view about people’s choice, self-regulation and so on, where there is clear evidence of harm, the Government should act. We really must look at this area, because there are clearly people who need to do, having no idea that they are committing a criminal offence. We need to educate them as well.

I will end there, because, as I say, I feel like I have been the Government at the Dispatch Box today. I look forward to continuing discussions with all Members present, who I know care very deeply about this. It is something that we really must tackle as a matter of urgency.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved,
That this House has considered body image and mental health.

PETITIONS

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Tom Tugendhat.

Stonecastle Farm Quarry

3.59 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be here, with you in the Chair once again, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The petition of residents of Tonbridge and Malling declares that Stonecastle Farm Quarry near Golden Green is an unsuitable location for further quarrying, and that Kent County Council and the Planning Inspectorate should not allocate site M13 for sharp sand and gravel extraction in the Kent minerals and waste local plan.

I am particularly grateful to all the residents in Golden Green and surrounding villages, including some of those present in the Public Gallery today—the advancement of public business may mean that some of them have not made it—for their work in collecting signatures and responding to the consultations that have already taken place. Including online signatures, over 1,000 people have now indicated their opposition to the allocation.

Stonecastle Farm Quarry lies on the boundary of Tonbridge and Malling with Tunbridge Wells. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) endorses my comments today, and perhaps he will be able to speak more freely about them tomorrow. Residents in Tudeley and surrounding areas, including the Save Capel campaign group, have been actively campaigning against expansion here, and against other proposed developments in the area. I hope the House will recognise their efforts.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Kent County Council and the Planning Inspectorate to reconsider the allocation of a site for quarrying in Golden Green.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of Residents of Tonbridge and Malling, Declares that Stonecastle Farm Quarry is an unsuitable location for further quarrying and Kent County Council and the Planning Inspectorate should not allocate site M13 for Sharp Sand and Gravel extraction in the Kent Minerals and Waste Local Plan.]
Lower Limb Wound Care

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

4.3 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, I do not normally sit when I speak in this place, but half an hour ago I was in a hospital bed on the 12th floor of St Thomas’s when I heard that this debate was coming early, rather than later. There was a big rush to get me here, and there are very good doctors and nurses in the Gallery who helped me to get here, because I thought it was tremendously important to speak. I had secured this debate, for which I am very grateful, and I particularly wanted to talk on this subject. I was pleased to get it before the recess, and I was not going to miss it for anything. After we finish, I shall be returning, I hope, to the 12th floor of St Thomas’s and to very good care.

The subject of this debate was brought to my attention by Lord Hunt, our colleague in the House of Lords, where they had a debate not long ago about what plans the Government have to develop a strategy for improving the standards of wound care in the NHS. As somebody who needs wound care right at this moment, I know what a big subject it is. I did not know before—I was totally ignorant—but I have discovered what a challenging subject it is for so many people.

As a patient myself, I can talk about the subject with some feeling. I have to say that it is the most painful thing I have ever come across, and I had no idea that people suffered this kind of pain. A week ago, when I had to be taken to a local hospital in Merthyr Tydfil, I was asked by an ambulance driver what level of pain I was in, on a scale of one to 10, and I said, “Nine.” I do not usually exaggerate; it was that painful. I am grateful to everybody who has helped me, and I want to make sure that the service develops and people get all the help they need in such circumstances.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) on securing the debate. She often features in Adjournment debates in this House. We are very pleased to see her in her place, and we thank her for all that she does. Does she agree that many people fear that the NHS neglects leg ulcers and the required treatment is not being given? The latest statistics, according to Dr Adderley’s speech at the Health Service Journal patient safety congress, show that leg ulcers account for 40% of chronic wounds but only 7% of the chronic wounds that are treated. There is quite clearly an anomaly.

Ann Clwyd: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making my speech for me. I am sure we will be in total agreement as my speech develops.

Some interesting points were made during the debate in the other place, including the point that wound care is a massive challenge to the NHS, but it currently lacks priority, investment and direction. I want to push the Government, if they need pushing, on the need for urgent action and the development of a strategy across care providers to improve the standard of wound care.

A staggering 2 million patients are treated for wounds every year, at a cost of more than £5 billion and rising. While 60% of all wounds heal within a year, a huge
resource has to be committed to managing untreated wounds. The NHS response is very variable. Healing takes far too long; diagnosis is not good enough; and inadequate commissioning of services by clinical commissioning groups compounds the problem, with under-trained staff and a lack of suitable dressings and bandages.

There has also been a very worrying drop in the number of district nurses, whose role in ensuring safe and effective wound care in the community is crucial. I was shocked when I talked to a friend in Cardiff about the problem of putting on surgical stockings, and her experience highlights the need for district nurses. My friend had had a serious operation, and she could not bend to pull on the stockings. I asked her what she did, because she is a widow who lives on her own. She said, “I go out in the street and ask somebody to help me.” I am sure that people are very ready to help, but no one should be in that situation. I think we would all agree that the drop in the number of district nurses is very worrying.

I am told that, ideally, 70% of venous leg ulcerations should heal within 12 to 16 weeks, and 98% in 24 weeks. In reality, however, research shows that healing rates at six months have been reported as low as 9%, with infection rates as high as 58%. Patients suffer, and the cost of not healing wounds swiftly and effectively can lead to more serious health problems, such as sepsis, which is often the result of an infected injury. We also know that foot ulcers on diabetics can unfortunately lead to amputations if they are not dealt with properly.

In the other place they talked about the Bradford study, and there is a very good summary of it in the House of Lords Library. It underlines the importance of evidence-based care, with nearly one third of patients interviewed in the study failing to receive an accurate diagnosis for their wound. As the study puts it:

“Wound care should be seen as a specialist segment of healthcare that requires clinicians with specialist training to diagnose and manage...There is no doubt that better diagnosis and treatment and effective prevention of wound complications would help minimise treatment costs”.

We learn most of all from our own experience. My experience is that when I first developed a farthing-sized spot on my leg, I did not know what it was. I asked my chiropodist, who looked at it a few times and said, “I think you had better go and see your GP.” I went to see my GP—a very good GP—who did not know what it was either. Eventually, I was referred to a skin specialist—that is some weeks ago, now—who looked at it and said, “I don’t know what it is, but why don’t you try putting Vaseline on it?” Now, I do not think the experts up there was either. Eventually, I was referred to a skin specialist—who runs a leg clinic, who had a lot of stories to tell. In fact, she sent me a whole pile of patient stories—there is not time to read them out today, but they are very interesting. I realised how difficult it is for patients to get the right diagnosis and the right treatment. I took a list of all the people—they are mainly consultants—and I know that some people in St Thomas’s would have come along if they had known of the existence of such a group. It introduced me to the Lindsay Leg Club Foundation, which is run by Ellie Lindsay OBE, who is the president. There are leg clubs in many towns and cities around the country. She was very encouraging—I say that as somebody who was a bit afraid when they realised what they had. She rang me up several times, and her patient stories were fascinating.

During the course of my journey, I have met many interesting people. For instance, I did not know there was an all-party group on vascular and venous disease. I just happened to see it in the all-party notices the day after I had been in St Thomas’s. I rang up the chair, the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), and asked him if I could come along to a meeting. He said that I was welcome to. I went along and, apart from the chair, I think I was the only MP there. There was a fascinating mixture of people, who were all involved in this problem in some way.

There was somebody who runs a leg clinic, who had a lot of stories to tell. In fact, she sent me a whole pile of patient stories—there is not time to read them out today, but they are very interesting. I realised how difficult it is for patients to get the right diagnosis and the right treatment. I took a list of all the people—they are mainly consultants—and I know that some people in St Thomas’s would have come along if they had known of the existence of such a group. It introduced me to the Lindsay Leg Club Foundation, which is run by Ellie Lindsay OBE, who is the president. There are leg clubs in many towns and cities around the country. She was very encouraging—I say that as somebody who was a bit afraid when they realised what they had. She rang me up several times, and her patient stories were fascinating.

Jamie Stone: (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am listening with great interest to what the right hon. Lady is saying, not least because this is an important debate on something that we do not talk about as much as we should in this place. Am I picking up correctly what she is saying on patient experience? Is she saying that we should encourage patients who have been through this transition and experience to share that experience with others in order to make other potential patients more aware of what might be out there and what they could do?

Ann Clwyd: Yes. That is a very positive idea. People need to talk to one another, particularly in this House because of the age differences. A lot of people talk about this in the other House, because on the whole they are much older than we are—which for me in this place; I am pretty old. I am just surprised that I had never heard of this before. Talking encourages people when they have discovered that they have this problem to seek the right advice.

Jamie Stone: Can I make absolutely sure that I understand this? By age difference, the right hon. Lady means people of my age—I am considerably older than some hon. Members—sharing experiences with people who are younger and might need to know these things. Is that correct?

Ann Clwyd: Sorry; I did not hear the last part.

Jamie Stone: Is this about the older generation, who might have had some experience in this regard, sharing experiences so that the younger generation—considerably younger than I am—might know the potential of what they will look at or deal with in future?

Ann Clwyd: Yes. I am very glad that there is an all-party group, for example, because it is important that such groups exist. I have seen the work that has
gone on there over several months. As the hon. Gentleman knows, there are dozens and dozens of all-party groups in this place—I am sure that we do not know of the existence of most of them, but it is good to draw attention to this one.

Another person I met was Professor Julian Guest, who is a health economics consultant. People are very good at sending information. He sent me a list of things that, as a health economist, he has been working on. He says that wound care requires a "change in its service delivery model that could include...Enhanced support for safe self-care (possibly by integration with local pharmacy support and supervision)...Improved diagnostic support underpinned by increased training and education of non-specialist nurses in the fundamentals of wound management...Consistent and integrated progressive care pathway with agreed defined trigger points for senior involvement and onward referral for investigation and differential diagnosis and a shared management plan to be implemented regardless of care setting...Establishment of dedicated wound care clinics in the community, possibly in general practices."

So there are several papers by people working in this area who are thinking deeply about it.

I heard from consultants at St Thomas’s about an excellent development called the Camden Health Improvement Practice pilot wound clinic. Dr Geraghty, who runs it, is working on wound care for people who are sleeping rough—for the homeless. I think everybody would applaud that as a very necessary and useful thing to do, and we look forward to hearing more about it. I am looking at the clock, and there is not much time left, but I hope the Minister will respond on this issue, because when I think of the pain inflicted on people—luckily, my pain is managed, but the pain of the homeless, for example, who are sleeping rough on the streets, is not generally being managed—it is clear that this Camden project is a very welcome development.

I had a new knee about a year ago, which is not a pleasant thing to have done. However, I have known nothing as painful as this leg wound, and I am grateful that so many good people are working in this area and highlighting its importance. It is probably not as glamorous as others in the health service, but it is absolutely necessary for people’s wellbeing, comfort and health, and I hope we can do a lot more to support people in this area, to support new initiatives and to assist the doctors, nurses and other practitioners who do such an excellent job.

I am out on parole, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will, I hope, be returning to my bed in St Thomas’s before too long, and I hope to come back after the recess with very positive views and a continuing interest in the whole subject of wound care in the NHS.

4.23 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I do apologise—I went to university in Wales, so I should get that right.

I must congratulate the right hon. Lady, first, on securing the debate, and, secondly, on making such mammoth, gargantuan efforts to be here. She did that with some help from her friends on the 12th floor of St Thomas’s, the experts in the Gallery—I am going to have to be careful what I say. She is nothing short of an inspiration to all of us, both as a long-standing Member of Parliament who is greatly respected in this place and as a human being. We are so grateful for the fact that she has made it here today, and we wish her a very speedy recovery. We look forward to her being back here to monitor every development that the Department can bring about in the context of wound care and how we look after people in hospital more generally. She is a great inspiration to all of us, and I thank her so much for raising this issue in the House.

I think we all recognise the importance of ensuring that patients have access to high-quality lower limb wound care. As a Government, we are absolutely committed to ensuring that people receive the right care in the right place at the right time, whether through acute services, a local GP or services based in the local community. As the right hon. Lady knows, wound care treatment is a vital service which, during the initial period, is predominantly provided by a community nurse. That crucial provision offers relief to those with leg ulcerations or diabetic foot ulcerations and pressure ulcers.

As Members will know, venous disease is the most common type of leg ulceration, and can cause great distress and suffering to patients and their families. The right hon. Lady spoke powerfully of the pain that she has suffered, and that others suffer, as a result of the condition. I think it is important to keep that in mind because of the side effects that having to live with enduring pain for long periods can have on a person’s emotional and mental health and wellbeing.

Our priority is for leg ulcers of this type to be treated early and in the community when that is possible, without the need for further hospital admissions or GP appointments. I think that that preventative approach is right for patients and for the system. It is key for wound care to be delivered effectively and efficiently. Good wound care not only saves patients from distress and suffering, but gives nurses more time to deliver other important services, and alleviates pressure on acute services. That is why NHS England and NHS Improvement have commissioned the Academic Health Science Network to develop and deliver a national wound care strategy programme for England, which aims to improve the quality of wound care provision. It is a comprehensive programme, which covers improving prevention of pressure ulcers, wound care of the lower leg, and management of surgical wounds.

The programme’s work will be informed by the following priorities. First, it will improve patient experience and outcomes by developing national clinical standards of care and a more data-driven approach. I know that the right hon. Lady is greatly respected in this place and

Ann Clwyd: It is pronounced “Cun-on”
the inconsistencies in the availability and quality of educational resources. As well as improving the care provided by healthcare professionals, that will allow patients to become more capable in self-care.

The right hon. Lady raised several issues that I should like to follow up. Let me first pay tribute to the work done by the Lindsay Leg Club Foundation in relation to community-based leg ulcer care. I am pleased that the committee of the lower limb clinical workstream of the national wound care strategy programme includes members of the foundation. As the right hon. Lady said, leg clubs are organised by the local community rather than health providers, but leg club nursing teams are employed by NHS local provider services, clinical commissioning groups and GPs. That is why it is so important for everyone to work together to support people as much as they can in the community. I can imagine that when this condition starts it is so painful that people can feel extremely alone and isolated, and the provision of leg clubs and other support mechanisms in the community, to offer the information, advice and support that they need, can help them to stop feeling that isolation and fear.

I also join the right hon. Lady in welcoming the all-party parliamentary group on vascular and venous disease. It is important for us to have all-party parliamentary groups which really recognise conditions of this kind, and which are doing their best to push the Government, and us in the Department of Health and Social Care, to do everything we can to support people who suffer from them.

The programme that I was talking about started its work in late 2018, and since then has brought together a range of experts. It has recruited over 500 stakeholders from a very broad range of private and public sector organisations to its stakeholder forum, and it is important that we have people with real experience from across the country taking part in this and influencing the decision making. They aim to deliver their recommendations by the end of the 2019-20 financial year. We look forward to receiving them and the positive impact that we will have on patients’ lives. This is just for England, but NHS England is in communication with wound care leads in the three other devolved nations to ensure that they are sharing this learning across the piece.

The research in this area is also very important. The Department funds research into all aspects of human health through the National Institute for Health Research at the level of about £1 billion a year, and the NIHR has funded a number of studies focusing on lower limb wound care, including venous leg ulcers and vascular problems. A five-year funded programme on complex wounds comprised 11 new and updated reviews of the existing literature, a survey and interviews with people with complex wounds, their carers and health care professionals. There has also been a series of venous leg ulcer studies using randomised control trials to investigate the clinical and cost effectiveness of new versus traditional venous leg ulcer treatments from types of compression bandage through to compression hosiery to larval therapy.

The right hon. Lady also spoke about the importance of having the right stuff, expertise and medically trained people to be able to deliver the care, and it is no secret that community nurses are a fundamental part of our health system; they provide vital services that ensure patients are treated where they are most comfortable, which often is in their own home, and that they are supported to manage their conditions and to live independently. To help deliver our vision for community services, we are investing an extra £4.5 billion a year to spend on primary medical and community health services by 2023-24. The key to delivering the long-term plans and vision is ensuring that we have the right nursing numbers, particularly in the community, and that is why the interim NHS people plan is prioritising urgent accelerated action to tackle some of the community nursing vacancies. That will be done in a range of different ways, including increasing supply through undergraduate nursing degrees, clearer pathways into the profession through the nursing associate qualification and apprenticeships, and tackling some of the misconceptions about the role of community nurses, which sometimes deter people from entering the profession. In addition, in May 2018 we announced £10 million for incentives to postgraduate students to go on to work in some of the areas that we care very passionately about and where we want to recruit the best people, such as mental health, learning disability and district community nursing roles.

Jim Shannon: I am pleased to hear this very positive response from the Minister. In Northern Ireland we have a very good community nursing programme that is delivered through the social care services. It cares for those who need care and a change of dressing for their wounds every day. The Minister referred to contact within the regions and devolved Administrations; will she contact the Northern Ireland Assembly and the permanent secretary of the Department of Health, Richard Pengelly, so they can give some idea of what we do there?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman is always full of brilliant ideas and we will only move forward as a nation if we share best practice and the expertise gained from different parts of our country. So I would be very keen to speak to his colleagues at the Northern Ireland Assembly and see if we can gain any learning from that.}

Jamie Stone: I could not possibly let the occasion pass without commenting. Can I take it that that promise will be extended to the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government? The issue we have heard about today is no less a problem in Scotland.

Caroline Dinenage: Yes. We do not discriminate. We are keen to talk to everyone to get the best possible learning so that patients up and down the country can benefit from all the expertise that is available.

In thanking the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley for making the supreme effort to be here today, I reassure her that both the Government and the NHS recognise the importance of ensuring that patients have access to high-quality lower limb wound care and will continue to support the work of the national wound care strategy programme for England on improving the quality of wound care, including lower limb wound care, in the country. I thank her once again for being here to make her case so incredibly powerfully. I wish her a speedy recovery and send her all our love from this House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I echo the Minister’s warm comments about the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd). We are all deeply impressed to see that she has come from her
[Madam Deputy Speaker]

hospital bed on the 12th floor of St Thomas’s to raise this important issue in the House. I have known and been a friend of the right hon. Lady for more than 30 years and I know her courage and resilience so it is not a great surprise that she has done so, but nevertheless we are hugely impressed. Like the Minister, on behalf of the whole House, I wish her a speedy recovery and look forward to having her back full time in September.

Question put and agreed to.

4.36 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

20 Years of Devolution

1. **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the merits of the devolution of powers to Scotland over the last 20 years. [912059]

   **David Mundell**: If that was a question about a separate English Parliament, I should say that I am clear, as is the new leader of the Conservative party, that England does not need its own separate Parliament.

   **Colin Clark** (Gordon) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the incoming Prime Minister must deliver certainty, confidence and prosperity for the whole UK, to counter the politics of grievance and defeat?

   **David Mundell**: Yes.

   **Paul Masterton** (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Given that, 20 years on, fewer than half the people in Scotland think that devolution has led to better outcomes in education, health or the growth of the Scottish economy,
does my right hon. Friend agree that what Scotland needs is a Government who will utilise with full effect Holyrood’s extensive powers, not deflect and delay powers like the Scottish National party has done?

David Mundell: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend and it is a message that I get back from my own constituents. They want to see the Scottish Parliament focusing on education, health, and transport—the issues that are important to their daily lives—and not pursuing an obsession with the constitution.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the frustrations that those of us who cherish devolution feel is the SNP’s apparent reticence to use many of the Scottish Parliament’s powers. For example, what a difference they could make to the lives of the 6,000 WASPI women in my constituency of Edinburgh West if they used the powers they had to alleviate the difficulties, rather than using them as another grievance.

David Mundell: May I begin by asking the hon. Lady to pass on my congratulations to her new UK leader? It is very good to see a Scottish MP in that role. I agree wholeheartedly with her sentiment. It is well documented that if, having aligned themselves to the WASPI cause, the SNP Government really wanted to do something for WASPI women, they have the power and, indeed, the capacity to raise the resources to do so.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the benefits of devolution is when our two Governments work together, such as with the Moray growth deal? The £32.5 million from the UK Government was matched by the Scottish Government, which means that it will make a real difference to the whole of Moray. Therefore, devolution delivers when our Governments work together.

David Mundell: I commend my hon. Friend for being such a champion of the Moray growth deal. His predecessor, my hon. Friend Pete Wishart, has had an extraordinary record on the Moray growth deal. He has been such a champion, and it is a matter of great regret that the next tenor, if the SNP Government are returned in the Scottish Parliament, will mean the end of the Moray growth deal. I commend him wholeheartedly.

David Mundell: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. That is a bit rich coming from the hon. Gentleman, whom I have always respected in my deliberations from the Dispatch Box. I think that he would agree with commentary this week that one of the biggest threats to the continuation of the United Kingdom is the total and utter collapse of the Scottish Labour party.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): More than 100 powers that are currently held in Brussels are to be transferred to Holyrood after Brexit. Therefore, does my right hon. Friend agree that, far from removing powers from Scotland, leaving the EU will give the Scottish Parliament more power?

David Mundell: What my hon. Friend says is absolutely correct. We have been subjected again, as we have so many times during this Session, to hearing about a power grab, but not once have we heard the identity of a single power that is being grabbed. Instead, what is identified is the fact that more than 100 powers and responsibilities are coming to the Scottish Parliament.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): What I am interested in is the conversations that the right hon. Gentleman has had with his soon-to-be Prime Minister, because what he has said in the past is that it would be “extremely difficult” to stay in a Cabinet under the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). Will he ever develop anything approaching a backbone, or are Ruth’s Scottish Conservatives now the exclusive property of their biggest electoral liability?

David Mundell: I have always admired the hon. Gentleman’s consistency. Last week, when I appeared before the Scottish Affairs Committee, he said that he hoped I would not resign and that I would be in post for months and years.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that leaving the EU provides many opportunities for the businesses, communities and people across Scotland, not least for the fishing communities in places such as my constituency of Banff and Buchan when we leave the common fisheries policy and become an independent coastal state?

David Mundell: I absolutely do, and I always commend my hon. Friend for being such a champion of the fishing industry. Yesterday, I met the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation, which remains excited and upbeat about the prospect of Britain leaving the EU and the hated common fisheries policy.

Lesley Laird (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): Politics is about principles. A few months ago, the Secretary of State told us that the threat to the integrity of the United Kingdom was “the principal issue” for him, but he also told us:

“Mr Johnson and I do not agree on a whole range of issues, and I do not see myself able to serve in this way.”
Oral Answers

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Oral Answers

So how far will the Secretary of State allow his principles to be stretched in defence of the Union, just so he can keep his job?

David Mundell: I am not going to take any lessons on the question of leadership from the hon. Lady. Only yesterday, she said that “we need a serious, mature politician who can be relied upon to keep his promises” to be our Prime Minister. I am sure she was not referring to Richard Leonard or the leader of the Labour party.

Lesley Laird: I think that we would find more maturity in both those quarters than we might in the Prime Minister to be. However, those were the Secretary of State’s opinions, although he has obviously traded them in and got some new ones. He wants us to believe and that this Government are guardians of the Union, yet by pandering to the dog-whistle politics of English nationalism, the next Prime Minister has already abandoned the tradition of the Conservative and Unionist party. The Tory party is now a real and present danger to the integrity of the United Kingdom, so will the Secretary of State now confirm that he will not sell out the people of Scotland and that he will not be part of a no-deal Cabinet?

David Mundell: The hon. Lady has a nerve. Her position has been to sell out to the SNP. She told her colleagues that she would gladly give up her own seat to the SNP so that there could be a Labour-SNP alliance that would inevitably lead to another independence referendum. But to give her credit, she is doing a pretty good job of crashing the Scottish Labour party in the polls—losing two MEPs and finishing fifth in the European elections. Only the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party in Scotland will stand up for our United Kingdom, and I will certainly continue to do so.

Leaving the EU: No Deal

3. Bambo Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What recent assessment has he made of the economic effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU without a deal?

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The Government delivered on our commitment to provide objective analysis to Parliament of how exiting the EU may affect the economy of the UK and its sectors, and I will certainly continue to do so.

David Mundell: It is well known that there would be a multibillion-pound funding gap in the event of Scottish independence that could only be dealt with by significant tax rises or cuts in services. Those who propose independence have still not answered the question on where that money is to be found.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): A no-deal Brexit will be catastrophic for Scotland’s hill farmers, especially those looking to export sheepmeat to the European Union. That is not just my view but the view of the National Farmers Union Scotland and the NFU across the four parts of the United Kingdom. Can the Secretary of State give me and them some assurance that he will not just sit in Cabinet and watch their livelihoods destroyed?

David Mundell: I have been very clear throughout my time in Cabinet about the importance of agriculture to Scotland and the needs of Scotland’s agriculture industry, and I will continue to be so.

Drug Consumption Room (Glasgow)

5. Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on the potential merits of establishing a medically supervised drug consumption room in Glasgow.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The causes of drug misuse are complex and need a range of policy responses. I am aware that the Home Secretary has offered to meet Scottish Government Public Health Minister Joe FitzPatrick to discuss a broad range of issues around the tragic matter of drug-related deaths in Scotland.

Alison Thewliss: I am glad that the Home Secretary is finally going to meet the Scottish Government on this. When NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde published its proposals for a supervised drug consumption in 2016, the number of drug-related deaths stood at 257; last year, it was 394. So I ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, how many people would still be alive in the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde area if the Home Office had not blocked, for ideological reasons, drug consumption rooms in Glasgow?

David Mundell: As I said in my initial response, issues around drug misuse are complex and need a range of policy responses. I welcome the fact that the summit that my Scottish Parliament colleague Miles Briggs MSP suggested is going to go ahead. I can confirm that UK Government Ministers will take part in that, and I am sure that all the issues will be discussed on that occasion.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Scotland’s drug death rate is three times higher than in the rest of the UK. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that...
in addition to UK-wide action, the Scottish Government should be using their substantial powers over healthcare, education, housing and criminal justice to tackle this?

David Mundell: I do agree with my hon. Friend. Of course the UK Government want to work closely with the Scottish Government on this. The statistics released last week are shocking to everyone in Scotland and, indeed, throughout the United Kingdom, but it should not be suggested that any of the UK Government’s policy decisions are the sole answer to this issue: it is complex, and the powers that the Scottish Parliament already has will go a long way towards dealing with it.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Two weeks ago, my constituent Chelsea Bruce died in a drugs-related incident. She was just 16 years old. The time for handwringing is over. We know that drug consumption rooms, drop-in testing and even safe clinical prescribing of illicit drugs will save lives. The international body of evidence is unequivocal, yet the Secretary of State has been sceptical and vague on this. If only he would show some leadership in urgently finding a route through the impasse between the Home Office and the Lord Advocate to help to rapidly roll out these facilities in Glasgow and across Scotland. How many more must die before the Secretary of State recognises this public health emergency and acts to save these lives?

David Mundell: That sort of politicking is completely unworthy of this serious debate. The Home Office, the UK Government and, with respect, the Scottish Government take this issue seriously. We are going to have a summit in early course to discuss all the issues around this, and I sincerely hope, because I have had constituents die as well, that we can move forward.

Further Devolution

6. Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Prime Minister on the devolution of further powers to Scotland.  

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I have regular meetings with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who has been unwavering in her passionate support for our Union. We have regularly discussed the UK Government’s continued commitment to the devolution settlement and to a strong Scotland within a strong United Kingdom.

Martin Whitfield: If the Secretary of State is in his place later, what will he do to keep Scotland in its place in the UK?

David Mundell: I will continue to do as I have done for the past four and a bit years, and that is relentlessly to make the positive case for the benefit of Scotland being in the United Kingdom and to the United Kingdom of having Scotland in it.

11. [912070] David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Britain will be leaving the European Union on 31 October, under our excellent new Prime Minister. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, when we do so, 100 extra powers will be devolved to the Scottish Parliament, meaning that Conservatives and Brexiteers are the true friends of devolution and a strong Scottish Parliament?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend makes a pertinent point. This party and this Government have been committed to the devolution settlement and to making it work. There is one party in this Parliament that would destroy devolution, and that is the SNP.

Leaving the EU: No Deal

7. Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Prime Minister on the effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

12. Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Prime Minister on the effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU without a deal.  

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I have had regular discussions with the Prime Minister on a range of matters related to exiting the EU. It is essential that we respect the result of the 2016 referendum vote to leave the EU.

Stewart Hosie: A no-deal Brexit combined with ending free movement of people, which is the inbound Prime Minister’s prospectus, would restrict Scottish business and the public sector from recruiting the staff they need, yet the Secretary of State has welcomed the appointment of the inbound Prime Minister. Can we conclude then that he is prepared to throw business and public services under a bus simply to protect his own career?

David Mundell: What amounts to throwing Scotland under a bus has been the actions of the SNP throughout the Brexit debates in this Parliament—voting three times against an agreement that would have allowed Scotland to leave the EU on an orderly basis and largely in accordance with its own document, “Scotland’s Place in Europe”.

Douglas Chapman: In recent weeks, I have read reports that house prices in London are falling and job vacancies are down—two classic signs of an economy going into recession—and I can add to this mix the potential for a no-deal Boris Brexit boorach. Given these circumstances, what is the Secretary of State’s plan B for the Scottish economy?

David Mundell: The incoming Prime Minister has been very clear that he wants to leave the EU with a deal, and that is the best outcome for Scotland.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Let me read this for fear of misquoting the Secretary of State. He told the last Scottish Conservative party conference: “Unfortunately Mr Johnson seems to behave in a way that suggests he is only focused on his own self interest and not on the interests of our country, and I find that very disappointing.” Has the Secretary of State now overcome his disappointment, and will he continue to serve the new Prime Minister?
David Mundell: Just like the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues, everything I have ever said is on the record. What I want to make clear is that my priority remains Scotland’s place within the United Kingdom, and that—in government or out—will be my continuing priority.

Tommy Sheppard: The House will observe that that is not actually an answer to my question. The Secretary of State sits besides Cabinet colleagues who have demonstrated integrity and conviction in deciding that they will resign over the question of a no-deal Brexit. If he is against a no-deal Brexit, would it not be a better look for Scotland for him to do likewise, rather than wait to be sacked or abolished?

David Mundell: Of course, the hon. Gentleman’s position is not a deal Brexit or a no-deal Brexit; it is no Brexit. That is what he is seeking to bring about. There is no evidence that the SNP has at any time been serious about getting a deal for Scotland. On each occasion it has had the opportunity to vote for a deal, it has voted against it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Finally, and briefly, Anna Soubry.

Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Ind): I hope that the Secretary of State will stay in post, but apparently that means he will have to sign the pledge, because in order to serve in government he will have to stay in post, but apparently that means he will have to sign the pledge, because in order to serve in government he and others will have to agree to leaving the EU come 31 October, deal or no deal. So will he be at the Dispatch Box again—yes or no—or are these his last questions?

David Mundell: I fear that the hon. Lady’s endorsement will have sealed my fate.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [912144] Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 24 July.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. Following my duties in this House, this afternoon I shall have an audience of Her Majesty the Queen. I shall then continue with my duties in this House from the Back Benches, where I will continue to be the Member of Parliament for Maidenhead.

Ruth Cadbury: I profoundly disagree with many of the decisions that the Prime Minister has made and many of the things she says, but I recognise that she should have a respect for public service and for the future of our country, so how does she feel about handing over to a man who, among many things, is happy to demonise Muslims, is prepared to chuck our loyal public servants and diplomats under a bus, and promises to sell our country out to Donald Trump and his friends?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to hand over to an incoming leader of the Conservative party and Prime Minister who I worked with when he was in my Cabinet, and who is committed, as a Conservative who stood on a Conservative manifesto in 2017, to delivering on the vote of the British people in 2016 and to delivering a bright future for this country.

Q5. [912148] Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I rise to thank my right hon. Friend not only for her loyal service as Prime Minister over the past three years, but for her 33 years of public service, which is a record to be proud of. I also thank her for her personal support in helping me get my private Member’s Bill—now the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017—on to the statute book. Does she agree that it is far better to prevent people becoming homeless, to use the taxation system to combat obesity, and to prevent people smoking in the first place? Does she agree that prevention is far better than cure?

The Prime Minister: First of all, I thank my hon. Friend for all his work on the Homelessness Reduction Act, which, crucially, we are seeing actually having an impact—that is so important for the people who are benefiting from the work he did. I know that he has been doing a lot of work as part of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health. I agree that we need to start viewing health as an asset to protect throughout our lives. That is why we have taken bold action on smoking and childhood obesity. I am proud that we have delivered not only the biggest ever cash boost in the history of the national health service, but a long-term plan that, as he said, will focus on prevention—as well as on cancer care and mental health—trying to ensure that people do not get ill in the first place. Preventing smoking and obesity are key parts of better lives for people in the future.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Today marks the final day in office for the Prime Minister, and I pay tribute to her sense of public duty. Public service should always be recognised. Being an MP, a Minister or indeed a Prime Minister is an honour that brings with it huge responsibility and huge pressures personally and, I am sure the Prime Minister and probably the whole House would agree, on those very closest to us, who are often not able to answer back for the criticisms made against them. I hope she has a marginally more relaxing time on the Back Benches. Perhaps, like the Chancellor, she will even help me oppose the reckless plans of her successor. [Interruption.] If I may continue—[Interruption.] I am glad the Government party is in such good heart today, for tomorrow it won’t be.

In the past three years, child poverty has gone up, pensioner poverty has gone up, in-work poverty has gone up, violent crime has gone up, NHS waiting times have gone up, school class sizes have gone up, homelessness has gone up and food bank use has gone up. Does the Prime Minister have any regrets about any of the things I have just said?

The Prime Minister: It is very good to see the Conservative party in good heart; it is more than I can say for the Labour party. But let me just say something to the right hon. Gentleman about my record over the past three years and how I measure it. It is in the
opportunity for every child who is now in a better school. It is in the comfort for every person who now has a job for the first time in their life. It is in the hope of every disadvantaged young person now able to go to university. It is in the joy of every couple who can now move into their own home. At its heart, politics is about exchanges across the Dispatch Box. Nor is it about eloquent speeches or media headlines. Politics is about the difference we make every day to the lives of people up and down this country. They are our reason for being here, and we should never forget it.

Jeremy Corbyn: Yes, politics is about real life and politics is about what people suffer in their ordinary lives. I did not mention that per-pupil school funding has gone down, police numbers are down and GP numbers are falling. In the 2017 Conservative manifesto, the Prime Minister promised that no school would have its budget cut, that she would protect TV licences for the over-75s and that she would halve rough sleeping. Which of those pledges is the Prime Minister most sorry not to have achieved?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to hear that the right hon. Gentleman spent some time reading the Conservative party manifesto from 2017—he has not been known for always reading the documents he stands up and talks about. Had he read the manifesto properly, he would know that we made a pledge on rough sleeping: to halve it by 2022 and to stop rough sleeping by 2027. I am pleased to say that in the past year we have seen rough sleeping going down. In particular, rough sleeping is going down in those areas where this Government have been taking action.

Jeremy Corbyn: I do not quite know where the Prime Minister gets her figures from on rough sleeping. All I know is that I travel around this country, just like other Members of this House, and I talk to people who have had a disaster in their lives and end up rough sleeping. We are the fifth richest country in the world. It is surely wrong that anyone should end up sleeping on the streets of this country. We can and should do something about it.

I have often disagreed with the Prime Minister and have many criticisms of her policies, but I welcome the reduction in the stake on fixed odds betting terminals, the adoption of the children’s funeral fund and the scrapping of employment tribunal fees. Which of those policies is the Prime Minister most proud of?

The Prime Minister: I am proud of all the policies that we have introduced that have been improving people’s lives. I am proud of the fact that through our balanced management of the economy, we now see more people in work in this country than ever before. I am proud of the fact that there are more children in good and outstanding schools. I am proud of the fact that the attainment gap between the disadvantaged and the advantaged has been narrowed under this Government. And I am proud of the fact that we are putting the biggest cash boost in its history into our national health service. We are ensuring that the national health service—the most beloved institution in this country—will be there for people into the future. This is a Conservative Government—my Government—delivering on the things that matter to people in their day-to-day lives.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister may have noticed that none of those things that I mentioned were actually in the Conservative party manifesto in 2017, but every one of them was a Labour pledge in 2017. On Brexit, the Prime Minister’s own red lines ruled out any sensible compromise deal. Only after she had missed her own deadline to leave did the Prime Minister even begin to shift her position, but by then, she no longer had the authority to deliver. Her successor has no mandate at all. Does she have confidence that the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) will succeed where she has not?

The Prime Minister: I worked tirelessly to get a good deal for the UK, and I also worked hard to get that deal through this Parliament. I voted for the deal. What did the right hon. Gentleman do? He voted against a deal. He voted to make no deal more likely, and when there was a prospect of reaching consensus across this House, the right hon. Gentleman walked away from the talks. At every stage, his only interest has been playing party politics, and frankly, he should be ashamed of himself.

Jeremy Corbyn: We have had three years of bungled negotiations, and we now have the spectacle of a Prime Minister coming into office with no electoral mandate looking for a Brexit deal that has been ruled out by the European Union, or in the case of a no deal, ruled out by the majority in this House and by anyone who understands the dangers to the British economy of a no deal. The next Prime Minister thought the Isle of Man was in the European Union and that the European Union made rules about kippers that, in fact, were made by the Government that he was part of. He also said that the UK could secure tariff-free trade through article 24 of the general agreement on tariffs and trade, despite the International Trade Secretary, the Attorney General and the Governor of the Bank of England all confirming that that is not possible.

At the start of 2018, the—[Interruption.] It’s coming, don’t worry. At the start of 2018, the Prime Minister herself set up a new unit to counter fake news, charged with “combating disinformation”. How successful does she think that has been?

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that I fear that our success has not been what we wanted it to be from the amount of fake news and fake information that he uses at that Dispatch Box.

Jeremy Corbyn: Maybe the Prime Minister can have a word with her successor on the way out, but let me conclude—[Interruption.] For today. Let me conclude by welcoming some of the Prime Minister’s notable U-turns over the last couple of years. The cruel dementia tax was scrapped. Plans to bring back grammar schools were ditched. The threat to the pensions triple lock was abandoned. The withdrawal of the winter fuel payments was dumped. The pledge to bring back foxhunting was dropped, and the Government binned their plan to end universal free school meals for five to seven-year-olds. The Prime Minister has dumped her own manifesto. Given that her successor has no mandate from the people—no mandate on which to move into office—does she not agree that the best thing that the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip could do later on today when he takes office is to call a general election and let the people decide their future?
The Prime Minister: My first answer to the right hon. Gentleman is no. If he wants to talk about people ducking manifesto commitments and commitments made during general election campaigns, might I remind him that the Labour party and he said that they would abolish student debt? After the election, he rowed back on that promise. What else did he say during the general election campaign? He said he was committed to Trident. What did he say afterwards? He said, no, he was not committed to Trident at all. He has broken promise after promise to the people of this country.

As this is the last time that the right hon. Gentleman and I will have this exchange across these Dispatch Boxes—[HON. MEMBER: “Are you going to answer the question?”] I was going to say that it is a strength of our British democracy that the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition have these exchanges across the Dispatch Boxes every week, two swords’ lengths apart, and that no quarter is sought and none is given. That is as it should be in our adversarial parliamentary democracy. But he and I are very different people and very different politicians and we approach the issues the country faces in different ways. I have spent all but one of my years in the House on the Front Bench trying to implement the policies I believe in, while he has spent the late 1990s, and she has been a great friend of Wales ever since. Only recently, her Government approved the end of the M4 tolls and several other great measures for Wales. Will she encourage her successor to introduce a Bill to extend the general election franchise to all British citizens living overseas, where there is a wide Welsh diaspora?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks and for highlighting the work the Government have done in Wales. I would add that over 95,000 people in Wales had a pay rise this year as a result of the national living wage and that employment in Wales has risen by 167,000 since 2010. Conservatives have indeed been delivering for Wales. I know the concern about the franchise for overseas voters and I am sure that my successor will wish to look at that.

I discovered a new part of my hon. Friend’s past recently. I believe he was once the bodyguard to the legendary Hollywood actress Lauren Bacall. [INTERUPTION.] I think his red face tells us all.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Prime Minister, it is fair to say that we have had our differences—it has not often been a meeting of minds—but, with her standing down today, the time for holding her to account has passed. The burdens of office are considerable, the loneliness of leadership can be stark. At times we have clashed on points of political difference, but equally we have stood together when it has been right to do so—over Salisbury and other threats to the UK’s national security. She rightly made sure that Opposition leaders were informed at key moments in national security. In particular, her chief of staff, Gavin Barwell, always sought to make sure that I was kept informed of important developments. Prime Minister, I wish you and Philip all the best for the future.

As the Prime Minister departs, is she confident that the office of Prime Minister can be upheld by her flagrant successor?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks. He is absolutely right; he and I have a difference of opinion on some key issues, but I have been grateful for the position that the SNP has taken on key issues of national security, when it has stood alongside the Government as we have faced the actions of our enemy. I understand the right hon. Gentleman’s point about keeping Opposition leaders in touch with things that have happened. I would also like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Gavin Barwell, who was a first-class Member of this House, a first-class Minister, and has been an absolutely first-class chief of staff.

In answer to the right hon. Gentleman’s question: yes, I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) on winning the Conservative leadership election. He will take over as Prime Minister and I look forward to a first-class Conservative Government under his leadership, delivering for the whole of the United Kingdom.

Ian Blackford: The Prime Minister-elect has no mandate in Scotland. He has no mandate from the people. The Government he is busy forming have no mandate in Scotland. Scotland deserves better. A snap YouGov poll shows that 60% of people in Scotland are dismayed and disappointed by the new Prime Minister.

Those of us on the SNP Benches have tabled an early-day motion, with friends from parties across this House, rejecting the idea of this House being shut down before November. Following Parliament’s overwhelming message in last week’s vote, may I invite the Prime Minister, in one of her first actions as a Back-Bench MP, to sign our early-day motion and join efforts to stop the suspension of Parliament under any circumstances?

The Prime Minister: As I said in answer to the right hon. Gentleman’s first question, I accept that he and I have differences on a number of issues. We both have a passion for delivering for the people of Scotland. I want to do that with Scotland as part of the United Kingdom; he wants to take Scotland out of the United Kingdom. We have a mandate from the people to form a Government of this country. That is how we run things in the parliamentary democracy that we have in this country. We also have a mandate from the people to deliver on the result of the 2016 referendum. If the right hon.
Gentleman is so interested in delivering on mandates from the British people, he should have voted on the deal to take us out of the EU.

Q9. [912152] Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): The Derwent valley cycle way is an aspirational project running through my constituency. It would create an off-road cycle way between Derby and Baslow, providing an alternative commuting route, encouraging tourism, encouraging cycling among the young, and improving the health of the local population. Does the Prime Minister agree that more funding should be made available to support this and other, similar projects?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the importance of increasing cycling and walking. It is important for people's health and the local environment. Schemes such as the Derwent valley cycle way provide significant benefit to the local economy as well as to health and the environment. We have doubled our spending on cycling and walking in England, and our local cycling and walking infrastructure plan enables local authorities to take a strategic approach to planning improvements and to integrate them into wider plans for transport and economic development. I am sure the issue will continue to be supported by Conservatives in government.

Q2. [912145] Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): In Newcastle, the Prime Minister’s departure invokes neither the despair of a Rafa Benitez nor yet the joy of a Mike Ashley, and she may take comfort from that, but as she considers her choices—House of Lords, dignified retirement, working with her successor—may I ask her to work to bring dignity and choice to others? She is a WASPI woman; will she dedicate her prime ministerial retirement to justice for all WASPI women?

The Prime Minister: We have put £1 billion extra into the pension system, recognising concerns that were expressed by women about the changes to pensions. The hon. Lady references what I am going to be doing in the future, but I thought I had already made that very clear: I will be continuing in this House as the Member of Parliament for Maidenhead.

West Midlands Combined Authority

Q14. [912157] Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What assessment she has made of the economic performance of the region governed by the West Midlands Combined Authority since that authority’s formation; and if she will make a statement.

The Prime Minister: I am sure my hon. Friend will want to join me in saying how pleased I am with the economic growth that we have seen in the West Midlands Combined Authority area. Output has increased by 27% over five years; productivity increased at twice the national rate last year; and employment has increased since 2011. The record of the West Midlands Combined Authority shows precisely what a local, visible, innovative leadership can do and how it can be the key to building a strong economy and a fairer society.

Michael Fabricant: With the Prime Minister’s active encouragement the Mayor of the West Midlands was elected in May 2017, and she has supported him and the region ever since. Over £2 billion has been given to the region by the Prime Minister in the form of grants and guarantees for transport and so many other worthwhile projects, so on behalf of the people of the west midlands may I thank her and may I also ask that she continues in Parliament as a strong advocate for local devolution?

The Prime Minister: I remember the conversation I had with Andy Street when I was encouraging him to stand for the mayoralty of the west midlands, and I am very pleased that he did. He has been delivering for the people of the west midlands ever since his election. I also thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the excellent work that we have done for the west midlands: Government working with that combined authority shows the benefits of the very local devolution that my hon. Friend has referred to. This is a very good example of what that innovative and visionary leadership can do at a local level in improving the lives of people.

Engagements

Q3. [912146] Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Outgoing American Presidents get to pardon anybody they want. If the Prime Minister could, would she pardon her successor for sabotaging her premiership purely for his own personal ambitions?

The Prime Minister: My successor will continue to deliver the Conservative policies that have improved the lives of people up and down this country since we were elected into a coalition Government in 2010. There is a long list of improvements that have taken place in people’s lives, and I look forward, on the Back Benches, to giving my full support to the next Prime Minister as he takes us forward, delivering on Brexit and continuing to deliver on those Conservative policies.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): May I thank my right hon. Friend for the way in which she has conducted herself as Prime Minister of this country, for the dignified way in which she has approached the job and her responsibilities? May I ask her to reflect on the fact that when we both first joined the Government in 2010, for every £4 the Government were spending we were borrowing £1, yet as she leaves office today for every £34 the Government spend we are borrowing £1? She has left an economy that is in a much more stable position than when it was inherited. To do that she has had to make some very difficult choices, and choices we may not have wanted to make, but we have got the economy on a sound footing, and I thank her for that.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for pointing out that fact about Government borrowing and for highlighting the work we have done for the economy, delivering that balanced approach. I would like to thank my right hon. Friend the Chancellor for the work he has done in delivering that. What does that mean? It means borrowing at its lowest level for 17 years; it means the lowest unemployment since the 1970s, wages growing at their fastest for a decade and debt
falling. That is what my Government have delivered: more jobs, healthier finances and an economy fit for the future.

Q4. [912147] Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): The Education Committee published its report on Friday stating that the Government should urgently address underfunding in further education by increasing the amount from £4,000 per student to £4,760. Does the Prime Minister agree that raising the rate will benefit the excellent Bolton sixth-form college in my constituency, as well as many other colleges that are also under severe financial pressure, some of which are actually going under?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, I always look at Select Committee reports with care. I commissioned the Augar review of post-18 education funding, and that review has been very clear that more money needs to go into further education and into sixth forms. I want to see that happening. Indeed, I think that, just as my Government have given a priority to the national health service in looking at funding for the future, the next Government should give priority to education so that we can see that money going into further education and sixth forms and ensure that for every young person there is an avenue through education and training that suits them and their talents and gives them the best opportunities for their future.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): The Prime Minister has always been a great champion of victims of domestic violence, as Prime Minister and as Home Secretary, and she has directed many millions of pounds into improving those support services during her time in office, but does she agree that there is still much more work to be done on prevention and early intervention, and on tackling the ongoing scepticism that still greets many victims when they report violence?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising an important issue. I also thank her for the work for victims of domestic violence that she did in her legal practice prior to coming into this House. This is a very important issue, and I am proud of the Domestic Abuse Bill that has been introduced in this House. I look forward to the debates on the Bill as it goes through Parliament. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we need to continue to focus on prevention and continue to raise awareness. We must ensure that domestic violence is seen for what it is. These are criminal acts that are being perpetrated and they should not be brushed under the carpet. People should not just say, “Oh, it’s something that happens behind closed doors” or “It’s just a domestic”. We need to take domestic violence very seriously. We need to ensure that we are taking appropriate action in relation to the perpetrators, and that victims are given support and feel confident and are able to come forward at the earliest opportunity to report what has happened to them.

Q8. [912151] John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): My constituent is the wife of Captain Dean Sprouting, who was a brave, experienced and decorated soldier with the UK military for 29 years. In January 2018, he was killed while serving in Iraq, and it is believed that he was killed by a forklift driven by US soldiers. Eighteen months later, Captain Sprouting’s family have still not had an answer as to how he came to his death. His death has not been fully investigated, and those driving the truck have not been brought to justice. Can the Prime Minister ensure that there will be a continuing investigation into the cause of his death?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised an issue of great concern, and I am sure it will be of concern to Members across the House and of course to the family of his constituent. I will ensure that the Ministry of Defence provides a response to him on this issue.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her work in supporting and overseeing the global health programme that the United Kingdom delivers overseas, particularly in regard to vaccination and most notably the polio eradication vaccination, for which she has been internationally recognised. The programme has saved and safeguarded millions of children’s lives across the world. Does she agree that the need to combat misinformation about vaccination is now as important as it ever has been? Will she, in her memo to her successor, note the importance of this programme and the continuing need for a self-standing Department for International Development?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his reference to the work on polio, which enables me to commend the work of my constituent, Judith Diment, with Rotary International in its work against polio. It is important that we combat the disinformation about vaccinations and ensure that people are willing to have those vaccinations, which will change their lives and ensure that they can lead healthy lives, rather than succumbing to diseases and conditions that can have an impact on their lives. I can also say to him that I am proud of the fact that we have a Department for International Development, and proud of the fact that we have legislated for 0.7% of gross national income to be spent on development aid overseas. That is an important element of global Britain and an important element of our standing in the world.

Q10. [912153] Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Last Friday, I had the honour of witnessing the presentation of the légion d’honneur to Helene Aldwick, who is a constituent, for her work at Bletchley Park as a codebreaker in world war two. She played a critical role in defeating the most disgusting fascist ideology. Will the Prime Minister, on her last appearance at the Dispatch Box, join me in saying that all politicians should remember the common goals that united people such as Helene and must never resort to, nor fail to call out, nationalistic rhetoric which paints others as enemies, victimises minorities, or espouses racism, because if they do, they are neither fit to be a President nor a Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: As I have said on several occasions, it behaves all of us as politicians—indeed, everyone in public life—to be careful about the language we use and to ensure that we give a clear message that there is no place in our society for racism or hate crime. We should all act to ensure that we deliver on those sentiments. I thank Helene for her work at Bletchley Park and thank
all those who worked there. Unsung for some considerable time, they played a crucial part in our ability to defeat fascism in the second world war. We should be very proud of their work, and I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving the House the opportunity to celebrate it.

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): I begin by commending the Prime Minister for her stamina and courage in her term of office—whatever our views on Brexit and other issues—and also commend the support that she has received from her husband Philip. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”] For many of us, our husbands, wives and partners are the unsung heroes. May I now ask her a specific question? She is going to the palace this afternoon, and we assume that she is going to recommend that the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) succeed her as Prime Minister, but will she tell the House one piece of real, hard advice that she would like to give him on being Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: Can I—[Interruption.] A number of my right hon. and hon. Friends are suggesting from a sedentary position that my advice should be to read my right hon. Friend’s summer reading list. However, he has also given me an opportunity to do something that I suspect many on my side may not thank me for, but I am taking a lead from you, Mister Speaker, in saying that I am pleased to be able to see my husband in the Gallery today.

Q11. [912154]Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I obviously disagree with the Prime Minister on many aspects of policy and the work that she has done over the past few years, both as Prime Minister and as Home Secretary, but it would be wrong not to commend her for the phenomenal work she has done to bring forward the issue of modern slavery and to tackle human trafficking, so I congratulate her on that. However, we still face many issues and challenges. Last year, as part of Government policy, we locked up 507 potential victims of modern slavery as immigration offenders. That cannot be right, and surely we need a change of public policy to treat them as victims, not criminals.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks and also for his work on modern slavery, because he and I have spoken about it on a number of occasions over the years, and he has also been a great champion. We passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which took action in relation to individuals who could find themselves on the receiving end of criminal charges effectively because they had been forced to act in a certain way because of modern slavery. We have been looking at how we deal with victims and the referral mechanism. It is important that we have had an independent review of the 2015 Act, which proposed a number of recommendations for improving how victims are treated, and we will be taking most of those recommendations on board.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Further to the mention of modern-day slavery by the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), it is right to record that my right hon. Friend has long and distinguished service in this House, both in government and in opposition, and her commitment to public service has been outstanding. Her vision and her determination to bring forward legislation against modern-day slavery led the world, and I hope she will continue her fight against slavery with us from the Back Benches so that we stamp out this evil scourge together.

Q12. [912155]Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has often spoken about the need for an industrial strategy during her time in office, but the St Rollox railway works in Springburn, affectionately known as the Caley, will be closed by its asset-stripping German owner Mutares on Friday; ending 163 years of engineering excellence and the jobs of 200 skilled workers. The Scottish and UK Governments have both failed to intervene to save this strategic site since the closure was announced late last year, while the workforce have been left devastated. Even though the Prime Minister is losing her own job today, it is not too late for her to act now and to instruct the Government to do everything they can to find a way to save these vital jobs and this historic railway works. Will she at least commit to doing that?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the concern that the hon. Gentleman is showing for his constituency, and the worry and concern that there is for those people who are employed in the business that he has referred to. Of course, whenever we see closures of factories and closures of industrial sites, the Government do act to ensure that support is available for those who find themselves losing their jobs, should that be the case.

However, the hon. Gentleman says that I talked of having a modern industrial strategy. We have a modern industrial strategy. It is a modern industrial strategy that is essentially setting the background and the framework that will enable the economy of the United Kingdom to be the economy for the 21st century.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): You are in no doubt, Mr Speaker, that I think the Prime Minister is a thoroughly good egg, and it has been an absolute privilege to serve her on the Back Benches.

This Prime Minister’s commitment to mental health has been simply fantastic; it was fantastic when she was the Home Secretary, and it has been fantastic in her time as Prime Minister. We have had the Stevenson/Farmer review of workplace mental health; Sir Simon Wessely’s review into the Mental Health Act 1983; her commitment to reducing the tragedy of suicide, with her putting her office behind that; and the introduction of places of safety for people experiencing a mental health crisis. We have been filling the Prime Minister’s diary up with
future commitments as she authors the next chapter of her political life, but can she find space for a few more paragraphs on mental health?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I also thank him and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) for the dignified way in which they conducted the Conservative party leadership election. He has been an advocate for the Government doing more on mental health during his time in this House, and he has championed the need for us to do more on mental health. I want to continue to ensure that we do indeed take that forward.

We have set the record in putting that record funding into mental health and in having those essential reviews—Stevenson/Farmer and Sir Simon Wessely’s review. We now need to ensure that we implement the proposals and that we take this forward. If we do so, we will make a significant improvement in the lives of those people with mental health problems.

Q13. [912156] **Mr Clive Bets (Sheffield South East) (Lab):** Professor John Snowden of Royal Hallamshire Hospital has just received a top NHS award for pioneering work on stem cell transplantation for multiple sclerosis sufferers. I declare a personal interest: John Snowden and his excellent team were responsible for my transplant last year for multiple myeloma, a form of blood cancer. Will the right hon. Lady give an assurance, as she steps down as Prime Minister but remains an MP, that she will not support any form of Brexit that prevents John Snowden from continuing to work with his EU colleagues on the board of the European Society for Blood and Marrow Transplantation, which will continue to advance this treatment for patients with myeloma, MS, leukaemia and other conditions?

**The Prime Minister:** I commend the individual to whom the hon. Gentleman referred for the work that he has been doing. I am not aware of the organisation that the hon. Gentleman referred to, of which the consultant that he mentioned is a member, but I do want a relationship between the United Kingdom and European Union in the future that enables our scientists and academics to continue to work with those in the EU, and around the rest of the world, to do the pioneering work that—as the hon. Gentleman said, speaking from his own experience—is changing people’s lives for the better.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**Mr Speaker:** Ah yes, a singular denizen of the House: Sir John Hayes.

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Prime Minister and I first encountered the “bumping pitch and...blinding light” of parliamentary life together in 1997, and since then, over many tests, have endured some defeats and enjoyed many victories. As she reflects on her innings on the Front Bench, will she count among her greatest achievements the fulling number of workless households, which has succoured personal responsibility, secured family stability and nurtured communal pride? Will she continue that work and, in doing so, unite the whole House in that mission?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my right hon. Friend for that, and also thank him for all the work that we did together when he was a Home Office Minister. He worked very hard to ensure that what I believe is an extremely important and pioneering piece of legislation, the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, went through this House. I am very happy to welcome the fact that we now have that low number of workless households in this country. We all know that children brought up in a household where there is work are more likely to do better at school, and more likely to succeed further in their life. Reducing the number of workless households is an important aim, and one that I would have hoped could be accepted and championed across this whole House.

Q15. [912158] **Ian Austin** (Dudley North) (Ind): May I start by associating myself completely with the final answer that the Prime Minister gave to the Leader of the Opposition about his need to consider his future? It is absolutely clear to me that the vast majority of Labour MPs agree with her.

Hundreds of people have come to my community meetings in the last few weeks. They are worried about antisocial behaviour, car crime, burglaries and violent crime. They want more police on the streets and more criminals locked up, so will the Prime Minister urge her successor to make sure that West Midlands police gets all the support it needs to keep people in Dudley safe?

**The Prime Minister:** First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his appointment as trade envoy to Israel. He has done a lot of work on antisemitism, and should be congratulated on it. We have been ensuring that we put more money into police forces: around £1 billion extra is available to police forces this year, and many police forces around the country are recruiting more officers. On the theme with which the hon. Gentleman started his question, I imagine that to him and to others it is a matter of great sadness that the Leader of the Opposition took the Labour party through voting against extra money for the police, and against extra powers for the police.

**Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): Some 31 people were killed in Idlib yesterday, and many tens of thousands of people were displaced—again. I thank the Prime Minister for her personal commitment to Syria, and to international development more widely. I would like her to join me in reassuring the people of Syria that all of us here will continue to remember them.

**The Prime Minister:** First, I commend my hon. Friend’s work in setting up Singing for Syrians, which has been raising funds for people in Syria, and the commitment that she has shown to the people of Syria. We remain, and the Conservative Government will remain, committed to working for a political solution in Syria that can provide the stability and security that the people of Syria deserve.

**Nigel Dodds** (Belfast North) (DUP): I join others in thanking the Prime Minister for her years of public service as Home Secretary and as the Prime Minister, for the thoroughly decent, dedicated, honourable way she has carried out all her duties, and for the very courteous and proper way she has dealt with us as a
party. Working together, we have ensured that there actually is a Conservative and Unionist Government of the United Kingdom, which will please many in the House. I will also please Labour Members by saying that we have ensured that there is no early general election.

Now that the Prime Minister has more time on her hands with her dear husband, Philip, I urge her to come to Northern Ireland and avail herself of the many walking opportunities there. She will have seen the wonderful Open championship this weekend in Royal Portrush, which was a credit to Northern Ireland and to the United Kingdom. The warm hospitality of the people of Northern Ireland was on show, and it is open to her as well.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the discussions we have had and the support he has continued to give to the Conservative and Unionist party so that there is a Conservative and Unionist Government in this country. I thank him for the warm invitation to Northern Ireland he has given to me and Philip. I have enjoyed my visits to Northern Ireland. I congratulate all those in Northern Ireland who were involved in putting on the Open championship at Portrush. There was a slight issue with the weather, which may have favoured those who came close to the top of the championship, but it was an excellent championship, and many people will have seen the delights and benefits of Northern Ireland when they attended that event.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): As somebody who has not invariably seen eye-to-eye with the Prime Minister, may I thank her for her remarkable public service, for showing that highest of virtues, a sense of duty and, on top of that, for being willing to deal with enormous courtesy with people who must on occasions have been annoying to her? On behalf of many people, I thank the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Can I say—[Interruption.] The Prime Minister: My advice to all women is to be true to yourself, persevere, keep going and be true to the vision that you are working for. I congratulate the hon. Lady on her election as leader of her party. I am pleased that we have a Member representing a Scottish constituency who is a leader of a United Kingdom party. That goes to show that we are one United Kingdom, and MPs from the four nations of our Union sit in this House on the basis of equality. I also congratulate the hon. Lady on becoming the first woman to lead her party. As I stand down, I am pleased to be able to hand the baton on to another female leader of a political party.

As I look around the Chamber, I have to say that we almost have a full set. My party has had two women leaders, the Liberal Democrats now have a woman leader, and the SNP has a woman leader, as does the DUP, Plaid and the Greens. Even—[Interruption. ] Wait for it. Even the independent TIGger group, Change UK, or whatever they are calling themselves this week, are now on to their second woman leader. There is only one party in this House letting the side down: the Labour party.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for all she has done for women in Parliament and in this country, from co-founding Women2Win to tackling domestic abuse and modern slavery and legislating to make our society more equal. Will she urge her successor to build on her work and make Britain the best place in the world to be a woman?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to urge that commitment for the future. I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. I am very pleased that under my Government, we have seen the gender pay gap at a record low, female employment at a record high and a record percentage of women on executive boards. With our women’s empowerment road map, we are now looking at how we can empower women in this country from school to retirement. I want women in this country to feel that there are no limits to how far they can go and what they can do with their lives.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): We have disagreed on many things over the years, but the Prime Minister knows that I have long respected her resilience, commitment to public duty and seriousness, as well as her work on national security. I assure her that there is much to be done from the Back Benches. She knows that I once said to her that I believed she was not the kind of person who would take this country into a chaotic no-deal scenario, not least because of the advice she had had on the risks to our national security. I am fearful about her successor, so can she reassure me that she really thinks, in her heart, that her successor will take those national security warnings as seriously as she has? If he does not, in October, will she speak out?

The Prime Minister: First, I have every confidence that my successor will take all the issues that he needs to look at in making these decisions and others across Government as seriously as they need to be taken. I also say to her—I am sorry, but I will say this—that she is absolutely right that I have always said that I believe it is better for this country to leave with a good deal, and I believe we negotiated a good deal. I voted three times in
this House for a good deal. I spoke to the right hon. Lady about this issue. If she was so concerned about the security aspect of no deal, she should have voted for the deal.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): In every aspect of her public life, the Prime Minister has put her heart and soul into giving people the best chance in life. Without understanding, autistic people and their families, who number 2.8 million in the UK, are all at risk of being isolated and developing mental health problems. In thanking the Prime Minister for all the work she has done in furthering the debate surrounding mental health and removing the stigma, may I ask her whether, after she has left the Front Bench to spend more meaningful time with her husband Philip, she will join the all-party parliamentary group on autism and become a champion and advocate for autistic people throughout the country?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question and for the groundbreaking work she did on the Autism Act 2009. That legislation helped to raise people’s awareness of the issues experienced by those on the autistic spectrum and greatly increased our understanding of what we need to do to enable people with autism to lead fulfilling lives. There are many issues in which I want to take an interest when I am on the Back Benches and this, along with mental health more widely, is something that I will want to continue to look at. I have committed to taking the autism training that the all-party group has made available for Members of Parliament.

Several hon. Members rose—

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

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): It is always a historic moment when a Prime Minister leaves office, especially when the country faces such difficult times ahead, as we do, but the right hon. Lady’s departure marks another milestone, because although we are on to our 77th Prime Minister now, she is only the second woman ever to have held that office. She made tackling human trafficking and the horrors of domestic violence a priority at the heart of her Government, and in that respect her legacy is secure, because everyone in this House backs that work and we will all be committed to taking it forward.

Even the Prime Minister’s harshest critics must recognise her integrity, her commitment to public service and her dedication to this country. Those are qualities that none of us should ever take for granted, but may I offer her a word of sisterly advice? Sometimes, you just have to be a bit more careful when a man wants to hold your hand. I thank her for her service as our Prime Minister, and I sincerely wish her all the very best for the future.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. and learned Lady for her question. She joined this House in 1982 when there was a female Prime Minister, but there were very few other women in this House. She has played a very important role—one of which she can be proud—in ensuring that more women come into this House as Labour Members of Parliament. She started something that began to change the face of this House, which has been very important. I came here in 1997 as one of only 13 Conservative women—and, indeed, one Labour Member of Parliament approached me to encourage me to sign a private Member’s Bill list because he assumed that, as a woman, I must have been a Labour Member of Parliament. I am also proud to have played my part in getting more women MPs in this House. I am sure that among the women in this House today there is a future Prime Minister—perhaps more than one.

Later today, as I said earlier, I will return to the Back Benches. It will be my first time on the Back Benches in 21 years, so it will be quite a change from standing here at the Dispatch Box. I am told that over the past three years I have answered more than 4,500 questions over 140 hours in this House—more than I might have expected. In future, I look forward to asking the questions. We are, as the right hon. and learned Lady says, living through extraordinary political times. This House of Commons is rightly at the centre of those events, and that is because of the vital link between every single Member of this House and the communities—the commons—that we represent. That is the bedrock of our parliamentary democracy and of our liberty, and each one of us, wherever we sit and whatever we stand for, can take pride in that. That duty to serve my constituents will remain my greatest motivation. [Applause.]
British Steel

1.5 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question):
To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on the sale of British Steel.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): As hon. Members will recall, I made a statement to the House a few hours after British Steel entered insolvency on 22 May. This was, and still is, an uncertain time for the British Steel workforce, their families, and their communities, for the customers and suppliers of the business and for everyone who believes, as I do, in the importance of excellent steelmaking and manufacturing in the UK.

In my statement, I said that, although the independent official receiver is solely responsible for the operation and sale of the British Steel business, I would, both personally and on behalf of the Government, do everything that I possibly could within my powers to help secure a good future for the whole of British Steel’s operations.

Following a visit to the Scunthorpe plant the following day and to Skinningrove and Lackenby on Teesside the day after with local MPs, including the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), we formed a British Steel support group to work together immediately and actively to pursue that aim. I chaired the group with the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), which has included British Steel management; trade unions Community, Unite and the GMB; the Mayor of the Tees Valley and the leader of North Lincolnshire Council and their officers; the chairs of the Humber, Greater Lincolnshire and Tees Valley local enterprise partnerships; UK Steel; Make UK, the manufacturers’ organisation, on behalf of suppliers and customers; the Federation of Small Businesses; Government officials and other local MPs, including the hon. Lady, my hon. Friends the Members for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) and for Brighouse and Goole (Andrew Percy), and the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin). The support group has now met eight times, usually in Doncaster, and sub-groups on the supply chain have met separately, as have local partners.

I wish to pay tribute to the hard work, tenacity and dedication of this group and the extraordinary commitment of the workforce who, during this time, have worked magnificently, not only to continue but to increase steel production.

Often in insolvencies, customer orders dry up, suppliers withdraw their services and the workforce drifts away, precipitating a rapid failure. In this instance, the opposite has been the case. The confidence that the support group has built, coupled with a Government indemnity to the official receiver, has allowed trading to continue, orders to be won and production to increase. This is without precedent in my experience.

Although all decisions are for the official receiver, I have been active, as Members know, in visiting prospective buyers in many parts of the world to make it clear that the UK Government will, within our legal powers, work with a good long-term owner of these important assets to see how we can help them to realise their vision for the company.

I am pleased to say that the official receiver has said that he is encouraged by the interest in purchasing British Steel and his special managers, EY, are currently in further discussions with potential buyers. The official receiver has made it clear that, given the complex nature of the operations, any potential sale will take time to deliver.

I said in May that I was determined to see the proud record of steelmaking excellence continue. The world needs steel, and British Steel is among the best in the world. To secure that will require, in my experience, the continued active participation of everyone that I mentioned earlier without interruption during the critical weeks ahead. In particular, whoever stands at this Dispatch Box will need to devote themselves unstintingly to achieve a great outcome for everyone concerned with British Steel, which I believe, although not certain, is certainly within grasp, and that is the flourishing of British Steel’s operations for many years to come.

Anna Turley: Let me begin by putting on record my thanks to the Secretary of State—not only for his response just now, but for the way in which he has responded to this crisis. We find ourselves in a fundamentally different position from the situation in 2015, where, either by design or flat-footedness, the Government failed to respond, with devastating consequences. This is a completely different scenario, and I am grateful to the Secretary of State for stepping in and helping to secure the asset, enabling the business to continue and ensuring that the workforce were paid. Through the indemnity that the Government have given to the official receiver, the Secretary of State has given us a very good chance of ensuring the future for British Steel in this country. I also thank him for his efforts in going around the world to help secure a buyer.

Of course, the situation remain precarious. In the past few weeks, we have seen the new Prime Minister running around the country waving kippers in the air; by contrast, 5,000 dedicated, highly-skilled workers in British Steel have been putting their shoulders to the wheel in Scunthorpe, Skinningrove and Lackenby, despite their livelihoods being in the balance. They have been producing at record levels and working with every effort they have to ensure that the business continues to produce the best steel in the world and to flourish. I pay tribute to all those working within British Steel. They deserve a Government who will be straining every single sinew to ensure that the business survives.

I pay tribute to the trade unions, including Community and Unite; every worker in British Steel; everybody in the customer base who has continued to ensure that requests for steel have come through, including some who have even stepped up their demands; everyone in the supply chain who has continued to work so hard to supply the business; and corrs in the Doncaster roundtable. I again pay tribute to the Secretary of State for the inclusive and positive way in which he has responded. However, I do have a number of questions for the Secretary of State—for whoever will be at the Dispatch Box in the coming days, weeks and months ahead.

First, does the incoming Secretary of State understand the implications of failure? We know what 5,000 job losses could be like in areas such as Scunthorpe, Redcar...
and Skinningrove where there is no alternative employment, and we know the cost of cleaning up the site: £1 billion. Does the future Secretary of State understand the loss of a major industry in Britain that any self-respecting major economy would value and recognise to be essential? Will they recognise the role of steel as a foundation industry for our defence, automotive and construction sectors and what reliance on overseas production could mean for our economy, our independence and our self-reliance?

Secondly, will the future Secretary of State endeavour to ensure that the official receiver continues to receive the indemnity for as long as it takes to find a buyer? Thirdly, will they endeavour to give wholehearted Government support to the bids that primarily keep the business together as one industry across Skinningrove, Lackenby and Scunthorpe? Will they pledge to prevent cherry-picking, to keep asset strippers at bay so that we do not suffer the same issues that we have experienced before and to ensure that the terms and conditions of the workforce are maintained? Will they ensure that any company that the Government support will invest in the assets and ensure that they are modernised for the future of our industry? Will they invest in research and development and be committed to the long-term interests of steelmaking in this country?

Finally, I hope that whoever will be at the Dispatch Box in the weeks ahead will recognise that they have the jobs and livelihoods of thousands of men and women in their hands, as well as the guardianship of a vital, modern, innovative and potentially world-leading British industry.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for asking the question that has given us the chance to talk about these issues. She has been dedicated and devoted to her constituents, as have other Members—starting the week with me in Doncaster with the colleagues I described to ensure that we can work together and join together to ensure that there are no gaps between any of the interested parties. That has had an appreciable effect, as has been noted by many prospective buyers. Certainly, many customers and suppliers have also observed the resolution and the unanimity of resolution behind this.

Many of the hon. Lady’s questions were addressed to whoever might be the Secretary of State under the new Prime Minister, so it would be presumptuous of me to answer on his or her behalf, but she has placed a clear set of requirements on the record and I endorse everything she said. Not only would the consequences of the loss of historical assets—hugely important in all the communities she mentions—be unconscionable; there would also be the loss of a substantial opportunity.

The hon. Lady, like me, believes that there is a strong strategic future for the British steel industry. As I said in my previous answer, the world is going to need steel. Through investing in infrastructure, this country has opportunities to make greater use of UK steel. We export much in the way of our scrap steel to other countries. That could be made better use of, both environmentally and in terms of industrial opportunities. If we invest—as we intend to and are doing through the industrial strategy—in the technologies that will make steelmaking cleaner, more efficient and suitable for new uses, there is every reason to think that the UK steel industry, including British Steel, can be a beacon showing the rest of the world how a modern manufacturing industry can flourish.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): May I associate myself with the priorities outlined by my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley)? This is an opportunity to say a big thank you on behalf of the people of Teesside for all the dedication that the Secretary of State—a son of Teesside—has shown to our steel industry. It has not gone unnoticed locally how much he has gone over and above what might be called the ordinary line of duty to secure a positive outcome to this sale, so I pass on a sincere and lasting thank you.

It would be helpful to get on record what the Secretary of State has been doing to leave no stone unturned in these negotiations. In particular, will he talk about the in-principle willingness potentially to invest alongside a future purchaser?

Greg Clark: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s generous words. He has been assiduous not just in being a member of the support group, but by working in Skinningrove with the customers of British Steel to convey the assurances that are necessary. Buyers will have questions about this extensive and complex set of assets, so it is important—and will continue to be important, especially during the weeks ahead in August—that everyone is available and active in providing the answers to those questions.

Through the industrial strategy, the Government have established programmes to support improvement in energy efficiency, which is very important; to decarbonise industrial clusters, of which steelmaking is a prime example; and to invest in research and development. Through the industrial strategy, we have the biggest increase in R&D in the history of this country. I am making these points to prospective purchasers so that they can see that the environment is a positive one.

It would be wrong for me to comment on the individual bids, as that is legally and strictly a matter for the official receiver, but I have made myself available in this country and overseas to answer questions. I think that I have had more than 25 meetings with bidders, and it has been encouraging—to use the words of the official receiver—that serious bids have been made, but the work must continue to land them and to secure the future.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I do hope that this is not my last exchange with the Secretary of State, but just in case it is, I want to stress my thanks for the amazing Mini Cooper toy that he presented me with last week and to say that he should not worry because there will always be a parking space in my heart for him. We might differ in our approach to many of the structural flaws that our economy faces, but we actually have more in common on most issues than many people would realise, not least on industrial strategy. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) for securing this important update on British Steel.

The Secretary of State shares my opinion that British Steel must be kept as one entity, not splintered off to different buyers who do not have the long-term success of the company at heart. However, there have been
The Secretary of State must recognise that, as Labour has repeatedly stated, action must be taken on electricity prices, business rates, driving investment and, of course, securing a good Brexit deal, because no deal could mean no steel. Will he therefore assure the House that he will be taking steps to ensure that the new Prime Minister urgently takes action on these issues and understands the real importance of the steel industry?

**Greg Clark:** I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for the generosity of her remarks. I have enjoyed my exchanges and meetings with her. I hope the parking space in her heart has a charging point for the electric Mini—that would be very important.

The hon. Lady invites me to comment on the bids and some of the press speculation as to who is bidding and who is not. First, this is a matter for the official receiver, and secondly, I would not want to prejudice any of the bids by commenting. The discussions, in many cases, take place under confidential terms, and it would be wrong to do anything that might disadvantage that. There is often, in situations like this, speculation in the press, and much of it is misplaced. What I can say—the official receiver has said this publicly—is that several bids have been made and he is looking for bids that consider the whole of the operation. I welcome that, as the hon. Lady does.

On long-term commitments, we do have a long-term commitment to manufacturing, and to steel in particular. I mentioned some of the funds that are available in the industrial strategy. Of course, because they would accompany substantial investments, which I hope will be in place, they require a long-term commitment from any prospective buyer.

The hon. Lady is right to raise the question of energy prices and electricity prices. This is not a new phenomenon, and it is not unique to any particular Government. In fact, the biggest increase in industrial electricity prices took place under the previous Government. In the past five years, we have contributed nearly £300 million to energy-intensive industries as a rebate towards those costs. Through the industrial energy efficiency fund that is available in the industrial strategy, we want to reduce further the costs of energy. It is very important that we should do that.

The hon. Lady asks questions about the incoming Prime Minister. I spoke to both candidates during the leadership contest to impress on them what she and I agree is the crucial role of this industry. I know that she, the Under-Secretary—my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson)—and other hon. Members have communicated not just with the current Prime Minister but with her potential successors to reinforce the resolution across all parts of the House that this is at the top of the new Prime Minister’s agenda.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): A very large number of my constituents work at Scunthorpe. Can the Secretary of State assure me that whatever happens, their welfare is at the forefront of his mind? In an international market that is often manipulated by Governments, notably the Chinese, will he assure me that in this case, to quote Sir Keith Joseph, the market is not enough, and there will be an activist and extremely interventionist approach by the Government to ensure that there is a buyer? Lastly, I have always thought that my right hon. Friend was an outstanding parliamentarian ever since our days on the Public Accounts Committee together, and I wish him well in the reshuffle.

**Greg Clark:** I am very grateful to the right hon. Friend. My training under his expert tutelage on the PAC stood me in good stead for ministerial office, and I am grateful to him for that.

I am encouraged by my right hon. Friend’s encouragement to take an activist approach. That is the approach that I have been taking. In my view—and this applies to everyone who has been part of the support group—we let this slip through our fingers if we are not there to make sure that all the questions can be answered, whether through the trade unions, which have been magnificent in this, or through the local authorities, including some of his neighbours in Lincolnshire. Ursula Lidbetter, who leads the Lincolnshire local enterprise partnership, has been very active in the group. I will, in so far as I am still at this Dispatch Box, continue that approach. I am sure that my right hon. Friend’s recommendation of an activist approach will sound with some resonance down the corridors of this place and reach the ears of the new Prime Minister, who I hope will follow his sage advice.

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is disheartening to hear that this process continues to drag on with no idea how long it will take for a deal to conclude. This UK Government must at last stand up for the steel industry and deliver a sector deal. In today’s global world, the uncertainty caused by Brexit is providing businesses with the nudge they need to leave the UK. How many more will leave when it becomes apparent that the new Prime Minister has no plans beyond a no-deal Brexit? Our thoughts are with all those dealing with continued uncertainty—employees, management, unions, and those in the supply chain. What will the Secretary of State, who has shown real commitment to securing the continuation of the British steel plants, do—or, indeed, what will his successor do—in the face of a Brexit that is doing irreparable damage to our manufacturing sector?

**Greg Clark:** I am grateful for what the hon. Lady said about me personally.

I think it would be more disheartening if this process had concluded, as was the wide expectation eight weeks ago, with what happened in Redcar, as the Redcar mentioned, which was the more or less immediate close-up. It was also reported that the deadline for bids has been moved a number of times. Indeed, an email sent from the official receiver is reported to have stated that no deadline has been set to conclude a sale process. Can the Secretary of State confirm how many prospective buyers remain, how many are interested in acquiring the entire company and what deadlines for the sale have been set? Will he also confirm, as my hon. Friend mentioned earlier, that he will only give his support to bids that support the long-term interests of the company, the workforce, the local community and the steel industry as a whole?

[Rebecca Long Bailey]
of the plant. The fact that the process continues, far from being disheartening, is heartening in that there are several bidders that the official receiver and his agents are working with. It is absolutely vital that those discussions should continue for as long as they prove necessary. That is one of the reasons why my first act on the warning of the insolvency was to commit a Government indemnity to allow an orderly process to take place, and I very much hope it will.

I very much agree with the hon. Lady that having a sector deal with the steel sector is highly desirable. All the sector deals colleagues have heard me launch different sector deals from this Dispatch Box—require investment by the industry and by the Government alongside each other. That is precisely what we want to do in this case. I hope that this will be a catalyst for the investment that allows such a deal to take place.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I, too, thank the Secretary of State for his work on behalf of the very large number of my constituents who work at Scunthorpe. It is because of his actions, and the actions of our Government, that they have continued to be paid throughout this process and that they continue to have the confidence to commit to the British Steel site at Scunthorpe. Moving forward, does he agree that it is really important that the incoming new Government commit once again to big infrastructure projects such as High Speed 2 and, of course, Northern Powerhouse Rail—HS3—to give the industry the certainty into the future that there is going to be investment from this Government in such vital infrastructure?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his participation in the support group in support of his constituents, which has been very valuable. As I made clear, this is for the official receiver, and I do not want to get ahead of his progress. The situation is still not resolved. He has said that it is encouraging, but we need to work very carefully to ensure that it is resolved satisfactorily. In terms of audit, one of the striking things he has found, as my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) and the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) will know, is how loyal customers of British Steel have been, in many cases confirming orders well into the future. Network Rail is one such customer, for two reasons—partly for steel reasons but partly because I believe that we should have big upgrades in our national infrastructure. I very much endorse what my hon. Friend said.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I, too, thank the Secretary of State for his work on behalf of the very large number of my constituents who work at Scunthorpe. It is because of his actions, and the actions of our Government, that they have continued to be paid throughout this process and that they continue to have the confidence to commit to the British Steel site at Scunthorpe. Moving forward, does he agree that it is really important that the incoming new Government commit once again to big infrastructure projects such as High Speed 2 and, of course, Northern Powerhouse Rail—HS3—to give the industry the certainty into the future that there is going to be investment from this Government in such vital infrastructure?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, the Chair of the Select Committee, and I welcome the prospect of that inquiry. There is a lot to examine, and she will approach it with her usual forensic attention to detail. I very much hope that the new Prime Minister will continue the commitment that the current Prime Minister was willing to give and the authority that she has given me to act in the way that I have. She and others will hold to account the new Prime Minister and his team on that.

The hon. Lady is right; there is something special about steel assets in many respects, but one is that if they are closed down, it is very hard for them to spring back into life, so continuity is of great importance. That is one of the achievements that, together, we have been able to bring about over recent weeks.

No one is keener than I am to conclude a sector deal. It requires investment. There is an opportunity for the British steel industry to be more strategic than it has been and, as some other sectors have done, align itself to some of the products that we know will be in demand in the future, backed by research and development. That is the approach that the industrial strategy takes, and it applies in spades to steel, so I hope there will be a sector deal to reflect that.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I am pleased to hear my right hon. Friend acknowledge the world’s dependence on steel and the value that he places on British Steel. Does he also recognise that, without coking coal, there would be no steel industry? The privately funded, multimillion-pound Woodhouse colliery being developed by West Cumbria Mining in my constituency is of vital importance and will have economic, social and environmental benefits for our area and, indeed, the country. Will he do all he can to help move that project forward?

Greg Clark: As my hon. Friend says, much steel production requires coking coal, so it needs to be provided. I understand that there was broad cross-party support for the operation that she describes. One of the imperatives is to move steelmaking to be cleaner and greener in its energy efficiency and use of other fuels. That feature of the industrial strategy programme applies very much to the steel industry.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) in thanking the Secretary of State for his approach to the industry in general and this issue in particular. He has reminded us today and on previous occasions that we cannot just turn on and off a steelworks like a tap. If it is allowed to go cold, it is very expensive and difficult to set up again. The indemnity has been the key thing in enabling operations to continue while a buyer is found. What assurance can he give the House that that indemnity will continue for as long as it takes to finish the process of finding a buyer?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman; he knows about the manufacturing industry, and he is right in his description of it. I have to report that my
request for the indemnity was granted readily: I think the lessons of the Redcar closure have been learned. I have no reason to suppose that the incoming Prime Minister will take a different view—in fact, quite the reverse. I have met him and his competitor, and during the days ahead I hope and expect that that support will continue to be available. But I should be clear with the House: British Steel is in the hands of the official receiver. Neither I nor any other Minister determines its future, so it will be important to conclude a sale to a long-term investor in it. That is not in the bag yet, but I think it is evident that everyone is doing everything they can to secure it.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): I was pleased to hear from the Secretary of State that he has been working tirelessly with British Steel and the official receiver to find a new buyer for the company. Can he tell the House what further plans the Government have to support companies in the supply chain, such as those in my constituency, over the coming days and weeks?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Because she gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to Stephen Phipson, the director general of Make UK, the manufacturers’ organisation. He serves on the support group and has been present at the meetings, and he has convened a panel of suppliers and customers, to ensure that some of the uncertainty and challenges that they have faced during the insolvency of British Steel have been dealt with. Working with HMRC, the British Business Bank and the official receiver, the panel has had—as I think colleagues on the support group would accept—a positive role in providing help and reassurance to the supply chain across the country.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has acknowledged that the closure of a major steelworks is an intergenerational blight, as we have seen with the closure of Redcar and of Ravenscraig, which is still a wasteland 30 years on. It is therefore critical that we maintain long-term planning in the sector. That is aided by patient finance. Access to patient finance in this country is very poor compared with some of our peer nations, notably Germany. What will he do to improve patient finance access for the huge capital investment needed in the steel industry, in order to improve the attractiveness of British Steel to potential investors?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. Improving the access to and availability of patient capital in this country is a focus through the industrial strategy and some of the work that the Treasury is doing, but there is more work to be done. He is right—a long-term owner of British Steel needs to have the patience required in an industry that is, and always has been, subject to the ups and downs of the economic cycle and sometimes conditions in international trade. It is often not the most stable of industries, and as I think he would agree, any owner needs to be resilient to that.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): British-manufactured steel is vital for exporting companies in my constituency, such as General Electric, and across the country and therefore makes a huge contribution to our balance of payments. What is being done to support the export of British steel both directly and through other manufactured goods? Will my right hon. Friend comment on what my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) said about the possibility of the UK Government being a co-investor, alongside others, to ensure that British Steel continues to serve this nation so well?

Greg Clark: On the first point, there are great opportunities for exports. The support group has been working with the Construction Products Association, for example, to improve the marketing of British Steel products in this country and to overseas markets. Support is available through UK Export Finance for British exporters in all sectors. When it comes to the requirements of any bidder, strict rules pertain to British Steel, which is one reason why it requires an understanding of the investment plans of prospective bidders. That is something I have been doing, and I hope it will continue in the new Government.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): As the son of a steelworker, may I join the Secretary of State in praising the workforce and the trade unions at British Steel? I want to press him: will the Government ensure that the terms and conditions of the workforce are kept high through this difficult time, until a new buyer emerges?

Greg Clark: The terms and conditions have continued. The special managers, on behalf of the official receiver, have worked closely with the trade unions. Through the support group, we have no complaints and no reason to think that anything in those terms and conditions has been impaired during the insolvency. Of course, when a company is in insolvency, it is in the hands of the official receiver, but the special managers have shown themselves to be understanding and accommodating of the requirements of the workforce. It is a reflection of the workforce that they have committed themselves to the company and increased production at a time of uncertainty. That is a real tribute to their professionalism and the faith they have in the quality of their product.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I know from friends and colleagues in the trade unions, particularly Community, that they are thankful for the positive approach the Secretary of State has taken to his dealings with this. I am glad that Doncaster is providing the venue for talks, and everybody who is a party to them is welcome to come to my house for beer and sandwiches—or whatever they fancy—if it helps the talks in any way.

The Secretary of State has mentioned securing a steel sector deal a couple of times, and he alluded to one of the issues that the industry should think about. Does he still believe that getting those talks under way again at the earliest possible opportunity is crucial, and what other main headline issues need to be sorted, discussed or broached to get those talks up and running at the earliest opportunity?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady, and it has been good to meet in Doncaster. It may seem a surprising place to meet, but it is quite convenient for
both Scunthorpe and Teesside, as well as London, so that is where we start our week. The invitation to go to the right hon. Lady’s house is a very inviting one, which I am sure the support group will want to take up.

On the sector deal, we have made good progress, but all sector deals are about investment. It has been a feature of the steel industry in recent years that the investment in the future has not been at the level of some other industries where we have concluded deals—life sciences, automotive, aerospace and others. It is not in any sense that the talks have broken down; it requires investments to be made. I hope that, if there is to be a successful resolution for British Steel, that might provide the ability to do precisely that.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that what the steel industry, including in the Black Country, needs above all else is a long-term strategy, with a pipeline of projects that can create good opportunities for those who work in the sector?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is right, and he is right, as his neighbour the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) did, to call attention to the role of the Black Country. They have a phrase in the Black Country, “Made in the Black Country, sold around the world”, and that is a proud and accurate boast. However, there are opportunities in the UK for those products, and the Government have published a forward pipeline of infrastructure investments that require steel so that companies can gear themselves up to participate in procurement.

That is very important, and I would like to pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), who has responsibility for industry. He has signed the steel charter and is promoting it across all public bodies. Again, it requires and encourages the use of British steel to be taken into account in all procurement decisions.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Following on from the Secretary of State’s answer, he may recall the Defence Secretary saying that “we can and must buy British.” Does he agree that one way to do this would be to back a British bid to build the Navy’s new support ships, which could create 16,000 jobs throughout the supply chain in Barnsley and across the country?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady makes a good point. We have published figures for each Department on their use of British steel. It is the case, and the House should be aware of this, that not all types of steel used are actually made in the UK. At least at the moment, it is not possible to supply all of our steel needs from domestic supplies; that is the reality. She mentioned the MOD, and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State is working closely with the Ministry of Defence so that its support for the steel charter results in increasing levels of procurement of British steel.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (LD): We can be incredibly proud of our steel industry. It is of course a primary example of where industrial activism generally, on the part of the Government, is absolutely vital. If we see the right hon. Lady’s house is a very inviting one, which I am sure the support group will want to take up.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he has said. He and other hon. Members will know that the approach we took to developing the industrial strategy was to seek, I think successfully, to engage all parts of the country, all parts of the economy, and different firms, business leaders, local leaders and trade unions, to have something that reflects, as far as possible, a shared view of what our priorities should be in the future—whether that is investing in infrastructure, investing in skills, increasing the research and development investments that we make in this country, and identifying opportunities, such as in the future of mobility or the analysis of data, that are great sources of global opportunity for Britain. We did it in that way because I think it is right for an industrial strategy to endure—a short-term strategy is a contradiction in terms. I hope the consensual way in which it has been put together and the content of it will commend the industrial strategy to the incoming Government. It is obvious from what the hon. Gentleman has said that he will play a role from his seat in ensuring that those in government do that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): As chair of the all-party manufacturing group of MPs, may I remind the Secretary of State, whom I have a lot of time for, that it is essential we have steel in this country? I represent Huddersfield, which is a major engineering community, and the community is at the heart of this. Manufacturing, steel and engineering all hang closely together. Will he take a long-term view, but will he also make sure that we do not sell at the weakest time in the market? If the steel industry needed a period of public ownership, what would be wrong with that? This pragmatic Government have done it with London North Eastern Railway, so why not with steel? May I urge him to be totally pragmatic, not ideological, and to make sure that we have a steel industry that is successful in the future?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman and I share a view about the importance of steel and manufacturing. At the University of Huddersfield, the national rail testing facility is a very important part of our contribution to increasing standards of technological development, so he is absolutely right. When it comes to the steel industry, the key thing is having an owner that, in my view, is willing and has an ambition to invest for the future. Since the official receiver is encouraged by the level of interest, what we in the support group—I would observe that it is a pragmatic group of people—want to do is to support those bidders to make sure that we have the long-term future we all want.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): It is important strategically and for regional employment to maintain a steel industry in the United Kingdom, and I do welcome any form of Brexit, which the Secretary of State knows I oppose, it will of course be even more important that we have industrial activism. I am in no way agitating for his removal, but will he assure this House that if he is replaced in post in the next 24 hours, he will urge any successor not to turn their back on implementing a proper industrial strategy? Now is certainly not the time for a return to the Thatcherite economics that, frankly, saw the destruction of so many great industries in this country.
the efforts that the Secretary of State has made to date. However, does he not realise that high-cost renewable energy plans and costly decarbonisation policies—pursued by this Government and previous Administrations, who, quite frankly, have pandered to a Luddite green lobby in this country—have resulted in energy-intensive industries moving out of Britain, with the aluminium industry being an example? These issues will have to be addressed if we are to maintain a viable steel industry in the United Kingdom in the future.

Greg Clark: My experience from conversations with the bidders for British Steel is that there is a recognition in the steel industry—not just in this country, but around the world—that the move to cleaner and greener production is happening globally. Actually, there is an opportunity to get ahead of that, as investing in improved energy efficiency and reducing carbon emissions will have to be done everywhere. Again, one of the purposes of the industrial strategy is to advance ourselves as a place where this has been done well and reliably and has been well supported. That, it seems to me, is best for the long-term future of steel making and other manufacturing, rather than attaching ourselves to a model that will be increasingly costly around the world. The future depends on being more energy efficient and greener.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The UK exports 2.6 million tonnes of steel to the European Union every year. It is estimated that a no-deal Brexit would add £70 million of additional administration costs and costs relating to border checks. Does the Secretary of State therefore agree that a no-deal Brexit represents an existential threat to the British steel industry, and will he be conveying that message loud and clear to his successor? That, it seems to me, is best for the long-term future of steel making and other manufacturing, rather than attaching ourselves to a model that will be increasingly costly around the world. The future depends on being more energy efficient and greener.

Greg Clark: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that that message should be conveyed to all Members of the House who did not vote for a deal that would have provided, as British steel advised, the ability to trade in that way. My views on the desirability—in fact, the imperative—of having a good deal that allows us to trade without introducing barriers and frictions are well known to the House, and indeed beyond. What I will say is that at this time, when potential purchasers are considering British steel, actually it is not the case that the steel industry would not have a future in the event of different forms of Brexit. It is very important to convey to prospective buyers the fact that the industry that exists, with its opportunities domestically and internationally, and with the quality of its workforce and of its steel production, is attractive in itself and will not be trumped by the Brexit settlement. It is important that those prospective buyers have confidence, as some of them have having done their due diligence, that this is a good investment in all circumstances.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): May I first thank my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) for her advocacy in the Chamber and—those of us who also know her as a friend know this—for her tireless activism on behalf of the sector, which has no better advocate? I also thank the Secretary of State; in a time of upheaval on the Government Front Bench, I hope that one point of consistency will be his position there. He has explained in the past, and in many appearances here in the Chamber, that the steel sector does not quite fit the criteria for a sector deal. Does that mean that we need to look at how the sector deals themselves are operating, to see whether they could be tailored to support such a vital industry?

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State’s work and lament the likelihood that he will not be there to see the deal through and a foundation industry saved, alongside many jobs, many of which are in my constituency. When he leaves a little note for his successor, will he show his true Teesside-born credentials and just tell them that they must do all they can to get the deal across the line, and that they must not fail?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman seems to have powers of prediction that are certainly beyond me. I think that Hansard this afternoon will provide the little note—perhaps an extensive note—that he has in mind.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The prize for patience and perseverance goes to Jonathan Edwards.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Madam Deputy Speaker. In February this year the EU put in place a definitive safeguard strategy on steel imports, covering 26 steel product categories. It put in place a 25% tariff once the quota has been surpassed. What analysis have the British Government undertaken of the impact on the UK steel sector of leaving the EU customs union, in terms of exports to our biggest market and imports to the UK?

Greg Clark: We have been very clear in the discussions that have been taken prospectively. Obviously, the arrangements are not settled until the Brexit conclusions are settled, but we have been very clear in a number of product areas that safeguards should be available and should be used for precisely the purpose they have been so far and will be needed in future.
Draft Historical Abuse Bill
(Northern Ireland)

1.55 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the updated draft Bill on historical abuse, and when the legislation will be brought before Parliament.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): The historical institutional abuse inquiry looked into the abuse of children under 18 who lived in institutions in Northern Ireland between 1922 and 1995. The Hart report was published in January 2017 and recommended a commissioner for victims of abuse and a redress scheme for victims.

This is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland and, as such, is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly. However, in the absence of Northern Ireland Ministers, the Northern Ireland civil service launched a public consultation on draft legislation, which closed in March this year. The results of the consultation were provided to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in May. Those results were different from the Hart report in some, but not all, areas, so the Secretary of State asked the Northern Ireland political parties to help resolve them. They did that, and I would like to put on the record our thanks on behalf of not just the Government, but victims, their families and all those who responded to the consultation.

The head of the civil service in Northern Ireland provided the Secretary of State with a redrafted Bill late last week. I am happy to confirm that it would establish a commissioner for survivors of institutional abuse in Northern Ireland and a redress scheme, which reflects a cross-party political consensus on the changes recommended following the consultation. That said, I hope that everyone here will understand that, given that the draft arrived only a few days ago, we will not be able to introduce it by tomorrow, but I am sure that everyone here is extremely keen to move forward on this—there is widespread support for action right across the community in Northern Ireland. I am also happy to reconfirm the widespread support for action right across the community here is extremely keen to move forward on this—there is no shortage of good will, energy or cross-party agreement to take the legislation forward. I therefore hope that we will be able to introduce the legislation at pace and at the very latest by the end of the year to set up a scheme.

None of us can undo what was done in the past, but I hope that, by getting a scheme under way, as I have laid out here today, we can at least provide some level of support, and perhaps a little closure, for the victims and their families.

Ian Paisley: I thank the Minister of State for that answer. I also pay tribute to Judge Hart, whom he mentioned, who recently passed away.

Last night I took a heartbreaking call from Marty Adams of the Survivors Together group. On Friday I took a call from Gerard McCann, another survivor of abuse. Last month the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) and I met a group of survivors in Belfast and there were tears in everyone’s eyes. In the past couple of weeks the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has collectively met a delegation of survivors and victims. These campaign teams are run on a shoestring. The entitlement of these victims is well established, as the Minister of State has now made clear. Indeed, the head of the Northern Ireland civil service has removed every impediment to allow these compensation payments to be made.

Last week, in a day and a half, this Parliament was able to rush through major changes to laws in Northern Ireland that are extremely controversial, and they were waved and cheered on by a packed House, and many of those Members on the Opposition Benches are notable today by their absence. This issue unites political parties—I pay tribute to the shadow Secretary of State, who personally telephoned me and did all he could to ensure that this matter would be raised today—yet still there appears to be this delay.

I do not doubt the sincerity of the Minister of State, the Secretary of State or indeed the team working on this in the Northern Ireland Office, but there can be no further delay. There is nothing to prevent the legislation being introduced this evening and voted on tomorrow and the matter being resolved before we go into recess. If the will is there, it can be done. Will the Minister affirm that there is not one comma outstanding and not jot or tittle out of place in the legislation—that it is ready to go and will be expedited?

John Penrose: I join the hon. Gentleman in his tribute to Sir Anthony Hart. In the past couple of weeks, during the passage of the Bill that he mentioned, tributes were paid to Sir Anthony for his contribution. Sadly he is no longer with us, but I hope he will be looking down and cheering on the progress of the legislation we are talking about today.

The hon. Gentleman is also right to say that the issue unites political parties not just here but in Northern Ireland. I mentioned in my earlier remarks that there have been efforts to get cross-party consensus on the updates to the legislation. He is also right that what happened to what was supposed to be a three-clause Bill is incredibly frustrating. He and others in his party and I at the time all pointed out that it turned into a Christmas tree—I think that was the phrase everyone was using—with other issues added to it. I know that he would therefore not have wanted that Bill to be added to still further.

This important issue has not yet been properly debated in a legislature. It will need primary legislation to be taken through. It is something that is new and it needs to be dealt with carefully. I am afraid that I therefore cannot tell the hon. Gentleman that the Bill is ready to go today. As I said, it arrived with us a couple of days ago. It is being gone through in huge detail. There are also all sorts of supporting documents, explanatory memorandums and so on and so forth that need to be put together. That is being done at pace—I can promise him that—but it will need to be taken forward by the incoming Administration. It may be the two incumbents or others sitting in the Northern Ireland Office who do that, but I do not think there is any shortage of good will, energy or cross-party agreement to take the legislation forward. I therefore hope that we will be able to introduce the legislation at pace and at the very latest by the end of this year.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What estimate has the Minister made of the possibility of meeting the substantial financial costs of the measure by having recourse to the sometimes quite wealthy institutions that perpetrated the abuse in the first place?
John Penrose: The draft legislation that has been sent to us does not go into that level of detail about what might be pursued. What is clear is that in order to ensure that financial probity is maintained, the costs of the scheme will be met from the Northern Ireland block grant. That is important, because the measure should be done, as I mentioned at the start of my remarks, by the devolved Assembly spending the money it is in charge of. It therefore has to be money that the Assembly has control of, and we all obviously hope that it will be back up and running as fast as possible to exercise that control.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I place it on record that I am not a prophet—the Prime Minister has not given me any indication of what the Northern Ireland team will look like—but I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister for their courtesy in our mutual dealings. That said, it is now more than two years since Sir Anthony Hart’s report was made available, and virtually seven years since the Historical Institutional Abuse Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 began going through the Northern Ireland Assembly. Since the Hart inquiry report, 40 of the survivors we are aware of have died. They are people for whom there will never be justice, but even for the existing survivors, every day that goes by is not justice delayed, but injustice continued. I therefore strongly support the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) in his plea for real urgency.

It may be that the House cannot see the Bill in the next two days, but we will come back in September. It seems a perfectly reasonable request to see the Bill on the Floor of the House then. As the Opposition, we will expedite this and we will work with the Government and Back-Bench MPs to ensure that the Bill’s passage is as quick and efficient as possible, but I have one specific request for the Minister. Can he think seriously about whether in the interim it would be possible to give some down payments, almost, of compensation to survivors as evidence of good faith and of real intent that we will at last give some sense of justice to the survivors of things that should simply never have been allowed to happen?

John Penrose: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments about the Secretary of State and me, but also for the further evidence of the cross-party support and the shared sense of urgency and determination to move forward as promptly as we can with the legislation. That is welcome, and it increases the chances that under the new regime, whoever is in it and however it will be formulated, we will be able to continue the momentum that has only recently developed.

The hon. Gentleman is also right to say that there is a huge sense of frustration, mainly brought about by the fact that the Hart report came out just as the Northern Ireland Assembly ceased sitting. Something that I suspect would normally have been taken forward promptly by MLAs and the Executive there was therefore not taken forward with anything like the same degree of urgency, because they were not there to do so and the matter is properly devolved. Everyone here will have heard the hon. Gentleman’s kind offer, and I hope that that will make any potential imagined obstacles to introducing legislation during the course of this autumn that much lower in the minds of the business managers when we come back in due course later on this year.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Can I just say I find it unacceptable that we are even thinking the legislation should be done by the end of the year? It should be done immediately. Given that David Sterling redrafted the legislation last week, it could have been tabled and introduced this week. It is unacceptable that that has not happened, but a commitment for that to happen the first week we return should be on the table. Significant periods between the 1920s and the 1990s were under direct rule, so while the issue is a devolved matter, does the Minister not agree that this place has a responsibility to give compensation to those victims? Does the Minister not further agree that, given that this place has previously passed all stages of Northern Ireland legislation in 24 hours, this Bill should be the top priority when we return from summer recess?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Secretary of State.

John Penrose: I am the Minister of State.

Hon. Members: Promotion!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I must make it absolutely clear that I have no crystal ball. I was merely aware of the stature of the hon. Gentleman and was mistaken. I call the Minister.

John Penrose: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will briefly respond to my hon. Friend by saying that I think she is tempting me into what is probably a constitutional impropriety by trying to commit the incoming Government, whoever may be in it, and bind their hands. The comments made by her, the shadow Secretary of State and Members from all parts of the House will have created a helpful political fact, which is that there is clearly a great degree of cross-party consensus about the legislation—not only here, but among the parties in Northern Ireland—and a shared cross-party consensus about pace and urgency too. I am sure that message will be heard loud and clear by the business managers, whoever they may be.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I have to say clearly to the Government Minister that the dithering, procrastination and excuses around the delays in compensating the victims of historical institutional abuse in Northern Ireland have been absolutely shameful. The dithering must stop. Three months ago, the head of the Northern Ireland civil service, David Sterling, said that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland had a moral responsibility to compensate the victims of historical institutional abuse if the Assembly was not up and running by the end of the summer. He was absolutely right: the Government have a moral responsibility to legislate for the issue. I think it would be fitting for the Minister to take a few minutes to explain to the victims of historical institutional abuse, 30 of whom have died in the three years since the Hart report—thank goodness we had someone of the stature of the late Sir Anthony Hart to do that inquiry—the wasted three months since the comments by the head of the Northern Ireland civil service.

John Penrose: The hon. Lady is rightly giving vent to people’s frustrations. She and many people on both sides of the House, including me, feel exactly the same way, as do many of the victims’ groups. I make the point that I made in my opening remarks: when the results of
the consultation came out, they were different in some detailed, but very important respects from the initial Hart recommendations. It was important to make sure that we had a solid basis of reconciliation between those proposals and the original Hart report proposals, and to make sure that there genuinely was cross-party agreement. That process is difficult and took some time, but I think that we are there now. It seems, therefore, that we have something with which we can go forward. It would be slower if we did not have cross-party consensus, so it has been sensible to take the time to get there. I agree—I think everybody here is in violent agreement—that now we are there, there are very few obstacles to moving forward at pace, and I think everybody wants to do so.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I wish my hon. Friend and the Secretary of State all the best for the discussions that will happen later today or tomorrow. If we stick to the timetable that gets the Bill through by the end of the year, will he confirm when he thinks payments can start being made to the victims?

John Penrose: I am afraid I cannot give my hon. Friend a precise date. The Bill will have to make its way through Parliament—through this Chamber and the one at the other end of the corridor—and there will be clarity at that point about when the payments scheme should be able to start making payments. I suspect that the appetite for a leisurely process will be very thin. I expect that people will want to crack on with this and it is right that we should want to. We would therefore want to start making preparations as soon as the civil servants constitutionally can—as soon as the direction that Parliament will go is clear—and at that point, we can start doing the preparations at an early stage, as I am sure everybody will want them to.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister alluded to the reasons why the legislation cannot proceed today or tomorrow. Setting that to one side, will he give an undertaking that the legislation will be placed before the House on the first day back in September—we have only two weeks back here then—that payments will be made as soon as possible thereafter, and that the period between now and then will be usefully used to see what institutions will pay where the abuse occurred?

John Penrose: I would love to be able to make the commitments exactly as the hon. Gentleman asks, but I am afraid that I cannot, simply because—as I said in response to earlier questions about tempting me into a commitment, but there is still further to go. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that there has been a Stormont Assembly, most people here would have expected the MLAs in the Assembly and the Executive to have sorted this out long since, given the horrific nature of the abuse that she rightly pointed out, and that that urgency would therefore have resulted in answers and a redress scheme well before now. That is a good example of why getting the Assembly back up and running is so important.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response today and add my voice strongly to the calls for the Bill to be moved forward as swiftly as possible. There is deep frustration about how this matter has been handled over the last number of years. When we look at such processes all over the world—particularly involving redress—we see that there is a significant contribution from the institutions that are found to have liability. That issue has been raised here. There is concern that those conversations have not yet commenced with the institutions, as far as I am aware. A significant number of the bodies mentioned in the report are non-governmental organisations. Will the Minister outline what he is intending to do? All parties and the all-party group on this matter agreed that this process should commence as soon as possible and that there must be a contribution from the other institutions to help to support victims.

John Penrose: I understand the concern around this matter. Given the need to move this process at speed, we have mainly been focusing on getting the commissioner and the redress scheme outline legislation in-house, and we are going through it at speed now. At the moment, therefore, that issue has not been at the front of priorities. I take the point that it will need to be addressed, but perhaps I can write to the hon. Lady to confirm how we might take that forward. I do not want to make any commitments on what might be the right answer for that at this stage, but I hear the concerns that she and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) raised. This clearly needs to be thought through.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response and his clear commitment. Will he outline how he believes compensation will in practice be available for victims and the proposed timeline for the Bill’s passage and implementation? Is September the date that this will happen? Further, will the Bill enable those who have reluctantly accepted small compensation sums to be able retrospectively to access and receive compensation that truly reflects the horrific abuse that they were subjected to historically?

John Penrose: Let me take that second and crucial point first. The draft Bill, as it has been sent to us, does allow for people who have already received initial compensation payments from other sources—whatever...
they may be—to apply to the scheme. That is certainly in the scheme proposals as they have come to us. I think that that has cross-party support from the Northern Ireland parties, so I can confirm that that is—as I suspect the hon. Gentleman has been briefed and told—exactly what it says.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his responses and my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) for raising this urgent question. The Minister will have heard the sense of frustration that we all have around the delay in this process and our earnest desire to find a solution quickly for victims. I am very conscious that Kincora boys' home was on a site 400 yards from my constituency office and many of those abused were in its care. The Minister specifically mentioned those who were abused in Northern Ireland. Will he confirm that the proposals being brought forward will include children who were born and entered care in Northern Ireland and were then forced emigrants, passed out to care institutions as far away as Australia, and abused both at home and abroad?

John Penrose: I think that the answer to the hon. Gentleman's detailed and precise question is yes, but if it is not, I will write to him to put the record straight. However, having followed the train of logic, I think that the answer is yes.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): Regarding the time delay, I appreciate that two and a half years ago, this report was submitted to the then Northern Ireland Assembly, which was brought down by Sinn Féin. My hon. Friend the Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) alluded to the delay and pointed out that many have passed away while waiting. We are rubbing salt into the wound. It is imperative that we get this Bill across the line as soon as possible. I ask for a commitment that it will be brought back in the first week of September, as a major point of business—as a priority—to get this issue resolved.

John Penrose: I completely sympathise with the hon. Gentleman. He is not the only person to have made that point this afternoon, and I doubt he will be the only person across the communities of Northern Ireland to make it either. There is huge urgency and impatience about this. As I said, I cannot bind the hands of my successors, but I am reassured that the urgency and importance that everyone here attaches to the subject will come across loud and clear to whoever the business managers may be. There are other important issues on the political horizon—he does not need me to tell him that—but that message will come across loud and clear, and I thank him for helping to drive the message home.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I was serving in the Northern Ireland Executive when this issue first came to their attention, and two things were very clear in our discussions. First, perpetrators of abuse should be held culpable for that abuse and for compensation. I hope that over the summer the Minister will have discussions with the civil service in Northern Ireland to ensure that the discussions about contributions from those named in the Hart report can commence. Secondly, any money made available should be made available to those who have suffered; it should not be absorbed by huge legal bills, as often happens in such cases. If that is not explicit in the legislation, I hope that before it comes before the House in September the Minister will ensure that the will of the Executive in that regard is also reflected.

John Penrose: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that where any criminal liability is implied, it will rightly be an independent prosecutorial decision taken not by politicians but by investigators in the correct, normal way at arm's length from Executives of any kind. He made a parallel but equivalent point about potential compensation contributions that has been made by others on both sides of the House. I want to reflect further on that to make sure I hear the concerns on both sides of the House. Clearly, this will need to be considered carefully.
Feltham A Young Offenders Institution

2.22 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will make a statement on Her Majesty's chief inspector of prison's recent invoking of the urgent notification process for Feltham A young offenders institution.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): At the outset, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke), who I gather has recently tendered his resignation as Secretary of State for Justice. I hope that you will allow me to answer in his place, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) for tabling this urgent question and for the opportunity to respond on an important subject. I am also grateful to Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons for its work and the scrutiny its inspections provide. I take the safety of all the young people in our custody very seriously, and clearly the urgent notification letter for Feltham A does not make comfortable reading. It is clearly a deeply disappointing and concerning report. Despite the significant efforts of staff at Feltham A, to whom I pay tribute, and the significant support and resources put in by the youth custody service and the Ministry of Justice, it is clear that serious underlying challenges remain. I have been clear that progress to address these issues needs to be swifter to deliver the safe environment that we all wish to see and that, as recent reports acknowledge, we do see in other parts of the youth custodial estate.

In addition to work already under way, we have taken a series of immediate steps, including placing an immediate temporary stop on new placements of young people into Feltham A, alongside additional resources and support for staff. The governor is still relatively new in post and is working hard to drive improvements in an establishment that has one of the highest and most concentrated proportions of violent offenders in the country. She and her team are dedicated to turning Feltham A around, and we will continue to support them in doing that. As required by the urgent notification process, we will formally respond with an action plan in the required 28 days.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the Minister for his response and for notifying me of the letter yesterday.

Feltham young offenders institution was a prison left without a governor for five months last year, and the findings of the recently announced inspection have been distressing for the staff and all those involved with Feltham. There was talk of a dramatic decline in safety, which is a matter of great concern for us all. I extend my thanks to the POA trade union and the staff and management, who have been working at that prison in very difficult circumstances.

The problems at Feltham are long standing and the current situation should have been avoidable. The Government have much to answer for regarding why the decline has been so fast, with a steep rise in violence against staff, allegations of assault and levels of self-harm. The Government desperately need to get to grip with the causes of the rapid decline and to support the staff and inmates in turning the situation around. Given that we are talking about children—140 boys aged 15 to 17 are being held at Feltham A in the care of the state—will the Minister update us on why Feltham was left without a governor for five months last year, what the impact has been, and what assessment he has made of the root causes of the steep decline in performance?

The Minister says he has supplied resources, but why does he believe they have not been sufficient? What additional skilled resources does he intend to provide to support the staff and management to address the culture and behaviour management issues that are so significant? What support is there for those young people living in great distress at Feltham young offenders institution? How fit for purpose does he consider Feltham to be, how quickly does he plan to produce his action plan, and how will he keep Parliament and me informed, particularly over the recess?

Edward Argar: I am as ever grateful to the hon. Lady. As she mentioned, I spoke to her yesterday, and we met again this morning. I am grateful for her typically measured tone, not seeking to score points but focusing on what needs to be done to improve the outcomes for young people at Feltham. I know her constituents will be grateful to her as well.

The hon. Lady raised a number of issues that I will address in turn. Her first point was about the gap—the interregnum—between governors. She is right that there was a gap. The previous governor was promoted to a prison group director role and the recruitment process took longer than anyone would have wished. One of the key reasons was that the governor, who has now been appointed, had to serve a notice period in her previous role. The view taken was that she was the right governor to do this job and that therefore it was appropriate to wait. She served her notice and is now in post. I emphasise that I have confidence in her. I believe that she and her team are doing a difficult job very well, as the hon. Lady alluded to. I recognise the constructive and positive relationship between the local branch of the POA and the governor and her team, and I thank them in the same way.

On the root causes, there are a number of challenges at Feltham. As I said, it has a very high concentration of very violent and challenging young people. At present, I believe, there are 110 young offenders in Feltham A, which has an operational capacity of 180. There is, therefore, significant headroom to give the staff greater opportunity to tackle the violence and the underlying challenges faced by those young people. The hon. Lady will be aware, because we met to discuss it earlier in the year, of the violence in April and of the incidents of assaults on other prisoners and on staff. There were a large number of incidents of self-harm and violence but a small number of perpetrators. We have some very challenging individuals.

The hon. Lady was right to mention resources and the need for skilled resource. There has been a 31% uplift in the budget for Feltham A, with £3.5 million going in, and it has an opportunity to draw down further moneys from a second £5 million pot across the youth custodial estate. There are also 90 more staff across Feltham. The experience mix and band mix are
broadly the same as they have been over time, but the hon. Lady was right to allude to the importance of experienced staff. We are bringing in extra senior and mid-level experienced resource to help drive change, both at the top level and to support those staff. I believe that seven senior staff have already been seconded, and there will be further changes in the coming days. Andrew Dickinson, the governor of Wetherby, is also taking on a role in supporting Emily, the prison governor. It will be a mentoring role, but he will also play a key role in monitoring the action plan. His institution got a good inspection report and we want to learn the lessons from that.

The hon. Lady raised two other points, which I will address swiftly. On fitness for purpose, current Government policy is to move away from the existing youth offender institution model and towards a secure schools model. Like the Minister who spoke before me at this Dispatch Box, I will not bind a future Government, but that is the current policy. In terms of keeping this House updated, I anticipate that the action plan will be ready within 28 days. I or my successor will write to the hon. Lady and the shadow Secretary of State when it is ready, so that they are kept informed, and we will continue to keep the hon. Lady, as the local Member of Parliament, informed throughout the action plan process.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I was glad to hear the Minister refer to the good report for Wetherby, but may I press him further on what is being done with an equally difficult cohort of individuals at Wetherby? What is Wetherby doing right that Feltham has been doing wrong?

Edward Argar: I will focus on what Wetherby has been doing right, as highlighted in the recent report. The governor of Wetherby is doing a lot of work to ensure that his staff and new recruits get not only up-front training but continuous training over a 12-month period, which makes a real difference to them. It has a strong and effective regime and the governor is focused on continued access to that regime; that is hugely important. The Keppel unit also does very important work in helping some of the most challenging people in the prison to tackle the underlying causes of their trauma, offending and behaviour. I believe we have a lot to learn from Wetherby and that Andrew Dickinson will help the governor of Feltham in playing a key role in making progress.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Two years ago we stood here for an urgent question on the crisis in our prisons after the chief inspector warned that not a single establishment inspected was safe to hold children and young people. Does the Minister accept that the chief inspector issuing an urgent notification for the first time in the youth estate highlights how the Government are overseeing a dangerous collapse in safety for children in custody, and that that shows, unfortunately, how little the Government have done in those two years?

The general prison crisis is bad enough, but we are talking about children—children in dangerously unsafe conditions. The chief inspector warns that in Feltham the “speed of this decline has been extraordinary”,

violent incidents are up by 45% since January 2019, and self-harm has increased fourteenfold in two years. When was the Minister first aware that the situation was spiralling out of control? What has been done since then? Will he agree to report to this House before seeking to end the temporary ban on children being sent to Feltham?

Later today we will get yet another Justice Secretary—the fifth I will have faced in just three years. I am sorry to say that I am sick of the warm words, sick of the speeches giving the impression that something is being done, and sick of the media stunts that serve as a springboard for leadership bids. Does the Minister agree that the chaotic approach to leadership in the Ministry of Justice deepens the crisis caused by unacceptable prison cuts? Finally, does he agree that whoever takes over as Justice Secretary must go beyond empty rhetoric and finally make the safety of young people in custody an urgent priority?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his contribution, if not for his tone. This may be the first time I have faced him directly across the Dispatch Box for an urgent question, and it might also be the last time—who knows? He asked a number of specific questions. He will be aware that, following his comments in 2017, the chief inspector said subsequently that it is no longer the case that there is no safe institution. It is important to draw that to the attention of the House and to mention again the Wetherby report. It is clear that this is not a systemic problem in the youth custodial system. That said, none of that, as the hon. Gentleman rightly says, detracts from the fact that what has been reported from Feltham is a cause of deep concern and must be addressed as a matter of priority.

Since my appointment last summer, I have been following the performance of Feltham and, indeed, all the other youth custodial institutions in my portfolio. I have held a number of meetings both with the governor and with the director of youth custody service, to discuss progress in Feltham and what more needs to be done. As I have made clear, considerable additional resource has been put in, so this is not a matter of spending or resource, and a considerable number of additional staff have been put in, so it is not down to that, either. It is important that we put that on the record rather than indulge in rhetoric about cuts, which do not apply in this case. The smile on the hon. Gentleman’s face suggests that I have a point. I continue to take a very close interest in the issue, particularly in recent months, and I have engaged with the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) and kept her up to date.

The hon. Gentleman asked when the temporary ban on placements will be brought to an end and how the House will be involved. That is an operational decision to be made by the director of the youth custody service. I am not able to bind my potential successor to how that is handled, but I am sure that whoever stands at this Dispatch Box with that responsibility will wish to keep the hon. Lady and, indeed, the House informed on that important issue.

The hon. Gentleman concluded with comments about leadership at the Ministry of Justice and the number of Secretaries of State and Ministers. I have to say that his characterisation of how the Ministry of Justice works certainly does not accord with my experience of working
there every day. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke), who has recently departed the role of Secretary of State for Justice. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the number of Ministers, but I suspect that their departure and the churn rate has little to do with his performance as their shadow and rather more with other factors. This Government and whoever leads the Ministry of Justice are entirely clear in their view that we must do everything we can to ensure that any children detained in custody are accorded care and support of the highest quality and are safe.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Why are young men locked up in their cells for the greater part of the day, with all the pent-up frustration that that gives rise to, when they should enter their cells with relief at the end of the day because they are so knackered, having been involved in vigorous activity?

Edward Argar: My right hon. Friend makes his point in his own unique way. Access to a full regime is important. Young people in custody need access to sporting, educational and other facilities. There is more we can do to address that need in Feltham, although I am encouraged by a lot of the work being done there, on sport in particular. I visited four weeks ago and saw “boats not bars”, which is about using rowing machines in the gym, and the work that Saracens rugby club is doing. A whole range of sporting and other activities are undertaken at the prison, but my right hon. Friend is right to highlight that there is always more that can be done.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I visited Feltham with the Justice Committee earlier this year, and I am saddened, although not wholly surprised, by the inspection report. According to the report, self-harm has risen by 218% in the past two years, assaults on staff are up 150% and 40% of children said they felt unsafe during their time in Feltham. There is clearly a rising epidemic of violence at Feltham, and no child should be left in these conditions. I have heard what the Minister said, but what specific and urgent steps will he now take to rectify this situation?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady is right, and I spoke to the Chairman of the Justice Committee this morning to discuss his visits, the Committee’s work and the urgent notification. The hon. Lady is right to highlight the violence and self-harm. I would sound a slight note of caution—it is only a slight one—on the incidences of self-harm; it is also important that we look at the number of individuals involved, because some individuals might be prolific self-harmers who account for a very large number of incidents, so there will be a small number of individuals. That is in no way to detract from its significance, but it is important that we are clear about that.

The hon. Lady asks about specific steps that are being taken. First, as I have made clear, we have placed a temporary block on the further placement of young people in Feltham: its capacity is 180, but about 110 young people are there at present, so there is room within Feltham for the staff to stabilise the situation and work on improving matters. The second step has been an urgent review of cell buttons—call buttons. That was highlighted in the report; it may appear to be a small issue, but it is extremely important that when someone buzzes for help or they need help that call is answered, so we have undertaken a review to check that the buttons are working effectively.

As I have also said, additional senior level resource is already going in, to bring additional experienced resource in, but also to support the governor in delivering on the action plan and driving forward rapid improvements. Andrew Dickinson, the governor of Wetherby, will be playing a key role in that. We have seen the positive inspection report he got at Wetherby and it is important that we draw on those lessons to work with the very able governor we have in Feltham.

In terms of the buildings, a programme is already under way for works to improve showers and other facilities, and I have asked the director of the youth custody service to undertake a review of the overall state of the estate there, to identify if any capital or other works are urgently needed.

Finally, we need to ensure that, as swiftly as we can, we address the challenges the chief inspector highlighted on how particular policies were applied, especially the keep-apart policy; while that has an important role to play in tackling gang-related or other violence, it must not lead to a curtailment of the regime and the active regime, which can play a key part in keeping young people active and keeping a lid on tensions and violence.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Notwithstanding the context my hon. Friend has set out, the high levels of self-harm at Feltham are particularly concerning. What is he doing to improve the mental health of young offenders?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of mental health, and healthcare more broadly, for offenders and particularly young people. The levels of self-harm are deeply concerning, and we need to do more to drive them down. More broadly, we are seeking to have better liaison and diversion services, which divert those who genuinely have a mental health need and, where that can be better treated in the community, to have that option. We are also working on our health and justice plan, which is about improving the mental health and physical healthcare pathways for all those who enter custody.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank my fellow Hounslow MP my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) for asking this question today. I visited Feltham as the Hounslow lead member for children’s services in around 2003, not long after another murder there. The Howard League has today re-released its July 2018 report on Feltham. For 30 years, there have been critical inspections of the regime at Feltham and nothing has got any better over those 30 years. Does the Minister not agree that to lock up in a prison environment 15, 16 and 17-year-olds, who are children, is fundamentally wrong? We are the only equivalent country that does this. Yes, some of them have committed terrible crimes, but they are children with mental health problems or addiction problems, or they may be neurodiverse or have learning disabilities.
Should we not learn from other countries and provide a better therapeutic regime to support these children to turn their lives around?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady takes a keen interest in this issue, not just as a local MP but from formerly serving on the Justice Committee, and she highlights the important point that a large number of the young people—female offenders and others—who end up in custody are victims as well as perpetrators of crime and that, as well as justice taking its course, we must make sure that the help they need is available to them, whether mental health help or a range of other interventions, to tackle the underlying trauma. We have seen in the past 10 years roughly a 70% reduction in the number of under-18s being sentenced to custody—the figure is down to about 700 at the moment—so liaison and diversion work. However, it is right that the courts still have the option of sentencing to custody, especially for very serious assaults, violent offences and sexual offences, but the current Government’s approach to this policy is to move towards secure schools: moving away from essentially a prison with some education to an environment that is a school with a degree of security, which is necessary given the nature of some of the sentences and some of the crimes committed. So we are seeking to address this with a cultural change in how we approach dealing with young people who commit these crimes.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): A significant proportion of the young people who find themselves in these institutions will have had experience of the care system, so does the Minister agree that councils and the Government should do more as corporate parents to prevent those children from ending up in the institutions in the first place?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend, who comes to this with a considerable degree of knowledge from his previous roles before he was a Member of this House, is absolutely right. A large number of the young people who end up in custody have been in care or in contact previously with the social care services of local councils. Our youth offending teams within councils do an extremely good job, and I recently visited Lewisham’s team who do an exceptional job and I pay tribute to them for their work. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of local authorities taking their corporate parenting role seriously. When I was a councillor before I was a Member of this place, we had an approach in which each councillor became a corporate parent receiving anonymised reports on individual looked-after children to better understand the responsibilities all local authorities and councils have in this respect, and I would recommend taking that level of interest.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The all-party group on the prevention of adverse childhood experiences can state without any doubt that young people who experience adverse childhood experiences are much more likely to end up in prison. Does the Minister agree that many more of our organisations and services need to be trauma-informed, so this does not just start with the Prison Service once young people are in custody but starts much earlier? We might or might not see the Minister again at the Dispatch Box, but will he drive this agenda within his own party because we need many more trauma-informed services across the board?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who I know takes a close interest in this area. Who knows what the announcements in the next day or two will bring, but I assure her that, regardless of them, I will continue in whatever capacity to take a very close interest in it. She is right about trauma-informed services: often by the time a young person ends up in custody in one of the YOIs or secure training centres that I am responsible for, it is almost as though they have got to the end of their relationship with the state; they will have been through a long process and had relationships with many state bodies on the way and each of them will potentially have failed them, resulting in their getting to that point. It is absolutely right that a trauma-informed approach is adopted throughout the voluntary and state systems, so that we do everything we can to address the underlying trauma suffered by those young people and to help them break the cycle of offending and have an opportunity for a productive and positive life.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): At Chelmsford Prison, we have also had a high level of violence and some tragic suicides, but when I have spoken to staff recently, they have told me how the situation has improved for a number of reasons: reducing the number of prisoners; more staff; more training for staff; investing in equipment to identify and stop drugs; and investing in improved environments to make the prison a less horrific place to be. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must ensure that the new Justice Secretary has whatever resources they need to ensure that our prison staff can be safe and that violence can be reduced?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is a strong champion for Chelmsford Prison. I believe that she has visited it on almost a dozen occasions, and I know that the staff there are grateful for the close interest she takes. She will forgive me if I am not at this point tempted into making spending announcements—especially in the absence of a Chancellor of the Exchequer at the moment—but I think both sides of the House would agree that it is important that our prison officers and others who work in our prisons in the custodial estate have the support and the tools they need to do their job effectively.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I understand that the suicide rate for boys aged 15 to 17 in custody is about 18 times greater than the rate for their counterparts in the community. Why is that?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman highlights an important point that links in with points made by other hon. Members—namely, that those in the cohort of young people in custody are not only the perpetrators of serious crimes but often the victims of crime who in many cases suffer from mental health challenges or a range of other issues. If we overlay that with the constraints of a custodial environment, that is extremely challenging, which is why we are working hard to divert young people and others, where appropriate, away from custody into community sentences and towards the support and medical support they need. Within custody, we are
working to improve conditions and ensure that the support is there to drive down the self-harm and suicide rates, but it is also vital that we remain focused on the longer term and on the current Government’s approach to changing the nature of youth custody, where it does have to occur, and moving towards a secure schools model.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The problems at Feltham are nothing new—as my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) said, young men were being transferred to Wormwood Scrubs for their own safety or the safety of others 10 years ago—but this is on a completely different scale. The situation has escalated far more quickly, whether in relation to the rise in assaults or to privation, particularly the time spent in the cell. When that was perceived as a problem more generally, the previous Prisons Minister set up the 10 prisons project, which involved regular and active engagement between the Minister and the institutions concerned, and it had an effect. I know that we are short of Ministers at the moment, but will the hon. Gentleman look at that and see whether he or his colleagues can take some responsibility, because this is on another level? People who read these reports regularly will not have seen one as shocking as this for some time.

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to mention the 10 prisons project. It involves the adult male estate and is tackling other issues, but we are seeking to learn lessons from it that could be applied to the youth custodial estate as well. Where something works well in that context, it is absolutely right that we should look at it. He is also right to talk about the importance of direct and personal engagement by the Minister and the director of the service in turning round challenged institutions. I hope that I have sufficiently alluded to that fact in references to meetings with the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston and to my regular meetings with the director of the youth custody service, which are almost fortnightly at the moment. I am taking a personal interest in the operation of Feltham, and indeed the whole estate, and I also speak regularly to the governor herself. She leads a dedicated team who are working in difficult circumstances involving violence and self-harm. I have confidence in her and her team, and they know that as long as I am the Minister, I will do everything I can to support them. I am also sure that the Ministry of Justice will continue to do everything it can support her and her team.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the Minister for answering his first urgent question.

TOEIC: Overseas Students

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will announce his decisions on the cases of overseas students falsely accused of cheating in ETS TOEIC—test of English for international communication—English language tests.

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Five years ago, “Panorama” uncovered the shocking scale of fraud within the English language testing system. ETS, the company that ran the centres, analysed all the tests taken in the UK between 2011 and 2014—more than 58,000 in all. It identified more than 33,000 invalid results where, in its view, there was direct evidence that somebody had cheated, and a further 22,000 were considered questionable because of irregularities. This fraud was serious and systematic, and 25 people who were involved have been convicted and sentenced to more than 70 years in prison. Further criminal investigations are ongoing, with a further 14 due in court next month. These crimes did not happen in isolation. The student visa system we inherited in 2010 was wide open to abuse. The National Audit Office found that as many as 50,000 people may have fraudulently entered the UK to work using the tier 4 student route in 2009–10 alone.

Following the revelations, the Home Office took prompt action against some of those who were found to have cheated, and that action was endorsed by the courts. Those whose results were questionable were offered the chance to resit the test. Despite this, there are understandable concerns that some people who did not cheat might have been caught up, and that some have found it hard to challenge the accusations against them. So earlier this year my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced that the Department would change existing guidance to ensure that the belief that a deception had taken place was balanced against other factors, which would normally lead to leave being granted, especially where children are involved.

Furthermore, we will ensure that no further action is taken in cases where there is no evidence that an ETS certificate was used in an immigration application. We will also drop the automatic requirement to interview those linked to a questionable certificate. We continue to look at other options, including whether there is a need for those who feel they have been wronged to be able to ask for their case to be reviewed. It is right that we show concern for those who have chosen to study or make a life in this country, but we cannot allow our concern to undermine the action we must take to tackle what was a widespread criminal fraud. We will keep the House fully informed as our response to this issue develops.

Stephen Timms: By 2017, more than 35,000 refusal, curtailment and removal decisions had been made in ETS alleged cheating cases. Thousands of those accused and denied visas remain in the UK protesting their innocence. The Home Secretary, who I am delighted to see in his place, told the House three months ago:
“We had a further meeting to make some final decisions just last week.”—[Official Report, 1 April 2019; Vol. 657, c. 799.]

However, there has still been no announcement. He said on Monday last week:

“I am planning to come to the House with a statement to say much more before the summer recess.”—[Official Report, 15 July 2019; Vol. 663, c. 586.]

He has come to the House today, but we have not heard that statement. Thousands of students who have been falsely accused now face grave hardship and need this to be resolved urgently.

ETS’s records are confused, incomplete and often plain wrong. The professor of digital forensics at Birmingham City University told the all-party parliamentary group on TOEIC last month that it was “unsafe for anyone to rely upon computer files created by ETS...as a sole means of making a decision”, but those files are the only basis for the cheating allegations. Appeals were not allowed in the UK, but a growing number have convinced a court that they did not cheat. Immigration judge Lucas, dismissing the Home Office’s case of TOEIC cheating against one of my constituents, wrote last month that “the reality is that there is no specific evidence in relation to this Appellant at all.”

This is a grave injustice that must be brought to an end.

At the Home Affairs Committee on Monday, the Home Secretary suggested a new reconsideration system for TOEIC cases, although yesterday’s inadequate written statement did not go as far as that. Does the Minister envisage a reconsideration system for those wrongly accused? When will it be set up? How will it operate? When will full details of it be announced? Would it not be better and easier just to allow students to take another secure English language test, and if they pass, to allow them to regain their visa status?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his diligence in pursuing this issue. He certainly brought it to my attention very early on in my tenure as Immigration Minister. It is important to reflect on the fact that the courts have said, in separate cases, that the evidence was enough to take the action that we did and that people had cheated for a variety of reasons. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary did indeed publish a written ministerial statement yesterday, which gave an indication of the changes so far, but it is important that we continue to work on the issue and find a mechanism to allow people, where necessary, to have some form of review. Unfortunately, I cannot set things out in the detail that the right hon. Gentleman has requested at this time, but I reassure him that I am conscious that we have a new Prime Minister and, should I remain in this post, I will seek to raise the TOEIC issue with him as a matter of urgency, because it is important that we work as a Government to ensure that we find a mechanism for redress for the few cases in which a wrong decision may have been made.

Caroline Nokes: I commend the right hon. Gentleman for his diligence in pursuing this issue. He certainly brought it to my attention very early on in my tenure as Immigration Minister. It is important to reflect on the fact that the courts have ruled that the evidence was enough to take the action that we did and that people had cheated for a variety of reasons. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary did indeed publish a written ministerial statement yesterday, which gave an indication of the changes so far, but it is important that we continue to work on the issue and find a mechanism to allow people, where necessary, to have some form of review. Unfortunately, I cannot set things out in the detail that the right hon. Gentleman has requested at this time, but I reassure him that I am conscious that we have a new Prime Minister and, should I remain in this post, I will seek to raise the TOEIC issue with him as a matter of urgency, because it is important that we work as a Government to ensure that we find a mechanism for redress for the few cases in which a wrong decision may have been made.

Afraal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for securing this urgent question and making a powerful case. His work and commitment on this issue has been tremendous. The TOEIC scandal is another example of the Government’s hostile environment, plunging thousands of lives into uncertainty. This shameful episode, which started in 2014, has led to thousands of students being accused of cheating and the cancellation of some 35,000 student visas. Multiple organisations and court cases have questioned the allegations, uncovering the Home Office’s many shortcomings.

The damage, distress and loss caused to the international students wrongly accused of cheating has been enormous, leaving them feeling like criminals. Likewise, it has damaged our international reputation as a preferred destination for international students. It is evident that the Home Office has not learned key lessons from this debacle and the hostile environment policy, which is obviously still in play. I met students in Parliament and was shocked to learn about the abuse that they have experienced and to learn that they all suffer mental health problems—something not to be taken lightly.

The Home Secretary revealed at Monday’s Home Affairs Committee meeting that a new reconsideration system will be introduced, but the details remained vague in yesterday’s statement. The urgency of this matter must be understood, and the Government must clarify what the new system will look like and when it will be set up. These students have endured serious hardship and deserve answers, and immigration policies and processes must be fair and transparent. Will the Minister confirm that no further students accused of cheating in a TOEIC test will be detained or forcibly removed? Does she also accept that students have faced serious financial losses? If so, what financial support will be provided? This grave injustice must be corrected as quickly as possible.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his diligence in pursuing this issue. He certainly brought it to my attention very early on in my tenure as Immigration Minister. It is important to reflect on the fact that the courts have said, in separate cases, that the evidence was enough to take the action that we did and that people had cheated for a variety of reasons. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary did indeed publish a written ministerial statement yesterday, which gave an indication of the changes so far, but it is important that we continue to work on the issue and find a mechanism to allow people, where necessary, to have some form of review. Unfortunately, I cannot set things out in the detail that the right hon. Gentleman has requested at this time, but I reassure him that I am conscious that we have a new Prime Minister and, should I remain in this post, I will seek to raise the TOEIC issue with him as a matter of urgency, because it is important that we work as a Government to ensure that we find a mechanism for redress for the few cases in which a wrong decision may have been made.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Yet again, I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and his colleagues in the all-party group for their tireless work on the behalf of probably thousands of innocent people whose lives and aspirations have been ruined by this fiasco. The Minister is absolutely right that shameful cheating was going on but, as the National Audit Office...
said, the Home Office should have been just as robust about protecting the innocent as it was in pursuing the fraudsters.

It was positive on Monday that the Home Secretary talked about creating a new opportunity for those who have been wronged to have their cases reconsidered, so it is slightly alarming that the Government seem to have moved away from that approach in the past couple of days. He was wrong to talk on Monday as though the burden of proof should still be on those facing allegations of cheating, who should be presumed innocent until proven otherwise. Thanks to the work of the all-party parliamentary group, we know that assertions of cheating by ETS cannot be relied upon on their own in deciding whether someone is guilty, and the courts have frequently rejected the evidence of ETS, just as they have sometimes upheld it.

I was going to ask when the new mechanism will be up and running, but when will we at least have clarity about whether we are getting such a mechanism? If we are to have a new mechanism, will the Minister undertake that individuals will be presumed innocent unless there is significant evidence beyond a simple and unreliable assertion of cheating by ETS? Finally, to restore credibility and trust in the whole process, will the Minister consider giving responsibility for making decisions on such cases to an independent decision maker—people with the required technical and legal expertise—totally outside the orbit of the Home Office and the ETS?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. I remind him that in 2014, before his time in this House, it was Parliament that insisted that the Home Office took urgent action to address what had been revealed as widespread cheating. It is important to find a mechanism that provides redress for those who may have been wrongly caught up in this. However, the independent expert, Professor French, indicated when he studied the matter that the likelihood of a false match from the voice checks was likely to be less than 1%.

The hon. Gentleman referred to some of the subsequent court cases, and evidence of an article 8 claim of a right to respect for family or private life led the courts to take a balanced decision in many cases that it was right that individuals should be allowed to stay, and that is absolutely what we are saying in the review of the guidance. We want to ensure that the Home Office, which I absolutely believe is the appropriate place for these decisions to be made, is making sensible decisions that properly balance any belief that deception was practiced against the wider circumstances. Where the circumstances are particularly compelling, perhaps when children are involved, it is important that we look to see what more the Home Office can do to help people put their claims forward.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): People accused and defamed, detained and deported, visas lost and people left destitute on unsafe allegations on discredited evidence. Yes, there were cheats—nobody is denying that—but many more were innocent. Maybe the reason why so few such cases have become apparent is that most people were not allowed to appeal and very few have been able to get to court. However, some of those who got to court, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) said, have had justices making public statements on their behalf.

I note the Minister’s reassurance, and it is welcome that this matter will remain one of her priorities if reappointed. For that reason alone, I hope she is reappointed, because many Opposition Members have invested a lot of time in this Front-Bench team taking things forward. However, this question will remain for whoever is on the Treasury Bench: when will those not guilty of any offence receive justice?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman—I think—for his kind words in saying that he hoped I would be reappointed. However, I reiterate that the allegations were not unsafe and that our approach to taking action on students has been endorsed by the courts, which have consistently found that the Home Office’s evidence was enough to prompt the action that was taken at the time. I emphasise that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary published a written ministerial statement yesterday and made it clear in his appearance before the Home Affairs Committee that he is determined to find solutions going forward that are practical for those involved and provide people with the opportunity to explain, potentially through article 8, how they can substantiate their claim to life in the UK.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): The truth remains that the Home Office does not actually know how many people were cheating. The truth remains that 35,000 people had their visas revoked as part of the Home Office and the Government’s anti-immigration atmosphere and hostile environment. That is the truth. Lots of people gave evidence to the Home Affairs Committee, of which I am a former member, and the truth is that the concerns that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) raised are absolutely valid. People have lost their livelihoods. They cannot return home because of the shame and the stigma. They have no recourse to public funds to defend themselves. They have been labelled guilty and as cheats. That is a crying shame, and I absolutely disagree with the Minister when she says this is not a shameful episode. We have had Windrush and the whole hostile environment, and TOEIC is exactly the same thing. Given that the evidence is no longer secure, is it not right that we should not deport anybody else and not force through any more deportations from our detention centres of students who have found themselves the victims of the incompetence of our Home Office and Government?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady was not here in 2014 and perhaps does not remember the pressure from Parliament to address this systematic cheating. I remind her that there have been criminal convictions, with sentences amounting to over 70 years and with more criminal trials to come. It is important to remember that this was a criminal operation on an industrial scale—-[Interruption.] The hon. Lady may chunter at me from a sedentary position, but she must remember the criminal facts behind this. However, as my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has indicated, we have recognised that some people may have innocently been caught up in it. As he said, it is our duty to make sure there is a redress mechanism for those for whom those circumstances prevailed. However, it is quite wrong to suggest that this is something to do with the hostile environment; this was to do with crime.
Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Let me help the Minister maybe. If she is absolutely confident about what she is saying from the Dispatch Box—I have to say I would be very surprised if she is—it surely she is excerpting something— the legal costs of any student who has had to pay for legal representation as a result of Home Office inadequacy? Surely that must be applicable and appropriate for those who win their appeals.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady will know that when it comes to court hearings, judges will decide whether people have a valid claim to remain in the UK. We continue to look at all the options, including whether there is a need for those who feel they have been wronged to be able to ask for their case to be reviewed. As I have said, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary intends to make further announcements in due course. However, it is right to reflect on the fact that this is a complicated issue, and it is right that we take time to make sure we get it right—[Interruption.] The hon. Lady may chunter at me from a sedentary position, but it is important that we make the right decisions and do not just give blanket promises that we will allow people to stay and will pay their costs, when it may be the case that they have cheated.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The problem is that we are no further on. Although I acknowledge the time the Home Secretary and the Immigration Minister have given to meeting Members, no remedy would be offered to people—people into the white of whose eyes we have to look in our surgeries—who had no reason whatever to cheat, given their written communication and English language speaking skills. I cannot go back to constituents such as Maruf Ahmed and tell them that we face the prospect possibly of a new Home Secretary and a new Immigration Minister looking at this afresh, and certainly of no action at all until the summer has passed. These people’s lives are being left in limbo. Acknowledging what the Minister has said about there clearly having been some cheating, and acknowledging what other Members have said about some people clearly having been inadvertently and wrongly caught up in this, surely the best thing to do now, given the passage of time and the numbers of people involved, is just to let those people sit a secure English language test afresh to give them the opportunity to clear their names, and, if they cannot, to politely ask them to return to where they came from.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that this evidence of cheating came to light in 2014, and evidence of people’s ability to speak English now may have no relation to their ability to speak English back then, given that we are five years on. However, I absolutely refute his accusation that we are no further forward. The written ministerial statement yesterday made it absolutely clear that the Home Secretary has asked officials to review Home Office guidance. The reviewing of that guidance relates to article 8 human rights claims to ensure that we make sensible decisions that are properly balanced in terms of any belief that deception was practised and of the individual’s wider circumstances. Where there are particularly compelling circumstances, we will also look at whether there is more we can do to help people put forward their claim. Given that this cheating was exposed in 2014, it is absolutely evident that people’s circumstances will have changed; they may well have established families in this country, and those children will have a right to an education here. We must put the priority of the families first. It is right that we should seek a mechanism to support people through an article 8 claim so that they can stay, when there are grounds for them to do so.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for his work on the APPG on TOEIC, which has exposed so much of what has happened. Many people, including some of my constituents, have been left in limbo. They have faced huge financial costs, and I ask the Minister whether it is possible to look at a compensation scheme for those affected and wrongly accused, because their lives have been ruined. Will she also work with higher and further education institutions to ensure that those who were falsely accused can get back to their studies and get their lives back on track?

Caroline Nokes: It is worth reflecting on the fact that many of those caught up in this attended a very small selection of colleges, which have subsequently been shut down. There were very close links between colleges being found to be operating outside their licences and these accusations of cheating. However, I must reflect on the fact that there were over 30,000 cases where there was absolute evidence that people had cheated. There were also 22,000 cases where there were questionable results. All those people were given the opportunity to resit a test. However, it is important to reflect on what my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said in his statement yesterday: we are looking at the other issues and particularly at whether we can give people who maintain their innocence another opportunity to challenge the finding of deception. However, the independent expert found that the likelihood of false matches was very small indeed and likely to be less than 1%.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister’s reference to understandable concerns, and I get the sense that she will want to see this issue concluded as quickly as possible. I have been contacted by at least six constituents who are unable to work and support their families as a result of the alleged cheating in TOEIC. They have lost their visas and been threatened with deportation, and their children’s education has been put at risk. They have not had the chance to prove their innocence. Their lives are on hold, and their families are under great strain. They are living in limbo. How reassured should my constituents feel by the Minister’s statement that they will be able very soon to get the chance to clear their name and, indeed, to get justice for what they have been through?

Caroline Nokes: As I have said, those with questionable tests were given the chance to resit the test at the time. We are clearly stating that the route via an article 8 claim to a family life is one that we wish to enable people to pursue, and they should make another claim. Obviously, I cannot stand here and comment on individual cases, but we are giving people the opportunity to make an article 8 claim, and I hope that that provides a mechanism going forward.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I am afraid that I disagree with the Minister, and agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz...
Caroline Nokes: I remind the hon. Lady of the numbers: 33,663 UK tests were invalid and a further 22,476 were questionable, so we are talking about 55,000 tests. The independent expert who carried out the review found that the likelihood of false matches was less than 1%. As my right hon. Friend the Minister, whoever that person is, meets the high commissioners from the countries in which the most people are affected, to try to sort out something positive from this mess, for the sake of the people affected and their families, and for the reputation of this country?

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for securing this urgent question following the work that we on the APPG on TOEIC have done. I know how frustrating the process is for the innocent victims inadvertently caught up in this. Professor French’s statement that false matches were less than 1% has been quoted, but he told the APPG just last month that that statement was valid only “if the results that ETS had given the Home Office were correct”, and that information is seriously in question. We need to look at that again. People need to be brought out of limbo. They have waited for the Home Secretary’s statement to the House, which did not come; we have had 306 words tucked away in a written statement. We need to know when that limbo will end for them.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman will know that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary did not “tuck away” 306 words in a written ministerial statement; it was published yesterday. My right hon. Friend said that he would update the House before recess, and he has. He has also been very clear that we want to go further. That is absolutely a priority for me and my right hon. Friend, or indeed whoever our successors may be. We will take this up as a matter of urgency with the new Prime Minister.
Dockless Bicycles (Regulation)

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

3.25 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to give powers to local authorities to regulate dockless bicycle-sharing schemes; and for connected purposes.

The sudden emergence of dockless bike schemes over the last few years has been a tale for our times—a tale of the power of tech to facilitate sharing, and of the massive and cheap production of bikes in China. It has led to new opportunities for travel in our cities, but also the prospect of people waking up to find their streets littered with bikes, with no obvious way of dealing with the issue.

I have been urging the Government to act on this for years, because my city of Cambridge was early to experience the phenomenon. Micro-mobility is a potentially exciting opportunity, and data-driven services are set to change the way we travel, but we cannot let the companies who provide these services litter our towns and cities, because, as ever, it falls to our local councils to pick up the mess—and too often the bill. In London in just the last few weeks, London councils have used byelaws to tackle the problem in the absence of help and support from this place; that help and support is the purpose of this Bill.

Let me start with the good examples—there are some—because proper regulation will foster positive innovation. For instance, healthy living can be championed; I am told that in Cardiff, the bike-share service provider nextbike is working with Cardiff Council and local health bodies to enable GPs to prescribe to patients unlimited free 30-minute hires of their 650 bikes. Cardiff Council has stated that it is “fortunate and proud to offer this opportunity”.

Other examples of initiatives include Bikeshare4all, which tackles digital exclusion and helps those without smartphones or bank accounts to access these schemes.

Dockless bicycle-sharing schemes are just part of a host of new innovations that look set to change the way we travel locally, with on-demand services linked up by tech, such as electric scooters and car-pooling apps. I shall briefly set out the current problems and then describe the ways in which the Bill and regulation could mitigate them, but first, in passing, I should point out that the concerns about electric scooters, made very real by the tragic death of Emily Hartridge, show why we need a Department for Transport that responds much more swiftly to changing circumstances. As a member of the Transport Committee, I see all too often that under this Administration, it really is the Department not for transport but for failing to keep up. I do not blame the Department; I am afraid the fault lies in lack of leadership.

The striking pictures of the dockless bike graveyards around the world that we saw in the newspapers a few years ago show how quickly the schemes can come and go. That was certainly felt keenly in Cambridge, and on an even larger scale in cities such as Sheffield, Norwich, Oxford and London. Ofo put some 2,000 bikes into Sheffield last year, causing much initial excitement among residents, but six months later they had all been removed.

In Cambridge, I had direct experience of Ofo, which was one of the first movers. Frankly, at the beginning it was very hard to find who to speak to—the bikes had turned up but it was unclear who was running the scheme—and the company’s initial relationship with the council was strained. After management changes, Ofo did engage knowledgeable local people—I visited its premises—and for a while the service seemed sustainable and effective. Sadly, Ofo began to withdraw operations from some areas of the city that it found problematic. I remember seeing an Ofo bike parked on top of a bus shelter in King’s Hedges Road. Suddenly, another operator, Mobike, appeared, adding to the confusion—and to the clutter. Just as suddenly, Ofo was gone, although not all the bikes were gone; some were still around, in various states of disrepair, and in some cases were still being used, but all too often they had been seized and broken by a small number of Cambridge youngsters who were up to no good. Frankly, it has not been a happy experience overall.

Not only do events such as those I have described prevent bike-share schemes from being a real transport solution that people can rely on, but the ending of schemes really disadvantages those who changed their routines to take advantage of the service and made the modal shift that so many in this place are keen to encourage. What message does it send when we exhort people to ditch their car and switch to public transport and bikes, but they then find the service withdrawn just a few months later?

What should be done? Franchising, with local authorities agreeing a timeframe for service provision, could rectify the situation and allow users certainty when they make decisions about their transport options. Currently, a provider can set up a scheme without permission from, or even communication with, the local authority. Franchising would also allow oversight and local authority influence over prices, so that they cannot be hiked overnight, as has unfortunately happened in some parts of the country.

As I have mentioned, bike-share schemes can organise their services to prioritise the most profitable areas and exclude deprived postcodes. I have heard stories that in Manchester one scheme continued to narrow its operational area to squeeze out the highest revenue possible. Regulation would mean that councils could agree the areas that the bikes would serve, making sure they are available in all parts of the city that need the service, not simply the most lucrative. Sustainable transport solutions cannot be a postcode lottery.

Beyond reliability and scope, bike-share companies can also swamp areas with their bikes without the permission of local authorities. Mobike put 1,300 bikes into London in July 2017, with Wandsworth Council flooded by hundreds of them without warning. Not only can this be a nuisance for local authorities to manage, but it can increase the likelihood of bikes being left in unsafe places. I was contacted by Dr Amy Kavanagh, who is visually impaired and uses a white cane. She says: “these bikes have become a constant hazard. There are at least 5 schemes now in operation in my area, and on my daily commute I am constantly forced to navigate around them, which is disorientating, difficult & occasionally painful. The bikes are...
abandoned all over the pavements, blocking access to tactile pavements at pedestrian crossings and creating a general nuisance for blind pedestrians”.

The same issue crops up for wheelchair users and for those with pushchairs. Dr Kavanagh asked me to “implore the government to properly regulate these schemes, and penalise any found creating hazards by blocking access to tactile paving at pedestrian crossings.”

We must designate where, or at least how, the bicycles can be parked, perhaps in prescribed zones or at least guided by a proper code of practice. I pay tribute to the excellent work done by Cambridge City Council to develop such a code and to Transport for London for specifying the space required on pavements to get around any abandoned bikes. The problem is not just about where bikes are parked; there is no official monitoring or safety checks on the quality and maintenance of bike-share bikes, which must raise concerns about their safety.

As the chair of the all-party group on data analytics, I note that there is no requirement for bike-share companies to use the data they collect for public good. Bike-share companies collect considerable amounts of data on user journeys. If local authorities had access to anonymised data that showed trends, that could be helpful when they design active travel infrastructure improvements. Frankly, if aggregated data is being sold for profit, as many of us suspect it is, that fact should be transparent to users. People should know what is happening to data on them. At a minimum, local authorities should be able to use the data for public good.

To summarise, the Bill would regulate the prices that can be charged to users and the area covered by the service; the number and make-up of bicycle fleets; the sharing of location data, to allow oversight of fleets and distribution and to speed up the reporting of any abandoned bikes. The problem is not just about where bikes are parked; there is no official monitoring or safety checks on the quality and maintenance of bike-share bikes, which must raise concerns about their safety.

The Chair of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With this it will be convenient to consider clause 2 stand part.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): Kew is a scientific institution of huge importance. As the global resource for knowledge of plant and fungal diversity, it plays a critical role in addressing the unprecedented scale and pace of threats facing the natural world, and indeed humanity, including the threat of climate change. It is fitting that our Secretary of State delivered his flagship environment speech last week at Kew. The fundamental purpose of the Bill is to help Kew to invest and support its vital mission in a way that also maintains and enhances this outstanding world heritage site.

The Bill amends restrictions on leases on the Crown land on Kew Gardens estate. Currently the Crown Lands Act 1702 limits leases at Kew to just 31 years; the clause amends those provisions, allowing leases up to 150 years, in line with provisions made for the Crown Estate in 1961. Clause 1(2) disappletes the 1702 Act in relation to leases granted under this Bill. The change will allow Kew to generate revenue to improve the quality of its estate and thereby to support its vital scientific mission and retain UNESCO world heritage site status. All proposals for granting long leases will be in line with Kew’s world heritage site management plan, and Clause 1(3) goes further on this point.

Clause 1(3), as amended in the other place, requires that before granting any lease the Secretary of State must be satisfied that the lease, and anything that the leaseholder is permitted to do with the property under the terms of the lease, would not have any adverse impact on the functions of the board of trustees, as set out under the National Heritage Act 1983. The Secretary of State must also be satisfied that the lease would have no adverse impact on the world heritage site status. The changes do not allow the sale of the freehold of Kew land. Furthermore, the Bill will not change the freehold position of the land, which remains with the Crown; it simply provides the ability to grant longer leases on the land.

Proposals for leases will be subject to scrutiny by Kew trustees and finally signed off by the Secretary of State. Proposals for the development of existing properties and new developments will require permission from the
local planning authority advised by Historic England in consultation with local residents and other stakeholders, as well as the Kew trustees. That is unchanged from the existing governance processes.

Clause 2 is a standard provision. Subsection (1) sets out that the Bill extends to England and Wales only, this being the legal jurisdiction for property in Kew. However, the Bill applies only to Crown land at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Subsection (2) sets out the arrangements for the commencement of the Bill, two months following the day on which it is granted Royal Assent. Subsection (3) sets out the Bill’s short title once it has become an Act on Royal Assent. This provides the abridged title as opposed to the long title found in the preamble. The short title of this legislation will be the Kew Gardens (Leases) Act 2019. For the reasons I have set out, I urge that these clauses stand part of the Bill.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to speak in support of this Bill. I will start by restating what my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) said on Second Reading—that Ministers can rest at ease, because the Opposition have no intention of dividing the House on this issue. Indeed, this is a Bill that we support and encourage the Government to get on with as fast as they can.

The Bill has been a long time in the making, with previous Bills started by the hon. Members for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) and Lord True. We are pleased that we have managed to come so far on this occasion, and we hope the Bill will pass all its remaining stages in the Commons today.

It is important to remember that the Bill goes back to the difficulties that Kew Gardens faced in 2014, when there was a potential funding crisis. The then director tracking biodiversity. The world’s largest herbaceous seeds and samples at Kew are unique and preserve for this metropolis of hustle, bustle, concrete and steel. The natural diversity that thrives in that corner of green in transitioning a way from its pure state funding model to

Luke Pollard: Kew is not only a fantastic tourist attraction, but it has also been a key pioneer in science and research for about 250 years. That is why it needs to be sustainable environmentally and economically, which is why we are looking at this legislation. Labour is supporting the Bill to allow leases to be extended from 31 years to 150 years in the hope that the expected £15 million windfall will make both the gardens and, importantly, the scientific research institution more sustainable. That is not to say that there are not questions that need to be raised now for the record, and there are a number of those—although very brief ones—regarding the clauses that the Minister has set out.

Funding is the key issue in this Bill. It is right that the Opposition continue to ask for the assurances that the Treasury will not deduct from Kew’s core funding the capital sums generated by these reforms. Can the Minister give the House an assurance that the full value of any extra revenue derived from these changes will go directly to Kew and its scientific work, not to the Chancellor? It is a worry that the Treasury will see this as a cash bonus and take some of it away or see it as an excuse to avoid approving funding streams to Kew Gardens in future.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is giving an excellent speech, showing the many virtues of Kew Gardens. Something that he has not mentioned is Kew’s important work discovering and helping with the eradication of invasive species that could have a hugely detrimental effect on plants in the United Kingdom. Do he agree that that work within Kew Gardens is also worthy of support?

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. This is not a general debate. Members should purely be discussing the clauses at this stage. There will be an opportunity later to speak on a broader range of matters. We just need to get through the clauses in Legislative Grand Committee and then there will be some amendments on Report.

Luke Pollard: Kew Gardens is not only an incredible tourist attraction, but it has also been a key pioneer in science and research for about 250 years. That is why it needs to be sustainable environmentally and economically, which is why we are looking at this legislation. Labour is supporting the Bill to allow leases to be extended from 31 years to 150 years in the hope that the expected £15 million windfall will make both the gardens and, importantly, the scientific research institution more sustainable. That is not to say that there are not questions that need to be raised now for the record, and there are a number of those—although very brief ones—regarding the clauses that the Minister has set out.

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It is important to note that the Government funding for Kew comes exclusively from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which has seen its funding slashed in recent years. Austerity is not over, regardless of what the outgoing Prime Minister may have said, and it follows that Kew has had its funding cut. Will the Minister explore getting access to funds from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Department for International Development and the Department for Education to ensure that this national treasure gets the funding it deserves to properly reflect the broad contribution and range of activities that it provides in support of the objectives in other Departments, too?

In relation to access arrangements, the Bill provides for the sale of leases of up to 150 years, which the Opposition do not oppose. However, can the Minister clarify something? Members of the public have raised concerns about whether the intention behind the sale of these leases is to sell the green spaces within Kew Gardens (Leases) (No. 3) Bill [Lords]
Gardens. I know that that is not the Minister’s intention, but given those concerns, it would be useful to be clear that this is about selling the leases on peripheral buildings to Kew Gardens and not the key assets themselves.

As we know, Kew Gardens is incredibly popular not only with local residents but with the British general public. Kew can sometimes be an expensive day out, at £42 for a family of four or £18 for one person at the gate. I recognise that local residents who live in the immediate vicinity are offered free entry, which is great if one can afford a home in the surrounding area, but that is not something that everyone can do. Will the Minister ensure that the core funding is maintained at such a level that Kew does not need to increase prices further? Not being content only with justice, will he also discuss with ministerial colleagues in DCMS and the Treasury how free entry for museums can also be funded at Kew to bring it into line with other national museums and attractions so that it can be enjoyed by everyone, regardless of their income? Does he have an understanding from Kew about what purpose the additional revenue derived from the reforms in this Bill will be put to? If so, can he state it on the record, because that would help folk to understand why this is happening?

Kew represents an absolutely essential asset to us in the fight to tackle the climate emergency, and it is right that funding is allocated in support of that. Kew is leading the way on climate change adaptation of crops. Some 50% of the calories consumed by our species come from just three big grasses—wheat, maize and rice—and that is a significant source of vulnerability within the global food system. The work being done at Kew to breed resilience into these crops is critically important and often overlooked. I would be grateful if the Minister set out whether any of the income stream that he expects to be derived from these reforms will go into its research in this area, because that would be very important.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud, who would usually have been here today, would not forgive me if I did not mention the importance of proper funding for the digitisation of the herbarium records—which, I am sure, is an issue on all our agendas. It should be, though, because Kew currently holds the world’s largest records in its herbarium. That is an opportunity to learn from a collection of species that has been gathered on a global basis over many centuries, which is especially important as species are being wiped out as part of climate change and as part of human behaviour globally. More than 7 million plants specimens are kept, including 350,000 type specimens—the original specimens on which new specimen descriptions are based. If we saw a repeat of what happened at Notre Dame, this could all be lost, which would be a significant blow to our fight to stop the climate crisis.

We need to digitise the collection as a matter of urgency. There is a £40 million cost to that work. I would welcome hearing from the Minister how progress is being made and what contributions these reforms could make to this effort. There would be another big advantage. Many people all over the world want to access the records but currently have to be able to afford to go to Kew in person. If those people, especially those from the developing world, were able to access digital records, that could be transformative in the fight against global biodiversity loss. I would be grateful if the Minister set out whether he expects any funding from the sale of the longer leases to go into these important projects.

On the basis of assurances that we have had on Second Reading and the ongoing conversations between the Opposition and the Government, we do not intend to oppose the Bill at this stage.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is great to be back once again in the English Parliament. It seems a bit similar to the UK Parliament that we usually use this building for, but it is fantastic to be here, because I now believe that the English Parliament is a treasured piece of our democratic infrastructure, where English Members of Parliament can secure debates on English-only issues. We do look forward to the many English members of this Committee coming forward to discuss and consider all the great issues of state, free from Caledonian interference.

What has the English Parliament roused itself for today? What great state of the English nation issue do we need to discuss? It is the two clauses of the Kew Gardens (Leases) (No. 3) Bill [Lords]. Some may say that the English Parliament is but an illusion, a mirage and a fake, and that this English Legislative Grand Committee does not properly represent and speak for England, but we say no to those doubters and deniers. This is not a sham Parliament. This is the English Parliament.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I wanted you to get that on the record, but this debate is about the Bill’s clauses. You have made a good point, and quite rightly. It is a well-rehearsed point that you make on every occasion, and I welcome that, but we now need to talk about the clauses.

Pete Wishart: Absolutely, Sir Lindsay, because this Bill gets to the heart of English horticulture and all the associated democratic quandaries that need to be properly resolved and considered in this fantastic English Parliament.

This Bill rightly seeks to introduce powers to grant a lease over land at Kew for a term of up to 150 years. We can almost feel all the great Members of all the ancient English Parliaments saying, “Yes, we need to make sure that this is properly considered. We wholeheartedly agree that there should be no restriction in section 5 of the Crown Lands Act 1702 in relation to a lease of land at Kew.” We can almost hear the Stuarts, the Plantagenets and the Roundheads. If they knew that section 5 of the 1702 Act currently prevents the sale of Crown land such as Kew and limits the length of leases over it to a term of 31 years, which is clearly insufficient, they would be turning in their decorative, medieval graves—they would be demanding 150 years for Kew Gardens, and by God this English Parliament is going to secure that for them today!

I want to make it abundantly clear before I go any further that I think that Kew Gardens is a wonderful institution. Of course it deserves to be treated properly, and the Bill sets out how to do that perfectly. We squatters are not members of this august body; we are not Members of the English Parliament. We get to participate in it and make speeches, but our vote is subject to the double majority—
The Chairman: Order. We are wandering again. There is a lot of time afterwards for you to speak, but we are discussing the clauses, not whether you have the right to vote. I accepted it earlier, but I will not allow that debate to be generated again. I know that you would never repeat yourself, but you are in danger of doing so.

Pete Wishart: I was just getting to the really important point. If we are going to consider the Bill properly, we have to look at what is in Kew Gardens. We have to—

The Chairman: Order. We are not going to go through individual plants. I was a little bit worried at the suggestion that we go back to the Plantagenets. As we know, Kew is a royal palace, and it was not Kew Gardens then, so I have allowed a little leeway, but I will not allow much more.

Pete Wishart: We are going from the Plantagenets to the plants, so perhaps we could skip a few generations if that would help. Maybe you could help me, Sir Lindsay. I thought we were considering all the clauses in the Bill in the Legislative Grand Committee. Is that correct?

The Chairman: Yes. Both of them—there are just two clauses.

Pete Wishart: Well, let us see what is in Kew Gardens—

The Chairman: Let us be honest: this Bill is purely about the extension of a lease—it is pretty straightforward. Other Members wanted to generate debate in other areas, quite rightly, but I want to ensure that we get through this stage, because I recognise that you want to move your amendments on Report, and it is important that we give you time to do that.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to you, Sir Lindsay, for mentioning the amendments. I understand that I cannot move them at this stage because I am not a member of this Committee. Is that correct?

The Chairman: No, you absolutely cannot.

Pete Wishart: So I cannot move the amendments at this stage. It has to be done on Report.

The Chairman: Order. It is not about you personally, but I think we are getting into a debate that neither of us really wants to have. I know you have great plans ahead, but this is what we are dealing with today. The fact is and the reality is that I am in the Chair, and I will be taking the decisions. Let us get back to where we were.

Pete Wishart: I hope that I will be able to make some sort of speech just to talk a little bit about what is in Kew Gardens, which the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) from the Labour party did.

The Chairman: Order. It is not about what is in Kew Gardens. You are a bright chap, so let us not test each other’s patience. This is about the Bill, not what is in Kew Gardens.

Pete Wishart: May I say that we very much support this Bill? We understand that the two clauses will help significantly in trying to generate some extra funds. We believe that seven residential properties may be impacted by the Bill. We look forward to ensuring that this is dealt with adequately, so this can be moved on and the money can be generated. I think that there was talk of up to £40 million that could be disposed of if this money was available to Kew Gardens, so we very much support that.

Sir Lindsay, you are obviously not going to let me talk about anything to do with the environment of this place, what we are doing in particular and how we cannot raise particular issues, with me not being a member of this Committee, so what we will do is look to bring forward our amendments later, if we can, and on that basis, possibly to divide the House when our amendments come forward. It is just unfortunate that we are not able to discuss properly what this place and this particular institution is. I see you rising to your feet again, and you are going to stop me—

The Chairman: Order. I do not want us to fall out. I do not make the rules of the House; I am here to ensure the rules are kept. If you have a problem, please do not take it up with the Chair, but change the rules of the House. It is quite simple.

Pete Wishart: I am not taking up anything. I listened to the Labour party spokesperson speaking about these particular issues, but, because I am not a member of this Committee, I am obviously not going to be allowed to do so.

I will conclude my remarks, Sir Lindsay. The last word is that it is really unfortunate that we cannot make a point about this ridiculous institution of the English Parliament. It is unfortunate that we cannot make our points about that today.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Clearly, this is the political box office today. I am not sure what else is going on outside the confines of this Chamber, but this is where the action is taking place. We have just seen it with my hon. Friend—he should be my right hon. Friend—the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) attempting to explain why the two clauses of this Bill are in fact relevant to those of us from Scotland. We are being excluded during this Legislative Grand Committee stage, which we like to see as the English Parliament. It was created by David Cameron when he introduced the EVEL Standing Orders in 2015. And now we rejoice in it, for the first time, in its full glory, and here they all are—all the Members from England who are having their say under the changes brought forward that were going to transform democracy in the United Kingdom.

The Chairman: Order. We have been here once. I have let you get your little bit in, but now I hope that we can begin to proceed.

Patrick Grady: We can, Sir Lindsay. However, I would note—I do not know whether it was deliberate—that the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) was the Whip who actually moved the motion to bring the English Parliament into being. I do not know whether
Patrick Grady: It just occurred to me that we are in a Committee, Sir Lindsay, and there is provision in the Standing Orders for the Chair of a Committee to allow Members to remove their jackets if it is uncomf ortably hot, so perhaps we could avail ourselves of that provision now. It would be rare to happen in the Chamber of the House, but we are in Committee.

The Chairman: That is in General Committees, and once again that is not the type of Committee we are in today. I wish I could allow that, because I am as desperate as other Members to remove my jacket, but unfortunately that is not the case.

Patrick Grady: Yes, we are currently meeting as the Legislative Grand Committee (England). Just as an aside, I do not think that the Scottish Grand Committee was ever permitted to use the Chamber of the House of Commons—

The Chairman: The hon. Gentleman is now stretching things, so I am going to call the Minister to speak.

David Rutley: Thank you, Sir Lindsay. I have an important announcement to make to the Committee, on the back of the significant points that have just been made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). I can confirm that, as he will see when he next visits Kew Gardens, there are goldfish there. I am glad that I can answer these important questions of the day that he raises.

I am grateful for the sincere co-operation of Members across the Committee, including the Opposition Front Benches. The hon. Members for Stroud (Dr Drew) and for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) have asked some important questions, and I am grateful to them for their support. I will respond briefly to their points. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport mentioned the concerns that the Select Committee raised back in 2014-15. In 2015 Kew published its science strategy, “A Global Resource for Plant and Fungal Knowledge”, which set out clear research priorities, including research programmes. The delivery of those programmes was all subject to funding and progress has been made on many of those priorities. Kew will be refreshing its corporate strategy and its science strategy in 2020, and that work is well under way.

The hon. Gentleman asked where the extra funding would go. I can assure him that it will go to help underpin Kew’s core priorities and what it is seeking to accomplish, in England and more widely, not least in Scotland and the wider world. I can assure the hon. Member for Stroud that the funding does incorporate significant investment in digitising Kew’s herbarium collection, which is important to him and to all of us, because we want to ensure that it is conserved securely and made globally available. Importantly, it will be available online.

The funding will help Kew in its ambition to increase further its self-generated revenue and become more financially self-sufficient. I understand that it will not be used directly to reduce funding; this is to help it achieve its ambitions to grow its funding further. What is reassuring to hon. Members is that since 2009-10 we have seen the grant in aid funding from DEFRA increase from £28.6 million to £40.8 million, and at the same
time—this is credit to the team at Kew—Kew’s self-generated income has increased from £20 million to £70 million. This is therefore part of an ambitious and much wider scheme to help move things forward.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport was absolutely right to mention green spaces. Yes, they will be protected. The leases are around peripheral buildings at this stage and will not affect the core purpose. As I have said already, the funding will be used for the core purposes that are so vitally important for all that goes on at Kew.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the entrance fee. The Natural History Museum and others are designated as national museums and are sponsored directly by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, although they do get funding from special exhibitions. Kew is different, and the admission and membership fees there help to raise much-needed funds of £18 million. The broader discussion about how that would shape things is for some part in the future and is certainly not for this Bill. It is good to know that the board is making significant steps forward.

The other point the hon. Gentleman raised was about extra funding from DCMS and elsewhere. He may be aware that it already receives £3 million of official development assistance funding administered from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Those are important issues, and it is worth noting that there will be a visit in due course so that Members from Scotland and elsewhere can come and see all that Kew has to offer. We will talk more about that later on.

The Bill is not large, but its impact is significant. It will enable the release of value from land and property at Kew Gardens through a variety of commercial options, such as long leases for residential or office use. It will also reduce maintenance liabilities and running costs and enhance the site through restoration and ongoing maintenance. It will help Kew in its ambition to further increase its self-generated revenue and become more financially self-sufficient. For those reasons, I hope that the Committee will approve the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Legislative Grand Committee (England)

4.7 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I have decided to select as manuscript amendments, to be proceeded with on Report, amendments 1 and 2 tabled in the name of Pete Wishart for the Legislative Grand Committee (England), to be debated together. Copies of a Report stage amendment paper will be available from the Vote Office shortly. In the meantime, we may proceed using the texts on the amendment paper for the Legislative Grand Committee (England).
of its being deleted almost entirely without notice, when the inevitable day comes when the EVEL Standing Orders are wiped away. They will be wiped away either because there will no longer be Members of Parliament from Scotland, because Scotland will have become an independent country—I believe that day is coming very soon—or because they are simply not convenient for whichever Government come into power and have the majority to do that, so they completely defeat the purpose for which they were set up.

EVEL was only ever set up as a convenient political tool for the then Prime Minister, David Cameron. It is ironic that we end up having this procedure on the day when his old Etonian friend finally takes power. If people are baffled by the procedure that has taken place when his old Etonian friend finally takes power. If ironic that we end up having this procedure on the day when his old Etonian friend finally takes power. If people are baffled by the procedure that has taken place today in the House of Commons, and which will continue to take place as we go back into a Legislative Grand Committee for a consent motion, goodness knows how baffled they will be when they see the drama beginning to unfold on Downing Street.

I put on record our support for Kew Gardens’ work. I was talking about the connections that exist with institutions in Scotland. The Glasgow Botanic Gardens, which are a jewel in my west end constituency, also have long historical links with Kew. Professor Sir William Jackson Hooker was appointed professor of botany in 1821 at the University of Glasgow and he went on to become a director at Kew Gardens. He was succeeded by his son, Joseph Dalton Hooker, who was also a graduate of the University of Glasgow. I was speaking briefly about the collaboration between Kew, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History and the Centre for Textile Conservation and Technical Art History at the University of Glasgow on traditional culture and practice in Pacific Islands. I suspect I am now lining up a visit to that institution in the University of Glasgow as well as a visit to Kew Gardens. That is an example of cutting-edge research and the importance of leveraging adequate finance to support it. That is one of the purposes of granting the lease set out in clause 1.

The other thing that Kew Gardens is working on, along with other institutions, is tackling climate change. There is a climate emergency, as anyone who was watching footage from the Mall 25 minutes ago will know. I was very interested to read that this year, Kew Gardens has awarded the Kew international medal to Dr Mary Robinson for her work on climate justice. Glasgow Caledonian University, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), has a fantastic research institute on the concept of climate justice. Dr Robinson is a patron of that institute and I have had the huge privilege of meeting her. I am delighted that she has been given that award by Kew Gardens. The Scottish Government have long espoused the importance of climate justice as a way of tackling climate change and helping people who have been the worst affected but have done the least to cause climate change to mitigate and tackle it. That is one reason why we wanted to make the point about the extent of the Bill and the importance of unintended consequences, and it is why we have tabled the amendments.

Amendment 1 would require a Minister to inform the Scottish Government of any business or individual based in Scotland who is granted a lease under the terms of the Bill. That could be useful and important for a number of reasons: the new leaseholder, for example, might be applying for similar development rights in Scotland, or they may be a stakeholder in an ongoing policy consultation or policy developments of some other kind north of the border. If we had a statutory reporting mechanism of the kind that we propose in the amendment, it would provide an opportunity for Scottish Government Ministers to be fully aware of what was happening.

Amendment 2 is more to the point. It is about the tax take and the sums that will accrue to the Treasury from any lease granted. One of the key purposes of the Bill, as we have heard in the various debates, is to raise badly needed funds for the gardens’ research and investment programme—I again pay tribute to the gardens’ work.

4.15 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Does the hon. Member intend to let hon. Members who have gathered in the House for the debate on youth services, or lack thereof, to discuss that important matter? The number of pages left of his speech indicates that he does not. It would be nice if he could inform the House of his intentions so that we can get to that important business.

Patrick Grady: The hon. Lady raises an important point. I do not intend to detain the House desperately long. I want to ensure that that debate can be had. It is particularly relevant, of course, to Members from England and Wales. We just had a procedure of the so-called English Parliament. This was what was supposed to happen as a result of the independence referendum and the reform of devolution, but it is patently failing, as she demonstrates. There are only two amendments, however, and I am speaking about the second, so her patience should not be tested for too much longer.

One of the key points is that the leases will raise money. That money will generate tax take, that tax take will go to the Treasury, and that money will eventually work its way into public expenditure, first through the UK consolidated fund, and then, presumably, some of it will end up in the Scottish consolidated fund through the Barnett formula. This has been the crux of our problem with the EVEL procedure from the very start—we do not see the full consequences and knock-on effects. That is why the amendment suggests that the Minister make an estimate or report on the sums expected to accrue to the Treasury as a result of any lease granted.

We were told when the EVEL procedure was introduced that we would be able to scrutinise all these things through the estimates process, but this is not the only time my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire has been called out of order and required by the Chair to resume his seat, because previously when he tried to talk about estimates, he was also ruled out of order and was unable to speak. There has been a small reform to the estimates process, which we have welcomed, but it is still not sufficient for us to have the kind of say we want. We cannot table meaningful amendments and the subjects and time available for debate are still limited.

We are demonstrating, even in the frustration of the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George), about the squeeze on the important debate to follow on youth services in England, the fundamental failures, first of the EVEL system, and secondly of the overall impact of the attempt at reform and the potential silencing of
voices from England and Wales. The EVEL procedure, sadly, is becoming a laughing stock. There is a risk of Parliament falling into the same trap. Certainly, laughing stocks will not be in short supply outside our doors and down Whitehall.

Politics is a bit chaotic at the moment, and these kinds of procedural shenanigans do not enhance that, but they serve to prove the point. In the interests of consensus and not delaying the Bill any further by sending it to ping-pong with the Lords, I do not intend to press my amendments, but I hope the point has been made, and I look forward to the Minister’s response.

David Rutley: I will be brief, because I am aware that the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) and others want to get on to the next debate. I fully understand that.

I am grateful for the support we have received from the Opposition Front Benchers. In these situations, it is important to learn lessons from other hon. Members, such as the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who, I always find, uses good humour, a probing wit and maximum respect for the subject and the people involved. I was getting a little bit nervous at the tone of an hon. Member whom I like, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). I was concerned that some of his understandable comments about the process were beginning to reflect on to Kew itself, so I am pleased that the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) clarified that that was certainly not the case. One thing’s for sure—Kew is certainly not a laughing stock. It is a much valued asset, and I am pleased he reinforced that.

Amendment 1 is not necessary and is not clearly drafted. Should information on the granting of a specific lease be required by anyone, including the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, in line with the Land Registry publication requirements, the price paid for the lease and the relevant details of the leaseholder and the lease document itself will be available from the Land Registry when the lease is registered. I think the hon. Gentleman is aware of that. It is unclear what information the amendment would require to be in any report, but information on a lease, including price and lease conditions, will be available to the public and any Government Minister.

On amendment 2, under the National Heritage Act 1983 a statement of accounts for Kew is prepared, examined and certified in respect of each financial year. This annual report and accounts is reviewed by the Comptroller and Auditor General—the head of the National Audit Office—and laid before each House. Details of Kew’s income, including Government, commercial and charitable donations, are set out in the report, which is a public document. As already stated in the other place, income received by Kew in respect of those leases will be reflected in the report.

I hope that assures the hon. Gentleman that the issue has been taken care of. He was probably already aware of the points I have made, and he has had an opportunity to make his wider points, so, for the benefit of this particular Bill and the impact it will have on the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, I ask him to withdraw his amendment.

Patrick Grady: I do not get to say this very often, but I accept the Minister’s reassurances. I think our point has been made and I look forward to seeing whether the Government Whips Office tries to use this procedure again at any point, ever. If it does not, perhaps it just needs to get rid of the whole procedure. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Consideration completed. Does the Minister intend to move the consent motion for the Legislative Grand Committee?

David Rutley indicated assent.

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

[SIR LINDSAY HOYLE IN THE CHAIR]

4.22 pm

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

Motion made, and Question proposed.

That the Committee consents to the Kew Gardens (Leases) (No. 3) Bill [Lords]—[David Rutley.]

Patrick Grady: I am just trying to beat the record of my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) for being the Member from Scotland who has spoken most frequently in the Legislative Grand Committee. It is not just the occupants of the Serjeant at Arms chair who are getting exercise; you are, too, Sir Lindsay, as you move up and down, from Chair to Chair. This should not just be a formality. It defeats the entire purpose of the process. I hope that has been heard by Members on the Treasury Bench.

Question put and agreed to.

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

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair; decision reported.

Third Reading

Queen’s consent signified.

4.24 pm

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

I am pleased to move the motion for the Third Reading of the Bill, which will provide the ability to grant leases of up to 150 years on Crown land at Kew Gardens, opening up new streams of revenue that will support this great British institution and world heritage site to flourish.

Kew is a scientific institution of towering importance, not only for the UK but as a global resource for authoritative specialist knowledge on plant and fungal diversity and its role in supporting essential ecosystems, which play a critical role in addressing the unprecedented scale and pace of the threats facing the natural world and indeed humanity. Kew is custodian of one of the largest and most diverse collections of plant and fungal specimens, living and preserved, collected from around
the world over 170 years, with 25,000 specimens added each year from the Millennium Seed Bank at Wakehurst to the herbarium at Kew itself.

These collections are of immense use and fundamental importance to science in determining how species differ and develop, and which ones are threatened by extinction—an issue of grave international concern. To restore and digitise this incredible collection to make it accessible across the world requires considerable investment, as has been set out. This Bill will enhance Kew’s ability to attract non-governmental funding, providing further income for these and other important investments.

Kew is home to more scientists than ever before, working in partnership with scientists, educators and communities to promote research, education and conservation. And Kew does much to involve the public too: we make more than 2 million visits a year to Kew and Wakehurst, and around 100,000 pupils learn from its many wonders on school trips. Across the spectrum of public engagement, Kew is fostering a wider understanding of plants and fungi and why they matter to us.

I am delighted by the support from parliamentarians in the Second Reading debate, and an invitation has been extended for interested parliamentarians across the board to visit Kew on the morning of 9 October from 8.45 to 10.45; hopefully they will have received the invitation already. I am still more delighted that the Government have had the opportunity to bring this Bill forward, building on the efforts of those who have promoted similar Bills on Kew through the private Member’s Bill route: my hon. Friends the Members for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) and for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) and Lord True in the other place. In the other place the Bill was amended by Lord Whitty to ensure robust protection for Kew’s core functions and the world heritage site. I am grateful to Members in this House and noble Lords in the other place for their contributions.

I extend my thanks to the team at Kew, including the trustees, for all they do, as well as the officials on the Bill team, my private office, the Parliamentary Private Secretaries, the Whips on both sides and of course the Clerks for their work and support on this issue.

As the Minister in the Commons with responsibility for the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, it has been an honour to lead on this Bill. Our debate in this House has enabled me to underline the global importance of Kew and the Government’s commitment to its future. I believe that the Bill’s progress through both Houses has been a model of Parliamentary process, working together effectively to ensure that the Bill is fit for purpose. I look forward to the Bill’s speedy progress towards Royal Assent.

4.27 pm

Luke Pollard: There is very little to add to the remarks I made earlier, so as I want the House to come to the next debate as soon as possible, I shall briefly say that I am grateful to the Minister for his support for the ongoing digitalisation of the herbarium records and the recognition that the income derived from the sale of these leases will go to support Kew’s ongoing work. We need more, bolder and swifter action to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss, and Kew Gardens plays an important part in Britain’s soft-power and hard-power interventions in doing that, and I wish it the best of luck in selling these leases so we can make sure that work continues.

4.28 pm

Patrick Grady: I just want to reinforce what we said earlier: we have points to make on procedures in this place, but the work that Kew does is immensely valuable. We hold it in the greatest of respect and look forward to the success of this Bill.

I also wanted to say before I was cut short earlier that we have been fortified in our contributions in the House this evening by some tea and cakes we were having in celebration of the birthday of Anne Harvey who works in the SNP Whips Office; she celebrates a very significant birthday next week, and we hope that goes on the record for her. But we wish the Bill every success.

4.28 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): It is a sad commentary on—or almost a tragic indication of—or a metaphor for—our times that a Bill like this which every sane, sensible person would support wholeheartedly seems to have run into the mire of parliamentary procedure. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) normally exhibits a warmth and amity so typical of his Caledonian cousins, and he normally extends this warm cloak of friendship over all of us and wishes nothing more than to accelerate the proceedings of the House, but on this occasion there was a smidgen of sarcasm about his words; it pains me grievously to say that. He implied that somehow this was not a matter of great moment beyond west London—although west London is obviously a place of great significance.

Kew Gardens is a global treasure store. It is a world bank and a world centre of excellence, yet the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire—one of the very few Members of this House to have exposed himself to the nation on “Top of the Pops” when he was playing with Runrig—somehow implied that this was not an issue that stretched beyond west London. I immediately thought of F. E. Smith during the Established Church (Wales) Bill, when he suggested that the eyes of the entire world would be on us. Hon. Members may remember Chesterton’s comment at the time:

“Are they clinging to their crosses, F. E. Smith, Where the Breton boat-fleet tosses, Are they, Smith? Do they, fasting, trembling, bleeding, Wait the news from this our city? Groaning ‘That’s the Second Reading!’ Hissing ‘There is still Committee!’”

This is an important Bill, and I have to say that the Minister has exhibited many of the great skills of the horticulturalists. He has been patient and allowed the Bill to grow before us. He has battened off invasive species using only organic principles—

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Stephen Pound: I was coming on to chemicals, but of course I will give way.
Gordon Marsden: In his encomium for the Minister, will my hon. Friend ask him whether he has done enough pruning?

Stephen Pound: The parliamentary secateurs—if not the snips—certainly should have been exhibited earlier on.

Kew Gardens is not just a world centre and seed bank; it is also a place of huge entertainment. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) talked about a concrete and steel part of the world that is illuminated and enlivened by this patch of green. Actually we are not all concrete and steel in west London, but we are grateful for that patch of green. Many of us will go along to the exhibitions, and not just the incredible Christmas celebrations—[Interruption.] What! I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker, but it always hurts me when a voice from the Rhondda is in any way attacking me. Kew is not just a place of great entertainment and an extraordinary resource for the world; it also has a new function nowadays. All over London we have these pop-up gardens on large, soulless council estates, and it is Kew that people go to for information on this. It is Kew that provides the details of plants that do not need a huge amount of watering or that can be resistant to problems. I am glad to see the leader of the all-party parliamentary group on horticulture and gardening, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), is on the Front Bench today. I trust that that means she has been promoted. All I can say is that Kew is for the world; it is not just for us in London. The Minister has done an excellent job, and I hope that we can leave aside the sourness and bitterness that may occasionally have been exhibited this afternoon and celebrate the glory that is Kew.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Youth Services

4.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role and sufficiency of youth services.

The Government have called this debate today as a response to the publication of the inquiry by the all-party parliamentary group on youth affairs, which was published in April. I am delighted that the Secretary of State and my colleague with the arts and culture brief are here to support me in responding to the report. I recently met the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) to discuss the report. It is a very impressive piece of work and, as I said at the time, the all-party group and its teams should be commended for it. We will of course respond in detail to all the report’s recommendations presently. Today I would like to continue that spirit of cross-party co-operation and focus on our young people, and to highlight what the Government are already doing to address the subject of sufficiency in youth work. I look forward to hearing Members’ views.

I shall turn first to the youth work curriculum and qualifications. On training for youth workers, we will renew the youth work curriculum and national occupational standards. We will also renew the entry level qualifications into youth work, and I am pleased to announce today that we will establish a new level 3 youth work apprenticeship. We know that these are particularly valuable to frontline youth workers—paid workers and, importantly, volunteers—and we are doing this because we know the power of a trusted relationship between a young person and an appropriately trained adult. This can absolutely transform a young person’s life.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the voluntary youth workers, both in my constituency of Crawley and up and down the country, who give so much of their time not just through council youth services but through other youth groups such as the Cubs, Brownies and Scouts?

Mims Davies: I know the importance of youth work interventions in my hon. Friend’s community and town, which can be seen in the football club, the charity movement and in terms of prevention. I completely agree with him regarding the uniformed youth.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The Minister is making some important comments, given that a 15-year-old was shot by somebody on a motorbike in Coventry last Saturday. The point that I am trying to make is that 87% of local authorities have cut at least one portion of their youth services over the past 10 years, and we must do something about that. To put it another way, £3 billion has been cut from youth services over the past 10 years, so how are the Government going to try to make up for that, bearing in mind that police resources are badly stretched? I am not making a political point, but we still have a shortage of policemen.

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that. The loss of one young life on our streets is one too many. When we are making decisions about local services, it is important that councillors and councils recognise
the impact of their decisions, and I have been one of those people having to make decisions in challenging circumstances. Our young people matter, and I will be coming on to that later in my comments, but I hope today’s debate will make it clear that, whether cross-Government or cross-party, we absolutely do care.

The new qualification that I mentioned earlier will be accessed by those working in a volunteer capacity—perhaps in small voluntary organisations—and they may not have the significant sums needed, so I can also confirm today that we are providing £500,000 in bursaries for potential students who would otherwise not be able to pay, benefiting up to some 400 students.

Turning to further investment, the youth investment fund has a three-year, £40 million collaboration with the national lottery, and I thank the players who are helping us to support the fund. The collaboration will benefit 90 voluntary and community organisations working in disadvantaged communities. A great example of that is the detached youth work done on the Pallister estate in Middlesbrough, which engages with 60 to 80 young people each week and has contributed to a reported decline in antisocial behaviour rates in the community. That successful model means that the delivery agency, Youth Focus: North East, is working with a local community business to establish a permanent building for young people on the estate.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Youth First provides fantastic youth services across Lewisham, and it was instrumental in bringing the community together when 15-year-old Jay Hughes was murdered last November. However, it is chronically underfunded owing to cuts to our local authority, so it cannot provide the detached youth workers that the Minister just mentioned. Does she agree that we must invest in youth services, so that they can play that vital role in tackling youth violence and supporting our communities?

Mims Davies: I agree with the hon. Lady. It is far too easy in council chambers to overlook our young people, because we perhaps do not think about them when making difficult decisions. I have heard about the benefits of detached youth work, and it is vital that the Government look to support it. I have already made a case to the incoming Prime Minister about the importance of our young people. It is absolutely right that we all do our utmost to provide youth services, and I will continue to do that while I am in this role.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) has already mentioned uniformed youth groups. We invested £5 million in 2018-19 through the uniformed youth fund, supporting the Sea Cadets, Boys Brigade and Girlguiding, to expand opportunities to take part into the most deprived wards. Over 10,000 new places for young people have been created as a result. There is another great example in Liverpool, where the Fire Cadets have a new unit in schools for young people with autism. This funding is enabling uniformed youth organisations to reach out, modernise their websites and improve their training materials.

What has happened in the National Citizen Service? To date, 500,000 young people have taken part, and 100,000 more will do so this summer. That means an additional 15 million hours of volunteering via the NCS.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): It is good to hear that there are some isolated examples of youth work going on, but in my county of Derbyshire every single youth worker has been made redundant—ironically, on the same day we had our first knife stabbing by young people, in Buxton. That is what is happening up and down the country. Isolated examples—the NCS lasts for two weeks—are no replacement for the long-term relationships and commitment that youth workers give young people around our country.

Mims Davies: It is vital that our young people have an opportunity to be involved in the NCS, but it is also vital that we have other interventions. I do not see this as a case of one or the other, although I understand the point the hon. Lady is making.

I confirm today ongoing funding of £280,000 to six of our most promising Centre for Social Action initiatives, to help them to grow. That includes support for the Grandmentors initiative run by Volunteering Matters, which uses mentoring to help our young care leavers. This complements the existing outstanding work done by civil society and our local authorities.

Local councils have a statutory duty to provide services for our young people. No one can deny that there has been an operational challenge in the financial environment for that provision, but as we perhaps heard just now, open access to youth services has in some cases been far too easy to target for cuts. Credit should therefore go to those local authorities that have helped to set up new structures, attracting new partners and direct funding into this space. We have seen fantastic examples of this from Devon to Doncaster, in Manchester and on Merseyside. That is why—this is key—we have launched a review of guidance for our local councils on the statutory duty to provide youth services. The Government want to see a more accessible approach, without putting any underfunded burdens on our local authorities.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for her kind words about our meeting. I welcome the fact that the Government have agreed to review the statutory guidelines and how councils are fulfilling their duties. Will she ensure that the guidelines set out a basic right for every young person to access youth services every night of the week, or will this review just be a wishy-washy statement of principles for councils to follow?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who I know is passionate about this area and absolutely doing all the right work to promote the positives available for our young people. It is absolutely right that they should know what they can expect from this Government and from the community. I will come on to that in relation to the youth charter, but let me briefly address the charter now. It is absolutely right that our young people get a chance to grow, mature and find things for themselves, and that is absolutely about a youth offer. That is why, when I came into this post, it was clear to me that a youth charter—a youth offer—setting out what our next generation could and should expect to be addressed. I am very pleased to be taking that work forward, and I will say more about it shortly.
We are committed to keeping our young people safe, and tackling serious violence is a priority for this Government and our communities. At April’s knife crime summit, at which the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) joined us, all Government Departments were at the table, as were Sport England, the Premier League, sporting governing bodies, and representatives of the arts, culture and civil society. They all agreed to work together to strengthen the sporting offer to tackle serious violence and other problems. The Home Office has launched a £200 million endowment to fund grassroots interventions. That is in addition to the £22 million early intervention youth fund. This week, I announced that Sport England will provide a further £400,000 of national lottery funding to 49 projects to deliver strong, targeted sports offers ahead of the summer holidays.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for that, and I have to say that Newham has in the past benefited from such projects. However, the applications were due in yesterday, and the money has to be spent by March. It is a complete waste of money to try to do these projects in an ad hoc way, year after year. We need a proper, costed programme that runs from the beginning of the year and can be planned properly, instead of squandering the money that is put in place.

Mims Davies: I agree. A concerted effort for our young people through long-term funding is the way forward. Salami-slicing is not helpful in this situation. I am sure that my officials will have heard that. This offer is about knowing what works, amplifying that, spreading it out, and supporting it.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab) rose—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) rose—

Mims Davies: I will take an intervention from the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), and then I will try to limit the interventions I take, because I want to hear from other Members.

Chris Bryant: I am grateful. Young people from the poorest backgrounds are four times more likely to suffer a traumatic or acquired brain injury. There is lots of evidence that those teenagers who do, and who have less developed executive functions in their brain—though some parts of their brain will already be very well developed—end up being the youngsters who get excluded from school, because they appear to be misbehaving and end up in the criminal justice system. Is it not vital that we make sure that those teenagers, particularly those from poorer backgrounds, get the medical and rehabilitation support that they need, so that they do not end up in the criminal justice system?

Mims Davies: The hon. Gentleman is right. If we intervene once a young person is in the criminal justice system, we are in some ways intervening far too late. That does not mean that there cannot be change from there, but we should be intervening sooner. This week, I have been working with the Minister for safeguarding, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), across the whole sector, on making sure that people with a challenged background get a chance to get into employment. It is absolutely right that the hon. Member for Rhondda should mention early intervention.

I do not want to undersell the impact of what Sport England is doing; through that, we will reach more than 3,000 additional young people under 25, giving them key skills, coaching and further opportunities. These projects demonstrate the power of sport to inspire. Culture, arts and heritage can also offer young people in our communities a way out, a new chance, and take them away from the risk of violence and gangs.

I have been looking in the Department for a concerted effort on discrimination and racism and the power of sport to inspire. Today, the Football Association, the Premier League and the English Football League have written to me to set out their next steps on tackling racism and discrimination, following the summit I called earlier this year. They have set out stronger education measures, improved reporting systems and better training and support for referees and stewards. There is more to do, and I expect the issue to be at the top of the agenda for the whole of football in the next season.

Let me turn to the other interventions we have made regarding the school sport and activity action plan. A third of our young people—especially girls, children from poorer backgrounds and some children from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds—are doing less than half of the recommended amount of exercise each day. We have published our new school sport and activity
action plan, which will ensure that young people are able to get the benefit of 60 minutes of daily sport and physical activity.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The Minister raises an interesting point. We need joined-up Government, with the involvement of education, including further education, which has lost a lot of money. Often, if we can channel a young person into further education, they can make their mind up and may want to go to university. It is a joined-up process and that is the approach that has to be taken.

Mims Davies: I will come to that joined-up approach shortly, because it is absolutely key.

We must ensure that young people are able to have a say in the policies that affect them. I have launched three further cross-Government youth voice projects, which enable young people to input directly into policies and design them, alongside officials and politicians. Whether it is hearing from the young people who attended the recent summit on serious violence or our youth steering group that advises the Government on environmental action, we are making sure that young people are being listened to.

The theme of today’s debate is the sufficiency of youth services. I have outlined some of the things we have done and the plans we have made. In April this year, the Government announced that we would develop a youth charter. We need to ask ourselves whether we are sufficiently ambitious on behalf of our young people. Through the charter, we will be. We will bring together policies from across Government and listen to views from young people, those who work with them and, importantly, those who care for our young people. I wish to say a huge thank you to the youth sector organisations that have shared in and embraced the opportunity to work with us to develop the charter so far. It is a commitment to a generation, for a generation. I want the youth charter to have a clear message for our young people: we back them and we are listening to them—to all of them. We are not stereotyping them and we are not limiting them, and we will make sure that if they speak or act in a different way, we will hear them.

Every young voice matters. The Government are determined that all young people will be supported to reach their full potential. We want this country to be the best place in the world to be young.

4.53 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I thank the Government for scheduling this general debate on the role and sufficiency of youth services. The Opposition welcome any new moneys announced today, because they are certainly needed for the youth-work sector. I join the Minister in welcoming the all-party group’s inquiry on youth work, which was published earlier this year, and commend my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) and the National Youth Agency for their role in that important body of work that will have a lot of influence on this debate.

Youth services play a vital role in our communities. They provide a safe space for young people to be creative, develop friendships and learn new skills, all with a trusted adult. However, this vital public service and the youth-work profession continue to be misunderstood and under-appreciated. Youth work is often misportrayed as sport, which is not what it is. Too often, youth services are depicted as a meeting place for young people to knock a ball about on a battered ping-pong table, yet that could not be further from the truth.

Youth work is a distinct educational process that focuses on young people’s defined needs through non-formal learning. Its key purpose, as outlined in the recent all-party group inquiry, is to facilitate young people’s learning. Its key purpose, as outlined in the recent all-party group inquiry, is to facilitate young people’s personal, social and educational development, to enable them to develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their full potential.

Youth services also play a crucial role in interacting with other services for young people where additional needs or opportunities are identified from formal education and social services to criminal justice, healthcare, housing and benefits. However, over the past decade, the Government have failed to recognise those benefits and have dismantled the entire infrastructure of youth services.

Since 2010, local authority spending has fallen from £1.1 billion to just £384 million, a 70% reduction in real terms. In my home county of Lancashire—you might know it well, Mr Deputy Speaker—that reduction rises to 78%. In the Minister’s own patch of Hampshire, the scale of cuts is even higher at 95%. As a result, at least 760 youth centres have closed their doors up and down the country. However, there are still fragments of excellent provision across the country. Labour councils have sought to protect services and their communities and, where funds have been cut, have innovated to continue to deliver a service for young people.

Barking and Dagenham Council is soon to open London’s first youth zone to offer first-class facilities to thousands of young people. Despite cuts in the council’s budget, it is innovating to ensure that all young people still have access to youth services. However, the youth service in England no longer exists as it did—as a service provided in every local authority area—with its specialist team of professionals and dedicated buildings and projects for young people.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is touching on the really important point of the sustainability of youth services, which depends on adequate workforce training. One impact of the deep cuts to local authorities has surely been the inability to continue the sort of training that we have seen in the past. Does she agree that, although we may welcome the 400 posts that I think I heard the Minister talk about earlier, that still falls well short of what is needed to provide an ambitious workforce and that we really need to focus on workforce sustainability as part of any strategy?

Cat Smith: My hon. Friend pre-empts a future section of my speech, where I go into detail about that. He is absolutely right and I agree with every word that he said about the sustainability of the workforce. In many ways, youth work is the first public service to have been dismantled. The uncertainty over local government funding creates growing challenges for local authorities to innovate and to provide for these services. It is a testament to our voluntary sector that provision has not completely collapsed under the weight of these cuts. I want to pay tribute to traditional organisations such as the Sea Cadets, the
Cat Smith: I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point, particularly with regard to rural services. Young people in rural areas can feel particularly isolated because when the school bus drops them back off in their village at perhaps 3.30 or 4 o’clock, that is it until the next morning. That is increasingly the case, as those are some of the areas where we have seen youth provision really drop off a cliff.

Ruth George: My hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) have made excellent points about services in rural areas. High Peak is another rural area that is now being targeted by county lines drugs gangs. Our young people desperately need youth services at the exact time when they are being decimated and taken away.

Cat Smith: My hon. Friend makes an excellent plea for youth services. There is a particular need in areas that are being targeted by county lines, which are having an impact on young people’s lives. This really highlights the importance of today’s debate. I am pleased to see that so many Members want to speak, so with the permission of other Members, I will make some progress with my speech so that we can hear from Back Benchers.

The loss of this open access youth work has had a devastating impact on young people’s lives because they simply cannot get any of the support they need when they do not meet the threshold for the targeted interventions. As a result, young people have lost the role models—who can build a trusted relationship with—who can empower them to realise their own strengths and divert them away from potential harms. They have lost safe spaces: somewhere to go outside school hours to develop social networks and friendship groups outside school and to have a sense of belonging and ownership in their local area. They have also lost opportunities—to learn new skills, to take part in social action projects and perhaps even to re-engage with education.

As Parliament goes into recess and schools go into their summer holidays, the impact of these cuts on young people’s lives will be felt to an even greater extent. I welcome the Minister’s announcement in her opening remarks of £400 million funding for sport this summer, with the national lottery, but it strikes me as being too little too late, given that the schools are breaking up for their summer holidays this week, as we are doing here in Westminster. In this context, it is hardly surprising that we are seeing chronic levels of loneliness and mental ill health and a rising number of children and young people tragically involved in knife crime and gangs. This is supported by research conducted by the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime, which found that local authority areas suffering the largest cuts to spending on young people have seen the biggest increases in knife crime.

The Government decision to slash youth services for the sake of short-term cash savings is reckless and short-sighted. Last Friday, I visited Central Lancaster High School in my constituency, where I discussed with the head the challenges the school faces in supporting young people without having a youth service to pick up the pieces outside the school gates. The head told me that the school has had to invest heavily in student support officers, behaviour mentors and alternative
provision education programmes—for example, the Queensberry alternative provision programme, which works with students at risk of exclusion to engage them in projects and activities and which has led to a massive shift in their attitudes and behaviours, with one year 10 student saying, “Queensberry helps me to think before I do”, and another saying, “I think more about the impact of what I do.” Such programmes allow young people the space to reflect, which is not often found in the school environment. However, this school-based provision comes at significant cost to the school budget, which is already diminishing in real terms year on year.

Henry Smith: Will the hon. Lady acknowledge that the National Citizen Service, as I witnessed last Friday in my constituency, is enabling young people to tackle knife crime, for example, as they are doing in my local programme? While there is a lot more to do, that is already having a positive impact.

Cat Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Last week, I visited a National Citizenship Service programme at Lancashire and Morecambe College and, as he probably did in his constituency, spoke to the young people there about issues of democracy, for example. I think that he will have picked up on similar concerns. Young people are deeply concerned about knife crime. The NCS offers a space where young people from different schools and different areas of the community can mix and, we hope, build lasting friendships—but in itself, of course, it is not youth work because it just is for a period of weeks over the summer.

A major flaw in the current system is the lack of statutory protections for youth work. The previous Labour Government attempted to strengthen the legislation by placing a duty on local authorities to secure sufficient access to positive activities for young people. However, because there is no legal definition of what access to provision should look like, this is open to interpretation and can be ignored by local authorities when faced with significant concerns. Young people are deeply concerned about knife crime. The NCS offers a space where young people from different schools and different areas of the community can mix and, we hope, build lasting friendships—but in itself, of course, it is not youth work because it just is for a period of weeks over the summer.

Labour has a strategy to rebuild our communities and guarantee high-quality youth work in every local authority. We will put forward a bold vision that is fit for the modern age—one that brings together fragmented services, celebrates diversity of provision and can respond to the challenges facing young people today. The next Labour Government will deliver properly funded youth services, backed by new legislation. Local authorities will be responsible for setting the strategic vision for what they want to achieve, working alongside local partners and young people to shape provision in the local area and ensure sufficient access to high-quality youth work provision. Local authorities will be required to establish and facilitate the delivery of local youth partnerships, which will bring together stakeholders from across the community, including young people themselves, to map how they can best support young people’s needs. That will be overseen by a strengthened national body for youth work, to ensure that such partnerships and provision is in place.

We must remember that austerity is a political choice, not an economic necessity. Our nation is the fifth richest in the world, and while axing millions from services for young people, the Tories have handed out billions of pounds in corporation tax giveaways. We will not sit back and allow the Tories to fail our young people. Instead, we must be aspirational in our outlook and recognise that, with the right support and services available, our young people can reach their full potential. What we want to build is a nation for young people where they feel safe and secure and are treated fairly, supported in the present and ambitious for their future.
5.10 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak briefly, and I thank the Government for committing time to this important debate. There are one or two competing political priorities on the agenda today, but this remains a hugely important issue.

I hope the House will indulge me for a second as I seek to take my moment in history by perhaps being the first to congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), our new Prime Minister, on his appointment to the role and his barnstorming speech outside No. 10 earlier. From that speech, I took a number of positives that relate to this debate. He spoke about his commitment to education and to policing and supporting our forgotten towns, which is important to me as the Member of Parliament for the town of Mansfield. All those things float around the edge of this discussion about our offer for younger people and the support we give them through things like youth work, so I hope that this, too, will form a key priority for him in government.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Have you got a job yet, Ben?

Ben Bradley: Maybe now.

As vice-chair of the all-party group on youth affairs, I have looked at the role and sufficiency of youth services closely over the last year, alongside colleagues from across the House and the brilliant National Youth Agency. Access to quality youth work and services for young people is fundamental, particularly in areas of significant deprivation such as Mansfield and Warsop. The reduction in services in recent years is well documented.

The APPG on youth affairs led a year-long inquiry to understand the role that youth work plays and the impact of recent changes. We had a brilliant time visiting some fantastic services in different parts of the country. I enjoyed spending some quality time with the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle). Although we do not always find total consensus on every issue, not least the things that I just mentioned, this is probably one on which we broadly agree. We might articulate it in slightly different ways; we will find out a bit later.

It was plain to see that the quality and the existence of these services is variable at best. The fabulous multimillion-pound Myplace centres that we visited in Mansfield or the brilliant YMCA facilities that we visited in Lincolnshire contrast with tumbledown scout huts and even minibus-based youth centres in many cases. Even in my own county of Nottinghamshire, the service is hugely varied.

My takeaway, informally, has been that the accessibility and locality of these services is far more important than fancy buildings. If young people cannot reach them, they are wasted. The Garage, which the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown visited, is connected with the Garibaldi School in my constituency. Although it is literally a scout hut on the side of the road and has needed significant refurbishment recently, the fact that it is next to the school and is local, so that people can get there, makes it almost a more positive contributor to the area, which is a particularly deprived part of my constituency, than the big, fancy Myplace centre in the middle of town.

I urge the Government to consider the possibility of linking up school facilities with youth work organisations and qualified youth workers. They need to be separate from schools, but basing those services there or nearby makes them as accessible as possible. The Shed and Vibrant Warsop are brilliant examples of how those services can be brought closer to home and into the local community. Warsop, which is a small town on the edge of Mansfield, did not have any youth services whatsoever until the voluntary sector stepped in and brought those services to the local estate, which made them much more accessible. It is a really positive scheme.

In April, the all-party group set out clear recommendations on what needs to be done. The report is detailed, and I encourage colleagues who have not had a chance to read it to get hold of a copy. It found that too many young people do not have the family support or the social networks they need to adequately support them into adulthood. Youth services can provide the important safety net for young people at risk of going down the wrong path. For too many, they are the only secure place that offers them safety and continuity.

In the UK, we are lucky to have a proud history of charities and organisations working with young people—from uniformed groups, such as scouts and girl guides, to social enterprises and local charities. I have been pleased to see Government support particularly for uniformed services and the extra funding for those services, as well as the many positive elements that my hon. Friend the Minister mentioned in the National Citizen Service.

I have met so many brilliant volunteers and youth workers in Mansfield who make a hugely positive impact on young people. I know the importance of youth workers in particular, and the importance of such intervention services was absolutely clear from the inquiry. It was brought home to me recently in a panel discussion with young people, organised by the British Youth Council. We talked about the proactive and preventive approach to youth services, which is so much more effective and cost-effective than the kind of crisis management we so often find ourselves doing.

Whether it is the trusted adult who steers a young person away from gangs and violence or who provides a safe space in the community for activities that forge friendships and skills for young people to get on in life, youth workers transform lives. Providing vital early intervention services keeps people out of trouble, frankly. We have so many discussions about some of the major societal challenges we face, such as knife crime, but youth services, particularly with trusted youth workers who forge connections with young people, can have a huge impact on those issues.

In many areas, such as Mansfield, we need to do more to support youth services and ensure that especially the most vulnerable young people have access to youth workers and services. Those services can help people feel supported and less isolated. They can improve mental health, tackle loneliness and, as I have said, steer children away from gangs and crime. It is a prevention service, and as we heard today in Prime Minister’s
questions, prevention is better than cure. It is better for individuals, families and communities, and for the public purse as well.

The loss of youth services can lead to significant costs—social and economic—in later years if young people do not receive support early enough. Through my own role on the Education Committee, I know the statistics on how many young people who do not get access to those services or to early intervention end up excluded or in the criminal justice system. It is very clear across all these sectors that prevention is the key. Youth services can play a key role in filling the gap in a more effective and cost-efficient way than needing expensive crisis services later on.

A key recommendation from the all-party group report was that we need clear statutory guidance that defines a minimum and protected level of youth service. I am pleased that the Government have initiated a review of that statutory guidance, with the National Youth Agency joining forces with the Local Government Association to lead on the Government consultation. I know it is due to report later in the year, and it should inform our local choices and local youth partnerships to strengthen those services. That review of what is a sufficient youth offer is very welcome and much needed. I am grateful to the Minister for securing the overdue review and renewal of youth work qualifications, which we have discussed, led by the NYA. I appreciate her update in her opening remarks on the progress on the funding for that, which I inquired about during PMQs a few weeks ago. I understood, as of a few days ago, that it was still awaiting the final sign-off. I do not know whether she can confirm that it is entirely done and sorted.

Mims Davies indicated assent.

Ben Bradley: The Minister is nodding, which is brilliant news. I know that the NYA will be relieved to hear that.

There needs to be a consistent understanding of the level of service, and suitable data should be available to answer the question of whether there is sufficient youth work in any particular area. For example, we do not know the sector’s balance between private, public and voluntary sectors. It is important to explore the changes that have happened over the last decade and examine exactly what we have in place now before we decide whether that is good enough. The reinstatement of the NYA audit, which determined levels of local authority provision, would help us to start to understand the picture at a national level. The last of these reported back in 2008, and things have clearly changed in our provision and youth work since then.

We have witnessed a reduction from 75% to just 25% of the youth workforce holding qualifications in youth work, and we have seen a nearly two-thirds drop in the number of new youth work graduate and postgraduate students since the peak. We are now in a position where there are not enough professionals in the sector, and we need to tackle this issue. With preventive services, as with anything we are trying to reinvigorate—for instance, the recruitment of teachers or doctors—the time involved in training people and putting in place qualifications to get people into the sector can be too long. We need to be looking now at how we support those qualifications, to ensure that if the Government do go ahead with plans for something, such as having youth workers more closely related to schools and tying those things together, we have youth workers trained and ready to deliver that. Pushing for those qualifications, and for the funding needed for their renewal, is absolutely vital.

I do not want to bang on for much longer—

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): My hon. Friend is not banging on at all; he is making an important speech, and I congratulate him on the report. On the question of qualifications and the recruitment of youth workers, I completely agree. We need well qualified youth workers, because we have lost many of them. Would he support a scheme along the lines of Teach First, Step Up to Social Work or Frontline, for example, whereby good graduates would be given fast-track training in youth work and then deployed in more challenging areas where they could do some really good work, whether on gang violence, the troubled families programme or similar issues? We need to recruit really good people and then make sure that they have the right skills to do what is quite a challenging job.

Ben Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I recognise his commitment to children and young people, particularly as a former Minister—I know that any time I take part in such a debate, he is there contributing to it, which is very welcome. I totally agree with him. Securing and renewing qualifications is vital. Any way that we can find interested, aspirational and talented young people who are capable of engaging in this sector, whether they are talented graduates or people volunteering in youth work right now, who we can perhaps fast-track through the system to ensure that we have the right skills and qualifications in place, is very welcome.

I want to highlight UK Active’s proposals for opening school facilities during the summer holidays to ensure that there is provision for young people. We see spikes in so many social issues over the summer, when children are not engaged in statutory education. A huge proportion of our sports facilities, for example, are locked away behind school gates in the evenings, at weekends and during the summer holidays, which is unbelievable when we consider some of the incredible facilities available. I know that the Minister has engaged in that proposal before. I urge the Government to continue to work with UK Active to open up youth provision in the summer holidays.

I want to mention a local social enterprise called Life Skills Education, which runs a programme called DARE. There are no local colleagues in the Chamber right now, but at some stage in the past 25 years they will probably all have gone through a DARE programme. When I did it at school, it was about drug and alcohol education. My dad used to come into school on his police motorbike and we all used to go into the playground to talk about the police and what they did—it was all very exciting.

That early intervention and education in schools has been revived in recent years in Nottinghamshire. Life Skills Education, which is based in my constituency, has just had a load of funding from the police and crime commissioner so that it can expand into every school in Nottinghamshire, getting in there with early intervention to deal with things such as knife crime, hate crime and the massively expanded curriculum now offered in
Nottinghamshire’s schools. I just wanted to highlight that programme and encourage the Minister, if she gets the opportunity, to support it.

With the youth work census, which looks in detail at what services exist and how they are structured, identifies gaps and creates statutory guidance and a clearer definition of what a sufficient level of youth work actually looks like, we can ensure that youth workers and youth services can meet the needs of young people across the country.

I thank the Minister for her personal interest in and support for youth work in the APPG’s inquiry. I welcome the investment she spoke about for supporting those qualifications and interventions, and the youth charter. I urge the Government currently taking shape around us this afternoon to ensure that they do all they can to support youth work, by implementing the youth work census and ensuring that we fund local services properly.

5.23 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Between January 2017 and March 2018, nine young people were killed in my constituency. Most of them died as a result of knife crime. That number represents only the very worst cases. It does not include young people who have been injured. It does not include the children being exploited, and trafficked, along county lines. It does not include the videos of teenagers driving around our local streets with their faces covered, brandishing knives and threatening violence. It does not include the fear that all these things breed in my community: the fear of parents sending their children to school; the fear of teachers with a duty of care; and the fear—real, palpable fear—of the young people themselves.

I have spoken several times in this place about knife crime and what we need to do to stop it. I have been making seven key demands of Government. Some are responsive, such as peripatetic mental health units that would help families and communities deal with the trauma of a violent attack once it has happened, but some are preventive, such as establishing new and trusted reporting systems for young people, so that we can work with young people to stop these tragedies happening.

My demand for proper youth investment is different, because youth services can do both—they can play a role in the prevention of crime as well as providing a comfortable, safe place. Spending time with a youth worker enables children to build up resilience. It allows them to test ideas and to develop coping strategies. It allows them to get support, to talk, to share and to question. When they are facing problems, a youth service helps a young person connect with agencies that can help them. Youth services can often broker that and provide trust in those agencies. Alternatively, a youth service can simply give advice from a trusted adult.

Youth services are about so much more than just fixing crime. I remember going to a youth club when I was young. It was at St John’s in north Woolwich. I received validation of my rights as a young person that I did not get from anywhere else. I do not think I would have got the confidence that has eventually led to me being here without that youth service. I want to publicly and belatedly thank Esther Wilson, Anne King, Nick Nicholls and Dave Butcher. I would not have made it without them.

Youth workers provide a really important education to young people. That is not a formal, academic education, but an education in skills that are massively important. For some young people, youth clubs will be the only place where there are older people who they can trust. Those adults can help all young people to learn to interpret the world with their peers and to interact with adults, as well as providing them with role models and safe places for creativity, cultural expression and cultural exploration. They allow young people to develop so many different skills. It is what policy wonks call cultural and social capital—basically, many of the things that middle-class children hopefully take for granted.

Since 2010, we have lost so many excellent youth workers. Across this city, since the 2011-12 financial year, 104 youth centres and projects have permanently closed and a massive 562 youth workers have been put out of a job. That is a tragedy, because it has led to tragedy. That is why I am delighted that the London Borough of Newham is pursuing a huge expansion of youth services. There will be £1.4 million of investment and 33 new full-time roles—potentially the largest ever recruitment of youth workers in the UK. Our young people in Newham have been asking for that. Fortunately, the Labour Mayor and the Labour council have listened to them.

The new services will be up and ready by the end of this year, and I know they will make a huge positive difference. We only need to listen to the testimony of children to understand why. Newham parents whose children spent last summer with youth clubs and council-funded youth services said it was the best summer their children had had. One young man said:

“The youth centre was a place that they offered me support, and the only worker who didn’t judge me, and actually attended all my meetings, was the youth worker. She never gave up on me, even when I gave up on myself.”

Those life-changing and, I suggest, life-preserving experiences need to be available to children across the country. How about the Minister matching the Labour promise of statutory youth services in every single area, so that no child misses out? Once she does that, she must ensure she does not pass the youth service buck without the bucks to match.

5.29 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown). She reminds us that in a digital world, where more and more young people spend time with their iPads or iPods and so on—as we all increasingly do—the need for them to have exposure to situations that those of us who were brought up in an analogue world took more for granted is extraordinarily important.

I want to make some remarks about the situation for youth services today, and I thank the Minister for her enthusiasm at the Dispatch Box. As shadow skills Minister, it was particularly interesting for me to hear her talk about the establishment of a new level 3 apprenticeship in this regard. I obviously welcome that, but we need to take into account the fact that many of the people who have previously qualified as youth workers have, for the reasons that we have discussed today, simply been unable to find jobs in that area. Another genuine point I make to her is that this needs to be taken forward very carefully because what happens at levels 1 and 2—I do
not know whether the intention is to do anything preparatory in this area—is critical in getting the right sort of people to do this sort of thing.

I praise the very comprehensive speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), the shadow Minister for youth affairs. She put her finger on so many of the disappointments and failings of recent years. She gave statistics on the amount by which spending had gone down and everything else, and all this is in the context of councils having had some of the worst cuts in recent years. I think particularly of my council in Blackpool, where we have lost about £700 million of funding. I say to the Minister and her departmental colleagues—her Department also focuses significantly on seaside and coastal towns, because of tourism issues—that small unitary authorities, such as mine in Blackpool, have suffered the most from that. The heavy toll of those cuts on children’s services, on social care and children’s care and on the number of young people who come to towns such as Blackpool, sometimes looking for the proverbial streets that are paved with gold, but finding that that is not the case, is an additional burden and challenge for my local authority. That is why I welcome what my hon. Friend said, not just today but on other occasions, about expansion.

The main purpose of youth services under a Labour Government will be to provide non-formal education through personal, social and political development. It will be absolutely clear that young people will be at the centre of determining a new statutory youth service, because the issue is the same as it is in education. Too often, young people feel and find that education is done to them, or sometimes for them, and not with them. That needs to be taken on board, whether we are talking about the National Citizen Service or any of the other initiatives that the Government have introduced.

It is also important that local councils partner locally with organisations to develop a diverse universal offer to establish and submit long-term plans for local delivery, but they can do that only if there is significant security from long-term funding. That has not been the case with Governments since 2010. There is a whole list of things, including rebuilding the workforce, long-term proportionate evaluation and so on, that we need to take forward. I hope not least that the impetus provided by the most excellent report from the all-party group on youth affairs, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), will have made waves for this Government, and will do the same for the new Government. As many have said, we wait to see the colour of their money in this area.

There has been some discussion about the value of the NCS this afternoon. Clearly, it has done some useful work for lots of people. I would cite one of my former Blackpool apprentices who took part in two or three NCS initiatives that inspired in her an interest in public affairs and a confidence that allowed her to go to work in a pressurised office environment and has now taken her on to a university degree. There are such individual examples, but, given how much money the NCS has been getting, compared with the number of young people it has delivered for, it is not the ideal solution. This needs to be taken onboard.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who is no longer in his place, and others have referred to the work that voluntary youth organisations have had to take on because of the lack of funding. I think of uniformed groups such as the Scouts, Girl Guides, Cadets, the Woodcraft Folk, and so on. I pay tribute to the Scouts Association. I pay tribute to Ann Limb, the first woman chair of the association, who is a long-standing friend of mine, and to Matt Hyde, the chief executive, for the way they have reinvigorated and energised the association for the 21st century. I particularly praise their skills for life programme. We have talked about informal learning and inspiration. Those skills for life are precisely the sorts of enabling skills that young people need not just in school but out of school.

Tim Loughton: As one of those who helped to design the National Citizen Service, I am obviously rather protective of it. I pay tribute to Matt Hyde, as has the hon. Gentleman. The Scouts have been very supportive of the NCS, and obviously the NCS has had a lot of investment, but will he take it from me that that should not be seen as displacing investment from youth services? It is not just the cost of the project; the NCS is a recruiting tool for youth leaders of the future, including for the Scouts. The data also shows that those who have been through the NCS achieve better results at school.

The situation in the careers services runs in parallel to the way in which Government have generally treated the youth service. The argument is the same. No one disputes that individual initiatives, properly carried out, can make a great difference, but they are no substitute for a long-term process, which is what we need. My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood on the Front Bench talked about the fall in the number of degrees, including graduate certificates and postgraduate diplomas, in youth work programmes. That is inevitable when people cannot find decent jobs and are not given a structure.

I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) that not every space has to be a five-star structure. There has been some discussion about the value of the NCS this afternoon. Clearly, it has done some useful work for lots of people. I would cite one of my former Blackpool apprentices who took part in two or three NCS initiatives that inspired in her an interest in public affairs and a confidence that allowed her to go to work in a pressurised office environment and has now taken her on to a university degree. There are such individual examples, but, given how much money the NCS has been getting, compared with the number of young people it has delivered for, it is not the ideal solution. This needs to be taken onboard.

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Gordon Marsden: I entirely accept that, and I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman, who was an extraordinarily good Children’s Minister. He is absolutely right to make the point about the wave effects, if I can put it that way. I am not saying that the NCS has not done good work; I am saying that it is not to be regarded as a substitute for the sort of statutory process we will need in the future.

I am very proud to be a Scout ambassador in Blackpool. I pay tribute to the Scout district commissioner, Victoria DaSilva, and to the president, an extremely formidable lady and councillor from the Minister’s own party, Councillor Lily Henderson. They, and everyone in Blackpool, have expanded the Scouts in recent years. It is not all doom and gloom, therefore, but we know about the number of youth and community workers who have lost their jobs since 2008.

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I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) that not every space has to be a five-star building and that it is what goes on inside that matters. Nevertheless, it is a tragedy that many of the last Labour Government’s investments in decent buildings have not flourished because of post-2010 austerity. Many of those buildings could not be used for their original purpose. Before I came to this debate, I checked the dates. One of the last of those buildings was erected in Blackpool. The Oracle youth hub is a fantastic, new,
modernistic building not far from my offices. Building started in November 2010. I have looked up in my local newspaper the date it was opened. It is a fantastic, dynamic building. We were told by the Blackpool Gazette in 2012 that the building was going to do wonderful things, but of course it has not because it has not had the money or the staff. That is a great shame, and similar situations should be avoided in future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood paid tribute to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for taking on the project. As a former Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department, however, I gently say to the Minister—to whom I mean no disrespect—that I know that DCMS has to cover a huge range of issues. I do not think things have changed that much since my day—they are probably worse, if anything—so I am sure the Minister will agree that DCMS civil servants are called on to undertake a considerable amount of work compared with those in other Departments. While DCMS takes this forward, it is important that every other Government Department, including the Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Justice, does not see it as an opportunity to say, “Oh well, DCMS is doing that.” I am sure the Minister does not need any lessons from me or, indeed, the new Secretary of State, if there is going to be a new Secretary of State, on lobbying in that regard. I gently say, however, that it is very important that DCMS should not be seen as being solely responsible for this particular area.

I want to turn briefly to the report’s recommendations. They have been covered extensively, and I have no doubt that my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown will want to talk about them in due course. I want to pluck out two quotations from the report. The first is from the British Youth Council, whose executive I was a member of many years ago. It says:

“We believe properly funded youth services and agencies aid young people in their personal development and their ability to function in society.”

That is a huge issue in terms of citizenship.

The second quotation is from the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), who is the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on youth affairs. In comments that echo those made by others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, she said:

“We lack a coherent approach to secure and sustain youth work, and a proper understanding of the levels and extent of youth work needed to achieve the best outcomes for young people.”

I want to close with two or three examples of what has been done on the ground in Blackpool in recent years. Last year I met a group of HeadStart apprentices; that is a Big Lottery-funded agency programme providing resilience for young people across Blackpool, particularly in mental health areas, and it does a fantastic job. It gives the apprentices themselves a varied and creative programme to qualify in, while helping empower hundreds of young people in Blackpool schools and also on a one-to-one basis and in conjunction with local charities such as mine. It has been doing things just in the last month. Blackpool’s Talbot road has been made into the country’s first resilience pathway. That pathway illustrates 42 different moves in life that might help young people and their families and friends to find a sense of belonging, and it was put together by young people in Blackpool themselves. Each paving stone is designed to represent an idea or suggestion that helps young people and their families and friends find a sense of belonging, and I am glad to say that that has received some funding from the Lancashire enterprise partnership.

I also want to touch on the fantastic work done by young carers in Blackpool; they need to be highlighted because they too are acquiring skills at a time when they are having also to attend school. I also want to highlight the Blackpool Youth Council and the body that organises the annual elections for it, UR Potential, and to praise particularly Debbie Terras, the previous chief executive, who did a fantastic job and brought people from Blackpool on two occasions to this place to participate in activities here.

I mentioned at the beginning of my speech the number of young people who come to Blackpool and find themselves in disarray not just with housing but with other issues as well, and I also want to mention our local charity the Streetlife Trust, whose chief executive Jane Hugo is now one of my councillors in a ward in the centre of town.

Finally, I want to talk about the work of the Blackpool Boys and Girls Club and its youth worker, Dave Blacker, who has worked for 43 years with the club. Its most recent initiative is an exhibition. We have had some problems with vandalism in our key park, Stanley Park, and those young people have put together an exhibition of their thoughts and images about that. Elaine Smith, doyenne and chair of Stanley Park, said it is all too easy to look at young people in the park and wonder if they are up to no good and that the exhibition “shows that so many of our children really do care.”

We have a lot to be thankful for from initiatives in Blackpool started by individuals, and I am reminded of the old song “Sisters are doin’ it for themselves”; young people are doing it for themselves, but they should not have to do it all on their own, and there should be a proper statutory youth service to go with this.

5.47 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for this debate. I rise as the chair of the all-party group on youth affairs who produced this report with my vice-chair the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and my former vice-chair the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan). Our travels up and down the country visiting youth centres in many constituencies played an important role and helped to provide the basis of this report.

I rise also as someone who worked in my local youth service when I left school at 16. I worked at the National Youth Agency, which of course helped to produce the report, and then spent four years in Brussels at the European Youth Forum. I was also a voluntary group leader in my local Woodcraft Folk, then national chair in the Youth Parliament, and I, too, served on the board of the British Youth Council. I could therefore say that I am steeped in this subject and it flows through my veins, but that does not mean that that I just biasedly think it is fantastic. That is why we tried to base the report on the evidence that we received—over 100 pieces of evidence came in—and the visits we undertook.
When I joined Parliament and became chair of the APPG, I was deeply concerned that the opportunities that we had, the safety nets that we heard about from other hon. Members and the spaces that supported us growing up had started to wither away. It is now nine years since Parliament looked at these issues, and in that time the youth portfolio has been in three different Government Departments. With the National Youth Agency, we agreed to initiate the report, and we applied for a Backbench Business debate on the subject. I am rather pleased that the Minister has stolen the Backbench Business debate that the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and I applied for and that was due to take place tomorrow, because I think it shows that she will treat this issue with some importance and that Government time has been scheduled for it. I hope this is a sign that the Minister will keep her role. I will not give her my total backing, because that would probably undermine her if she wanted a job in the future, but I will say that she has shown a real regard for youth services that we perhaps have not seen previously. I intend no offence to previous Ministers, because the portfolio is huge, but her showing an understanding of youth has been really welcome. I also welcome today’s announcement that 3,000 young people will be given opportunities in sports, that there will be £500,000 in student bursaries for 400 students on the apprenticeship programme, that the youth charter will be produced and, most important, that we will have a review of statutory youth provision and what that means.

I will quickly rattle through some of the key findings of the APPG report, then offer some personal reflections on where the sector is now. Our first recommendation was that there should be a Minister responsible for the portfolio focused on young people. As I have said, to be effective, the Minister needs to give greater priority to youth work and youth services, and I think that she has done that. However, she is currently the Minister for Sport and Civil Society and has responsibility not only for youth but for gambling, horse-racing, lotteries and loneliness. Yes, these things are interconnected, but the reality is that a Minister with responsibility for children and young people who can focus on that area and the interconnectedness across Government is desperately needed. It is not only our APPG that has made this point; others dealing with different parts of the journey of a child have also done so.

**Tim Loughton:** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his report. He and I attended the same school, with just a few years in between us. What he has just suggested as his No. 1 recommendation was actually the case some seven years ago, when the youth brief was within the Department for Education as part of the children and families brief. As a result, we produced the “Positive for Youth” report in 2011, which was the most comprehensive policy document of proposals on an integrated youth policy involving the statutory sector, the charity sector and the business sector. So we are only trying to reinvent the wheel here.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** A lot of this report is about either reinventing the wheel or looking back into the past and seeing what we can learn from the positive things. Always, while going forward we must know our history. I would say that the hon. Gentleman was one of the best children and youth Ministers that we have had in a Conservative Government in recent history. He should be very pleased with the work that he did when he was a Minister, and his departure was a great shame. That is the past, but we can learn from some of the good things that happened.

Our report also says that there needs to be greater investment in youth work and a commitment to support for youth services in the next comprehensive spending review. There is no purpose in talking about nice, positive little programmes here and little grants there that do not scratch the surface unless, as we have heard already, there is a decent strategic commitment to funding as part of a long-term Government funding review. We call for further research to determine what the benefit-cost ratio would need to be to ensure that open access youth services and appropriate long-term funding are provided.

Our next point is that the Government should introduce a clear statutory duty and guidance to define the minimum protected level of service. Councils do have a statutory duty to provide some youth activities, but the guidance on what “some youth activities” means is so weak that a horse and cart can be driven through it. It can effectively mean that we could have a local youth football club playing once a week in the local park and that is it. Welcome the Government’s commitment to review the guidance, but we really need not just a review, but clear directions that outcomes must be significantly better than we have at the moment.

Youth provision is disappearing across the country due to cuts, but the truth is that we do not even know the state of services after all those cuts, because we have not had an audit of local authority provision since the coalition Government. We urgently need a census, an audit or whatever—I am not precious. Such a thing used to happen once a year, but it could happen once every cycle—whatever the cycle is. We need to know where we stand with a census of local authority youth work. There is a mantra: “Unless you measure it, you can’t deliver it.” Until we measure the situation and audit it, we will not be able to assess where we are failing young people. I welcome the Minister’s responsibilities, but they must come with that auditing process.

We also recommended that each local authority should confirm a lead role responsible for the discharge of the statutory duty for youth work. Again, if local councils have a statutory duty but do not appoint a person who is responsible for delivering on that duty, it is almost impossible to hold them to account. Youth work is not a voluntary provision, because it has statutory underpinning. Although it is poorly defined, local authorities must show that they are discharging that duty. We recommended that the position should be probably equivalent to a deputy director of children’s services in the responsible local authority, which are upper-tier authorities, and they should be accountable for the duty, ensuring that council officers fully take charge.

Finally, the inquiry recommended that the Government should develop a youth workforce strategy, including the expectations for the ratio of professional youth workers, trainers and volunteers. We need a standardised national system to evaluate the sufficiency and suitability of youth services and the quality of youth work provision. That, of course, is where the National Youth Agency comes in.

We are currently relying on the NYA to oversee standards, qualifications, access, safeguarding and youth workforce development in the sector. Until last week, it
did that without any Government funding. Prior to the coalition Government, the NYA had an annual budget of £10 million. Almost overnight, however, funding disappeared entirely, and it has done a tremendous job in the most difficult circumstances. It has had to limit not only the services that it is able to offer to councils, but voluntary services, too, and it has had to rely on private endowments, fees, and Canada and Australia, which continue to pay the NYA for the accreditation of their youth services. It should be a national scandal that a national institution designed to keep our young people safe was defunded in such a way, and that we have had to rely on the kindness, in effect, of Commonwealth countries to continue funding a service offered here in Britain. Although I am pleased that the Minister has said there will be some commitment to the National Youth Agency in some of the workforce reviews, £800,000 is too little compared with where we were, and it is definitely too late for the young people who have missed out on opportunities.

Part of the NYA’s role was to provide the audit I mentioned of youth services around the country—something that was lost when its funding went. That needs to be urgently reinstated, and I hope the Minister will either find resources from her Department or pull the Treasury to sufficiently fund not only blanket audits but the ability to do one-off spot checks—sometimes we can address these issues by picking up where we think there are problems and by delving in. In over five years, Ofsted has not inspected any youth provision in this country; it is entitled to do that, and we could encourage it to do so to make sure that the fulfilment is there.

There can be no question but that youth services improve the lives of young people. They offer young people experiences outside formal education; they support, but do not replace, formal education; and they enhance readiness to succeed. In the classroom and in life. That is why professional qualifications for youth workers are so important. My ten-minute rule Bill early last year aimed to put youth work qualifications on a statutory footing. That, of course, does not devalue the work of current programmes such as the apprenticeship programme, which will hopefully come on stream—the Government have approved it, albeit late, but better late than never—and university programmes such as the fantastic one at the University of Brighton in my constituency, which ensures that our children and young people are supported by the people best qualified to understand their emotional and educational wellbeing.

We should be under no illusion about the dire state of youth work at the moment. I have been in and out of this sector most of my life. As in any sector, there is politics, with the voluntary sector having arguments with the professional sector, and at one point or another everyone falls out. However, what is remarkable now is that the sector—the youth workers, the voluntary organisations, the scouts and the guides—are saying almost with one voice that there is a crisis in many of our young people’s lives and we need to step up to support them. Those organisations are campaigning for the survival of much of the sector.

The Government must be held to account. Multiple youth work programmes have now closed their doors to new applicants across country. We have had the closure of 763 youth centres. Some 4,500 youth workers have lost their jobs, and their posts have been deleted. That has led to 140,000 places providing young people with access to youth services being lost. The sector is on its knees, and Members should not take my word for it. Research from the House of Commons Library shows that funding went from £1.2 billion in 2010 to £358 million in 2017. That is a 68% cut in cash terms, and almost £1 billion in real terms stripped from the sector. Many parts of the country now have no youth services at all provided through statutory provision.

So stark is the sense of bereftness felt by young people that 16 to 24-year-olds are now the largest demographic to feel lonely, with one in 10 saying they always or often feel lonely—far more than among the over-65s, whom we often associate with loneliness. When young people do reach out for help, those in my city alone can face a wait of 12 months to see a professional for their mental health, which then spirals down. In the very worst cases, as in my city in only the last few months, we see young people committing suicide. The Government need to take young people seriously.

In all societies, we have had people in the community who have supported us during transitions in our lives—at different points, we will all go through difficult transitions. Historically, since humanity began, that person may have been the village elder, the local imam or the local vicar. Having someone to help us with that process is vital. Youth workers were there to help young people make that transition. Quite rightly, at the turn of the last century, we moved away from a link between Church and state. We developed a professionalised programme, into which safeguarding was embedded, and we made sure that provision was based on need, not on a person’s religion. However, we have destroyed much of the provision that took the place of the role played by other bodies, and we have not replaced it with anything. We have not replaced it with community endeavour, because communities are facing other huge cuts.

That is not to say that there is no voluntary provision. I visited Wigan OnSide youth zone; we are hoping to get an OnSide centre in Brighton, and some great ones are opening up in London. There, we see qualified youth workers doing good, old-fashioned youth work, and it transforms communities, but this provision is not perfect, because it is city-centre-based. What we need in every community is voluntary engagement with young people, so that they have something to do, somewhere to go, and someone to speak to. Parents might be the best to love young people, but we need professional engagement to support young people through the difficult moments in their life.

I am pleased that the Government will introduce a charter, but will we make sure that every young person has somewhere to go, someone to do and someone to speak to? If we do not, it can come as no surprise when knife crime and antisocial behaviour increase, and when county lines ravage our communities—although youth work will not in itself solve those issues. When cuts in social services, policing and youth work all come together, the result is communities bereft of support. There is a phrase in “The Shopkeeper’s Journal”: “You break it, you own it.” The reality is that this Government—not councils—defunded youth services. They broke it; they must fix it.
Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): It gives me great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), who is such an expert and has done so much work in this field. I shall speak about our experience of youth work and youth services in a corner of north Derbyshire.

Last September, I visited Fairfield youth club, the only evening youth club left in our rural community. There were 60 or so young people there, having fun, chatting, and engaging with the staff. They wanted to make a video with me. They asked if I would interview them about what they wanted for their area and their hopes for the future. Once the camera was on them and I was asking questions, those young people opened up in a way that I will never forget. They spoke about their youth centre and youth club as a safe place to go. Their friends had fallen prey to the drug gangs, and it was the only place out of the house where they could go and feel safe.

Even in High Peak, our beautiful rural corner of Derbyshire, we have drug gangs preying on young people who are hanging around, as young people do when they have nowhere to go and nothing to do. I spoke to all our headteachers of secondary schools shortly before the end of term, and they highlighted to me how concerned they were about the summer holidays and about the preying on young people that they had already seen in term time. Parents would phone them up, worried about whether they should pay a drug debt for their child. Drug gangs would give a child drugs and tell them to sell them to their friends and would then come seeking the money. There were young people, often from ordinary middle-class families, owing £1,000 in drug debt, and being told that their bodies would be smashed if they or their parents did not pay. That is what we see, unfortunately, and I am sure that my area is far from being different from other places, especially ones that border large cities.

At the same time as all that, under universal credit, we have seen parents with children, the youngest of whom was 12, forced to seek work full time for 35 hours a week, regardless of school holidays. I have spoken to Save the Children about the threat to our young people and their safety and security. The other week, I spoke to a parent whose children are 12 and eight years old. She was told that she could go out to work and leave her 12-year-old in charge of her eight-year-old throughout the summer holidays. If that is the sort of advice parents are being given by a Government agency, what hope do our children have?

We are not only seeing the decimation of support services. In Derbyshire, not only has every youth worker been given redundancy, but hundreds of early-help support workers for families have disappeared, as have our sexual health clinics, where so many young people could go when they disclose sexual abuse. We have seen our school nurses halved and our police force halved. At the same time as all that, parents are told that they should be out looking for work full time and leaving young people alone.

We have been desperate for summer holiday provision, which used to be provided by our youth services but is no longer. We no longer even have youth clubs that the county council provides statutorily. We used to have eight or nine youth workers locally, and 80 throughout Derbyshire; the number has gone down to eight across the entire county. Those places left are for supporting voluntary groups and parents who set up clubs and voluntary provision. That is fine, but as has been pointed out, voluntary groups often cannot provide the continuity and the sort of support that youth workers can give.

The youth workers in my area have been instrumental in supporting young people with the disclosure of sexual abuse, to deal with disability and mental health issues and to resist the drugs gangs that prey on them. That is not a job that we can ask volunteers to do. We have some wonderful voluntary groups. I pay tribute to parents, a wonderful group of whom set up a Monday-night youth club in Chinley, a village in my constituency. They see 80 or 90 young people come from all across the area because there is nothing else on.

We have sports teams, and we have Beavers, Cubs, Scouts, Brownies, Guides and Sea Scouts. There are some fantastic activities going on and a real wealth of provision for some young people, but such activities often cost money. Cubs and Scouts costs £30 for a term, and often more for different trips. There are sports clubs on the private finance initiative-provided playing fields, but it costs £6 or £7 a night to play football. That is not something that parents on a low income can pay. The most vulnerable young people often feel that they cannot take part in guided activities and are not prepared to do that.

Young people often want to hang out. We have some brilliant youth centres, which were provided next to our parks, in exactly the place where young people want to hang out and to get a bit of support as well. When I spent a day in one of my local secondary schools, I spoke to some year 9s—they were 13 and 14-year-olds—and said, “What do you want from your area? What do you want from your politicians?” Their answer was that they wanted a covered bench so that they had somewhere to sit that was out of the rain—so that they could sit and chat with their friends and not get wet. It is not very much to ask.

In the same town, there is a youth centre right next to the park. It was exactly what young people needed. It used to provide youth services on a Tuesday and Friday night. Young people could run in and out, talk to the staff, get a drink, have fun and get support at the same time. That is exactly the sort of provision we need. We have the buildings there, but they are mothballed—they are not in use anymore—and the staff have just been given redundancy notices. Staff with years of experience who are trusted among young people across our communities are, with very heavy hearts, having to give up the jobs that they loved and believed in.

We need our young people to have such support. I am delighted to hear the Minister say that she will put in place more statutory guidelines and that she wants the UK to be the best place in which young people can grow up, but I am afraid that one of our youth workers told me the other week that it is a terrible time to be both a young person in Derbyshire and a youth worker. This is tough not just on our young people, but on the people who work with them. It takes years to build not just the apprenticeships, but the experience and dedication of those members of staff. At the moment, we are seeing their skills and that dedication put on the scrapheap.
This Government need urgently to put in place long-term, funded, ring-fenced statutory provision for young people before we see any more suffer and made vulnerable.

I am providing a summer school for 16 to 24-year-olds this week. It has been a real honour to interact with those young people, to hear about their hopes and dreams and to get them planning and campaigning on what they want to do. They will be out tomorrow in one of our local towns, holding a drop-in for young people to talk about politics, to register to vote, to get involved and to have a say. As Members of Parliament, that is something that we can all do. Young people want to be able to change things, but they are left powerless. We can put power into their hands. We can give them the support that they need. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) spoke very movingly about the support that she had that enabled her to get to where she is today. That is what we need to do for all our young people, and I hope that the Government will not just listen but act.

6.16 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I am glad that we have had the opportunity to debate the positive impact that youth services have on our young people. Youth centres provide young people with safe spaces in which to learn, develop trusted relationships, build friendships and develop interpersonal skills. They should be at the heart of our communities, but, sadly, after nearly a decade of austerity, many parts of our country have no recognisable youth services at all.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) for his persistence in securing this debate. He is chair of the all-party group on youth affairs, which recently conducted a parliamentary inquiry into youth services. He spoke eloquently about his areas of expertise, which are wide and varied, and I learned a lot from him. He also spoke about the importance of evidence and why he was involved in this work. I hope that the Minister responds positively to his recommendations, and I look forward to her response.

We also heard a number of very passionate speeches. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) who spoke passionately about knife crime, the impact of trauma on our communities and how youth services can help in prevention, building resilience and ensuring that our children have trusted adults to whom they can go to be connected with the relevant agencies.

We also had a passionate speech from my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George), who spoke emotively about Fairfield youth club in her constituency and about how, when she spoke to young people there, they spoke of the need for a safe space and how, sadly, this club was their only safe place and the only way to keep them out of the grips of the local gangs.

Many other Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), mentioned the importance of youth work in tackling youth violence. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), who is my neighbour and friend, talked about the impact of losing a young person’s life—Jay Hughes—on the local community and the role that youth work can play in rebuilding that community.

My hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) and for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) also mentioned these points. The great role that NCS plays was mentioned by the Minister and the hon. Members for Crawley (Henry Smith) and for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) made some positive points about the scheme but also asked some questions, which leads me on to a few issues on which I wish to touch.

Currently, 95% of all Government spending on youth services goes to the NCS, despite the fact that only one in 10 eligible young people participate in its programmes. Since it was established, the NCS has received £1.5 billion, and it spent £10 million on a brand refresh earlier this year. Let that sink in. This is alongside a landscape in which spending on youth services has fallen by 70%, 760 youth centres have closed their doors and over 14,000 youth workers have lost their jobs in the last decade. Surely, it is unsustainable to spend millions of pounds on a programme that is simply not attracting the numbers when there are hundreds of brilliant youth centres and talented youth workers crying out for funding across the country.

The hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) quoted the APPG’s report and spoke about the importance of family support into adulthood, youth work being one of the only safe spaces for young people and why we need trusted youth workers. He also pointed out that there are not enough professionals in the sector and mentioned the importance of early intervention. I agree with all those points.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South spoke about the impact of cuts to council funding and pointed out that Blackpool Council is losing £700 million. He also mentioned the overall negative impact of these cuts on all the services that interact with young people.

Labour is absolutely committed to rebuilding the youth sector to ensure that it is fit for the modern age—a youth sector that has open access, is diverse and has the interests of young people at heart. I remember chatting with the chief executive officer of UK Youth about consulting young people on the kind of programmes they wanted to see. After she had got feedback from lots of young people, UK Youth put on a course called “Money for Life”, which focused on budgeting and money management. The organisation was concerned that no one would turn up, but it was inundated with young people. That just shows how important it is to have young people at the heart of designing youth work. We need to ensure that the programmes we create are relevant to them.

Labour is also committed to ensuring that our youth services respond to the unique challenges that young people face. Youth centres should be safe spaces for every young person, where they can speak to adults they trust and who have built up relationships with them over time. Trauma-informed training will be necessary to ensure that youth workers are equipped to deal with the various issues and challenges that young people face today.

Before I end my remarks, I have several questions for the Minister. Successful grantees of the Government’s youth endowment fund will need to demonstrate their plans to spend £100,000 or more by March 2020. This
freezes out small charities from the outset, setting some of our brilliant grassroots organisations up for failure. Does the Minister agree? If not, can she outline exactly how the youth endowment fund is directed to the right organisations and projects? Do they have any plans for any potential underspend from successful grantees of the fund?

We all know—it has been said many times in this Chamber—that 3 to 6 pm is a particularly dangerous time for young people, so do the Government have plans to provide youth work during those hours as part of their public health strategy to tackle violence and keep young people safe? What date will the Government publish their review of the statutory youth guidance? We have talked about it many times, but there still does not seem to be a date for this. What work is the Minister doing to ensure that youth services receive adequate funding in the upcoming spending review? Barnardo’s and the Children’s Society estimate that this funding needs to be around £3 billion.

UK Youth and other leading youth bodies wrote to the new Prime Minister today asking him to make Britain the best country in the world to be young. Will the Minister call on the new Prime Minister to back the asks in that letter—in particular, to unlock the £50 million NCS underspend and deliver a 10-year spending commitment to the first ever youth charter? Our young people are fantastic, but to reach their potential, they need to be given the right opportunities. It is vital that fully funded youth services are part of that picture—services that are varied, accessible and fit for the modern age. Following his speech yesterday, if the new Prime Minister wants to be known as a dude and not a dud, he could start with our youth services, making sure that they are delivered locally with a universal offer and diverse provision and established with and for our young people. So dude, don’t under-deliver. We need action, not rhetoric.

6.25 pm

Mims Davies: With the leave of the House, I will close this debate for the Government, and it is a pleasure to do so. I thank hon. Members for such a passionate and informed debate. Let me repeat that the all-party group has done outstanding work on its report. I will, and we will, fully consider all its recommendations, and all the contributions made by Members today. I think that we do need to look at the workforce strategy. We need to make sure that we have a formal response to the report. I am delighted to hear that UK Youth has written to the new Prime Minister today. I do not want to give away secrets at the Dispatch Box, but I very much encouraged it to do so, so I am delighted that it has undertaken that.

As we have seen from the passionate speeches around the Chamber, there is absolutely a need to consider this report. The message from this debate is that we need somewhere to go in talking about youth work and our young people. We need to offer the opportunity that comes through the youth charter. I am delighted with the way that the sector has got to grips with supporting that. As we have heard, we are committed to the revision of the youth work qualification, the third sector forum and the revision of the guidance for local authorities. That has met with warm support, but I absolutely recognise that many Members around the Chamber feel that it is just the start. On the issue of youth loneliness, the new policies that will come into place later this year, I hope, will have a focus on our young people—on our care leavers, on our young carers and on people who need further support.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who is no longer in his place, talked about fast-track opportunities to get into youth service. The role of the NCS is extraordinarily valuable and important. The opportunity to bring people into this realm is a chance to give back through NCS—a great way to explore. Talking of exploring, it is very important for us to look at the future underspend in the NCS. I would personally love to see it directed towards detached youth services. I would welcome, as anybody would, more funding going that way, but obviously we will have to wait and see. The NCS is delivering a more confident, capable group of young people. We want that for all our young people, and it is absolutely right that we focus on that.

The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) spoke about long-term funding, which is what the youth endowment fund is about. It is absolutely right that we look at the 10-year plan—and that is exactly what it is—on top of the £22 million early intervention plan. On the joined-up approach, it is absolutely right that we link up with our communities and schools. Our schools know where the young people who are going to be at risk are at the end of the day—from 3 pm to 6 pm, after school. It is therefore absolutely right that we use the opportunities and understanding that our schools have.

The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) made an emotional speech. I understand what she said; my goddaughter lives in a rural community in Derbyshire. I do not want anyone to feel, from talking to young people, that it is a terrible time to be young. That is not where we want to be. The innovation and opportunities in this sphere should reach everyone, wherever they live. I hope that, through the additional £16 million in the rural services delivery grant for local authorities, we can give hope to young people. As we have heard, we need to balance the urban, rural and coastal challenges. The Government have a proud record of putting more money into coastal communities, supporting 295 projects nationwide with £174 million since 2012.

I want to talk about the youth charter. The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemp Town (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) spoke about the importance of youth positivity and not needing to reinvent the wheel. He asked about where we are with the NYA on the evaluation of current youth work. That is ongoing between us and the Department for Education, and no final decision has been made, but his plea has been heard.

It is true that there has been a challenge regarding our youth services. Local authorities are responsible for assessing local needs, and we have given them flexibility to make decisions. As we have heard today, where we use innovation, our community and our understanding of it, we can get things right and do things better.

We heard from the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) that this is not just about ping-pong. I would like to look at ping-pong, because the Brighton Table Tennis Club in the constituency of the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemp Town is fantastic. I have never been to a youth centre or youth club that
I want to pick up on a point made by the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown). If we are lucky, we can look back to a teacher, youth worker, mentor or grandparent who told us that we matter and that we had chances and opportunities. We must ensure that we use our opportunities to give confidence to our young people—not to talk them down but to give them the skills and opportunities to move forward. I am delighted to hear about the extra £1.4 million in her constituency, which is being used wisely to support young people. We need to look at the basic level of sufficiency and how we are ensuring that our young people are not at risk and are safeguarded.

Lyn Brown: I thank the Minister for recognising what the London Borough of Newham is doing, despite the financial restraints, but I gently say that £1.4 million is very difficult for my local council to find. We collectively need to find ways of funding local government to fund local youth services, otherwise there will not be the people I had in my constituency to help young people through the difficulties they face.

Mims Davies: Absolutely. A strong economy, working with communities and using all the tools we have—including, for example, social impact bonds and our dormant assets—to fund our local communities, is vital.

As someone who has young girls growing up, I want to reiterate the importance of a youth voice in this policy area and the youth charter. We know what it was like when we grew up, but we have heard today that it is very different for young people growing up now. Members have asked why the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is the right place for youth policy. I think it really is the right place, but I will not be ungrateful to the rest of Government, who we have hauled in to speak to about amplifying and recognising where we are all working together. We have three youth voice projects: the youth voice steering group, which sits in civil society; the young inspectors group; and our new digital solutions group. It is right that we engage with our young people and listen to them, to ensure that these policies are right for them.

I do not think anyone can deny the challenge of serious violence and the fact that we need to make sure our young people stay safe on our streets. I am personally delighted to make sure that we have more police on our streets, and the Home Secretary—I am not quite sure who it is right now—will, I hope, be following through on this.

I am very proud to have heard from so many Members across the House about the importance of our young people. I say again that this Government are determined to support all our young people in reaching their full potential and in giving them skills and opportunities. We truly do want this to be the best place in the world to be young, and I am determined that my Department will make that so.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the role and sufficiency of youth services.

PETITIONS

Ceasefire in Yemen

6.35 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Mr Speaker, it is a great honour to have you in the Chair at the time of the presentation of petitions on the issue of Yemen. The petition calls for the Government to pursue an immediate ceasefire in Yemen. Following my presentation, a number of other colleagues—the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby and West Nile (Douglas Chapman)—will also present petitions on this very important subject. Despite the peace process, humanitarian aid agencies are struggling to reach those who desperately need support. We hope that we will use our position as the penholder on Yemen at the UN to bring about an immediate ceasefire.

The petition states:

The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom, Declares that Yemen is the world’s worst humanitarian situation, where over 91,000 people have been killed in the war in Yemen, a further 24.1 million need humanitarian assistance and over 14 million

the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement, and to honour the decision of the Court of Appeal;

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I pay tribute to the chair of the all-party group on Yemen, the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who has done so much to bring the cause of Yemen to this House, and to make sure that it is not forgotten, that the people of Yemen are remembered in this House and that action is taken to protect them.

I am very grateful to my constituents, who came at very short notice to my office to sign this petition. They include a Yemeni family who, when they heard about it, went and found other Yemenis to come and sign the petition. They want to make sure that as much as possible can be done for those still suffering in the situation in Yemen at the moment.

The petition states:

The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom, Declares that Yemen is the world’s worst humanitarian situation, where over 91,000 people have been killed in the war in Yemen, a further 24.1 million need humanitarian assistance and over 14 million
are on the brink of starvation; further that the Court of Appeal decision of June 20th 2019 deemed arms-exports licences to Saudi Arabia as ‘unlawful’.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to pursue an immediate ceasefire in Yemen, the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement, and to honour the decision of the Court of Appeal;

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Mr Speaker: It is very good to observe that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has beetled back into the Chamber. I am bound to say that I felt almost discombobulated by his temporary absence. I am fortified by his return, as will be the House, which will now hear him present his petition on the same important matter.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Speaker; you are always kind, but tonight you are most kind.

It is a pleasure to introduce this petition on behalf of my constituents. I thank the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for bringing it forward. The conditions of those in Yemen have been a key issue for this House.

The petition, which I and my constituents in Strangford support from the bottom of our hearts, states:

The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Yemen is the world’s worst humanitarian situation, where over 91,000 people have been killed in the war in Yemen, a further 24.1 million need humanitarian assistance and over 14 million are on the brink of starvation; further that the Court of Appeal decision of June 20th 2019 deemed arms-exports licences to Saudi Arabia as ‘unlawful’.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to pursue an immediate ceasefire in Yemen, the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement, and to honour the decision of the Court of Appeal;

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to join in this cross-party presentation of petitions relating to the situation in Yemen. It used to be said that the crisis in Yemen was a forgotten war. Thanks to the cross-party efforts of Members who are speaking today, and others who are not here with us, we have ensured that it is not forgotten in this place. I am particularly pleased to present this petition from Liverpool Friends of Yemen and others.

The petition states:

The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Yemen is the world’s worst humanitarian situation, where over 91,000 people have been killed in the war in Yemen, a further 24.1 million need humanitarian assistance and over 14 million are on the brink of starvation; further that the Court of Appeal decision of June 20th 2019 deemed arms-exports licences to Saudi Arabia as ‘unlawful’.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to pursue an immediate ceasefire in Yemen, the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement, and to honour the decision of the Court of Appeal;

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): Mr Speaker, I appreciate you allowing both petitions in my name to be presented at the same time. The first petition relates to the ongoing dismal humanitarian situation in Yemen. I am sincerely grateful to all those members of the public who have signed it, and I hope that we can continue to work together with the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen, many of the non-governmental organisations that are active in the region and the United Nations to bring about peace to such a war-torn part of the middle east.

The petition states:

The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Yemen is the world’s worst humanitarian situation, where over 91,000 people have been killed in the war in Yemen, a further 24.1 million need humanitarian assistance and over 14 million are on the brink of starvation; further that the Court of Appeal decision of June 20th 2019 deemed arms-exports licences to Saudi Arabia as ‘unlawful’.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to pursue an immediate ceasefire in Yemen, the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement, and to honour the decision of the Court of Appeal;

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Driving Test Centre in Dunfermline

6.43 pm

Douglas Chapman: This petition has been signed by over 160 petitioners from my constituency. They are very concerned that the Department for Transport, through its agency the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency, has been trying to diminish the opportunity for learner drivers to have their driving test carried out in their own community through the driving test centre in Dunfermline. Travelling elsewhere to be tested would add time and a huge cost for many younger drivers, their parents and driving school instructors alike. I have been keen to support the campaign as Dunfermline has a growing population and we should be securing as many key services that would be commensurate with a vibrant, growing town.

The petition states:

The petition of Residents of Dunfermline & West Fife,

Declares that there is a clear demand for a Driving Test Centre to remain in Dunfermline.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Her Majesty’s Government to work with the DVSA to ensure a long-term arrangement is secured to retain the Driving Test Centre in Dunfermline with an adequate level of service provision to meet current and future demand.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Road Safety outside Wingate Primary School

6.45 pm

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): This petition has been organised by the pupils of Wingate Primary School and relates to the road safety issues outside of the school. The children there have acquired more than 200 signatures from all the pupils, the teachers and a fair share of the local community.
The petition states:

The petition of Community of Wingate Primary School,
Declares that safer roads for children are essential and that the roads outside Wingate Primary School should be made more safe.
The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the roads outside Wingate Primary School are made safer for its pupils and other people in the community.
And the petitioners remain, etc.

Water Safety and Life-saving Equipment

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

6.46 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank Mr Speaker for granting me this debate and allowing me to highlight an issue that has been prominent in my constituency and those of many other Members who have come along this evening. Drownings are sadly all too common. We hear today of a body being recovered in London, as happened recently in the Speirs Wharf area of the constituency of the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney). Our hearts go out to all the families who have lost loved ones to drowning.

Given the scorching temperatures outside, many people will be tempted to go into the water without realising the risks that involves, so I highlight the Royal Lifesaving Society’s summer water safety campaign. We need to all look out for one another in those circumstances and ensure as much as we can that those messages are shared with all our constituents wherever we have open water, or rivers or even large ponds, in our constituencies. People need to understand the risks they are taking.

Concerns have been raised for some time in Glasgow about damage to lifebelts and life ropes particularly, but not exclusively, on the banks of the River Clyde, which runs through my constituency. Life-saving equipment is regularly being removed, damaged and otherwise tampered with. In response, Glasgow City Council’s water safety working group has launched a campaign, “Taking a lifebelt is taking a life”. Only a week after the launch and of signs being affixed to the lifebelt posts in the city, the Evening Times reported that some of the signs themselves had been vandalised. Andy Waddell, the chairman of Glasgow’s water safety working group, said:

“People who vandalise the lifebelts along the Clyde need to be fully aware of the potentially lethal consequences of their actions. That anyone would seek to destroy a safety message intended to protect lives is truly mind-boggling.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. I spoke to her today about this issue, but I want to make her aware of a similar circumstance in my constituency. She might not be aware that the lifebelts in Killyleagh harbour have been tampered with on a number of occasions. Does she agree that further steps have to be taken to ensure that such safety equipment is not tampered with, since the unavailability of lifebelts could lead to death? There is the prospect that fines are not enough. Indeed, fines and penalties for such behaviour should be legally binding—perhaps the Minister can respond to that—and of such severity that people will think twice before destroying lifebelts, which could end up leading to someone dying when they just did not have to.

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point, and I sympathise with those being affected by the issue in his constituency. It is a widespread occurrence, and it seems to be happening across these islands. We need to do more about that.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate on water safety, since many of us feel strongly...
about the issue. In my constituency, there have been fatalities in the Jubilee river. I have raised that issue with the Prime Minister no less during Prime Minister’s questions. In this regard, I commend Slough Borough Council. Working with its partners the Environment Agency, Thames Valley police and Royal Berkshire fire and rescue, it has installed safety signage warning people about the dangers of swimming in the river, given the strong undercurrents, and the effects of cold-water shock even during the summer months. Does the hon. Lady agree that while life-saving equipment should not be tampered with, the Government have simply been too slow to implement an effective and sufficient water safety education programme?

Alison Thewliss: I agree with that, and I think there is a lot more to be said for co-ordination of action and for making sure that more happens and there is not a piecemeal approach to water safety around the UK.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Tragically, over Easter we lost five people in York’s rivers. In York we continue to have one of the highest levels of river deaths in the country. On Saturday, I had the privilege of going out with York Rescue Boat, a voluntary organisation that does tremendous work to maintain river safety, and the fire and rescue service. Their plea was for some specific funding for training, equipment and facilities, because they, too, have faced issues with equipment being tampered with. Does she agree that we should have specific funding for river safety?

Alison Thewliss: I sympathise with the families of those who have lost loved ones in the York area. The circumstances that the hon. Lady describes sound absolutely awful. I agree that more needs to be done on funding for these organisations, because it feels very much to me as though a lot of this is left up to charity and the goodwill of local organisations or councils rather than our having a specific pot of funding.

Incidents of drowning are, fortunately, decreasing in Scotland. Water Safety Scotland noted that there were 78 water-related fatalities in Scotland in 2018, down from over 100 in 2013, but that does not mean that we should be complacent. We need to continue to ensure that people do not lose their lives in the water. I note that the Scottish Government have designated 2020 the Year of Coasts and Waters. That seems as good an opportunity as any to discuss some issues to do with water safety, as well as exploring the virtues of our coasts and waters and the wider environment.

I am grateful to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, which responds to water incidents as part of its duties. It provided statistics that revealed that it attended 79 incidents on the Clyde last year, which is an increase of 13 on the previous year. It has a 3:1 ratio of rescues to fatalities, which is heartening, but there have been a few incidents in Glasgow recently that give me pause for thought as I cross the river in the course of my day; I can see the tributes to loved ones who have been lost.

We are very fortunate in Glasgow to have not only the water safety working group, but a dedicated organisation—the Glasgow Humane Society—watching over the safety of people using our waterways. The society was founded in 1790 by members of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, which employed an officer to carry out the practical work of drowning prevention, rescue and the recovery of bodies from the river. Since then, it has sought to pursue water safety issues in Glasgow and the wider world, and it is now under the stewardship of the great George Parsonage. The Clyde runs in his blood, he having taken on the vocation of his father, Benjamin Parsonage, in the Glasgow Humane Society, and his family are very much involved in the organisation in a voluntary capacity.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady referred to rivers, seas, beaches and lakes. In my constituency, and probably in a lot of others, there are a lot of quarries. Unfortunately, over the years we have lost some people who have drowned in the quarries across Strangford. I am ever mindful that what is under the water in quarries is unknown, and of the chill and the depth of the water. Does she agree that when it comes to looking at waterways, whether that be rivers, beaches, tides, lakes and so on, we also have to include quarries?

Alison Thewliss: Yes, I agree. We need to think about all watercourses. People do not need very much water to drown in, so we must be mindful of all the risks out there.

The issue of removal of and damage to lifebelts is not new by any matter or means. As George told me yesterday, the society has a poster dating from 1860 warning of the dangers of damaging life-saving equipment. Today the society officer, William Graham, along with its many volunteers, collects lifebelts from the river and restores them to their rightful position. George tells me that this is a daily job, with anything from a few lifebelts to up to 30 having to be recovered from the river.

The system of reporting that we have in place in Glasgow, instigated by the Glasgow Humane Society, is one where lifebelts and ropes are placed on neon yellow poles along the banks of the city waterways. That makes it very clear where the lifebelts are located and when they are missing. Coming in today, I noted that the ones placed along the Thames are a lot less clear, having been placed inside boxes, meaning that people cannot immediately tell if there is a lifebelt in there when they need it, and it could take them longer to reach, too, which is time that cannot be spared when somebody is in the water.

The neon poles I mentioned, along with other vital resources such as rescue ladders, are all GPS-tagged and display a code, such as UN25, in a system that is understood by the local emergency services. It helps people to describe their location accurately in an emergency and allows them to easily report missing lifebelts or have them recovered. I would commend the system to other Members with watercourses in their constituencies. It is incredibly useful to be able to pinpoint exactly where an incident has happened so that the emergency services can respond.

I would also like to pay tribute to campaigners in Glasgow, Margaret and Duncan Spiers, constituents of the hon. Member for Glasgow North East, who is here today, who lost their son in an accidental drowning in the Clyde in 2016. They are passionate in the face of such adversity to ensure that all is done to prevent anybody going through the same pain. Their son slipped and fell into the water. The police threw in lifebelts but could not reach him, and he died in less than 10 minutes.
[Alison Thewliss]

The whole event was captured on CCTV. I cannot imagine how awful it must have been for Christopher's father, Duncan, to watch it back, knowing his son was so close to being saved. The Spiers have been tireless campaigners for water safety ever since and have succeeded in getting Glasgow City Council to install ropes to lifebelts along the banks of the Clyde. I am sure that all hon. Members would commend the Spiers for their campaign.

The Spiers hope that nobody has to experience what their family has gone through. They have taken the issue to the Scottish Parliament to ask for improvements, such as making ropes on lifebelts more common and providing life ropes and throw bags. More recently, they sought the use of specifically marked ropes so that, should they be removed, they could be easily identified if found in somebody's possession, which would enable the crime to be traced back to somebody. At the moment, if someone removes lifesaving equipment or carelessly or recklessly throws it into the river, it is very hard to pursue them, to identify perpetrators and get some resolution, particularly as waterways are often in rural and isolated areas. We cannot put CCTV on every lifebelt post in the city of Glasgow, so there is much to do to deter people from doing this in the first place.

There does not seem to be a specific offence of tampering with lifesaving equipment. Any fines would be for vandalism or theft. Someone could be charged with culpable and reckless behaviour, but this all feels far too discretionary.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this debate to the House. She is making an excellent speech. I share her sentiments about the Spiers family. I have had the honour of meeting them and have been touched by their commitment to securing a safety legacy for the River Clyde, particularly with respect to lifebelt equipment. It beggars belief that somebody would damage or vandalise such equipment in the way that has been done. I should mention other campaigners, such as Stef Shaw and the Think Again campaign on emergency lifeline telephones. People in Glasgow are making a great effort to solve some of the problems, particularly in the light of the death of John Connelly—that extends to the Forth and Clyde canal as well. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need a much greater effort—perhaps charitable effort—to fundraise for equipment on the river? I note that Glasgow City Council has purchased 21 ropes to fit to lifebelts on the Clyde this year. Perhaps we could further improve capacity if some of these groups’ charitable efforts were harnessed.

Alison Thewliss: I agree. There is always something to be said for charity fundraising and resources of that kind being raised, but, as hon. Members mentioned earlier, we cannot rely on that. More thought needs to be given to how we make it a lot more consistent and part of mainstream funding. It is lifesaving equipment and should not rely on charity alone.

There is not really an appropriate offence to cover such crimes—I would call them crimes—as tampering with lifesaving equipment. At the moment, there are various things that local authorities can do. A recent incident in the Salford Quays prompted the authorities there to use a public spaces protection order, available under the law in England, to prevent people from interfering with safety equipment, but this only incurs a £90 fine—£60 if paid in 10 days. Apparently, this could end up in court if those fines are not paid, but that still seems not to get the balance quite right, given the gravity of what people are doing here. After all, this is lifesaving equipment. The Manchester Evening News reported that the cost to Salford Council of replacing the equipment and making the system more secure was £34,000—money that would not have to be spent if people did not engage in such mindless behaviour.

Turning to my asks of the Minister, I seek to find out if more can be done to catalogue the availability of water safety equipment, to ensure that as many watercourses as possible can have the reassurance of access to life-saving equipment. The UK Government could also carry out assessments to understand the extent to which damage is being caused and any hotspots. I have noted in my research and by speaking to people such as—

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Alison Thewliss: I have noted in my research and by speaking to campaigners with expertise, such as George Parsonage, that this is, sadly, all too common in many communities. Will the UK Government consider carrying out a wider, year-round campaign rather than just during Drowning Prevention Week? Perhaps they could look to the Scottish Government’s drowning prevention strategy, which is funded and is working hard to deliver education and other public goods.

Like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I am struck by the lack of penalty for the undoubted public harm caused by tampering with life-saving equipment. I believe that there should be a specific aggravated offence related to tampering with life-saving equipment.

Fianna Fáil Senator Keith Swanick has promoted a private Member’s Bill in Ireland that would make it an offence to steal or damage life-saving equipment such as defibrillators and lifebuoys. I do not want to stray too far from the issue of water safety, but many campaigns have fundraised to install defibrillators, and it is beyond belief that somebody would go out to damage one. I would argue that they also require protection.

The penalties proposed by Senator Swanick include fines of up to €50,000 and a jail term of up to five years, which are quite different from the £90 fine in England. Will the Minister consider introducing a similar measure? I do not know whether we will get new private Members’ Bills or whether this Session of Parliament will ever come to an end. In the meantime, it would be useful if the Minister would consider other mechanisms that might be used to protect this vital resource and whether it could be placed in any existing legislation.

Duncan Spiers has said to me:

“The reason we want the law changed is to ensure the safety equipment is not tampered with...anyone tampering with this should be charged with putting a life at risk and not just vandalism. Our campaign is about accident prevention measures and anyone that goes into the Clyde by accident or suicide attempt should have the best chance of getting out of the water”.

I wholeheartedly agree.
The Glasgow campaign is called “Taking a lifebelt is taking a life”. I ask the Minister to support the campaign and do all in her power to ensure that life-saving equipment is always there for those who need it in their moment of greatest need.

7.2 pm  
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The joy of the Home Office is that one can never quite understand the extent of its tentacles, so it was with some surprise—but, indeed, some pleasure—that I was called to respond on this important debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) on raising the subject, particularly given today’s weather. Nationally we are all feeling the heat a bit—not just those of us who are awaiting that phone call—so it is very tempting to seek cool waters in which to dip our toes or to submerge ourselves in a little further. She has shown great timing in securing this debate this evening.

I must start by saying how terribly affecting I found the hon. Lady’s descriptions of the incidents on the River Clyde in her constituency. The terrible experiences that her constituents and other families have suffered are heartbreaking. For the love of your life to meet their end in a matter of moments in water—that must be every parent’s worst nightmare. I very much reiterate and emphasise the hon. Lady’s message that removing or damaging life belts or other public rescue equipment is incredibly serious and can put people’s lives at risk.

As the hon. Lady may appreciate, the matters she has raised are devolved to Scotland. I will deal with the details of the legislation in a moment. I genuinely welcome the opportunity to set out the approach to and understanding of the extent of incidents across the United Kingdom, and the UK Government’s efforts to tackle them.

We know that on average 400 people drown across the UK in our rivers and seas each year and a further 200 people take their own lives in our waters. People who had no intention of entering the water in the first place account for 44% of drowning fatalities. This happens despite the enormous efforts of search and rescue and emergency services, who respond to around 35,000 water-related rescue and flood events each year. Indeed only in the past month or so in my county of Lincolnshire—I am delighted to be joined by my Lincolnshire neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson)—we have seen for ourselves the terrible impact flood events can have on people’s homes and ways of life.

As Members may be aware, in 2016 the National Water Safety Forum, whose members include organisations such as the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, put in place a national drowning prevention strategy, which aims to halve deaths in the UK by 2026. The Government support the strategy fully. I note that in Scotland, Water Safety Scotland brings together people and organisations from all over the country who over many years have developed a variety of water safety initiatives, including the drowning prevention strategy, which complements the UK strategy while taking into account the unique situation in Scotland—for example the legal and education systems and the geographical differences. These national strategies are supported by a range of local initiatives, such as the new tidal Thames drowning prevention strategy established by the Tidal Thames Water Safety Forum and the work being taken forward by Glasgow’s Water Safety Group.

We are very clear that if someone is in trouble in the water, the availability of public rescue equipment is critical to reduce the likelihood of their drowning. Early intervention by a bystander may be the first and last opportunity for rescue—indeed the hon. Member for Glasgow Central mentioned the rurality of many of these locations—and theft and vandalism of equipment potentially endangers the lives of both the person in the water and those who would rescue them. As the recent awareness-raising campaign by Glasgow’s Water Safety Group made clear, “taking a lifebelt is taking a life.”

Members rightly raised the question of education, and through the National Water Safety Forum’s UK drowning prevention strategy, we have highlighted the importance of water safety education at primary school and, where required, at key stage 3. I have seen some of that work myself, and it is very good.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of legislation. This is where devolution rears its head. If the hon. Lady is inviting the UK Government to take back powers, I will ensure that the new Prime Minister is made aware of that. In England and Wales, under the Criminal Damage Act 1971 vandalism of life-saving equipment may be an offence that carries a maximum penalty of 10 years’ imprisonment, and an aggravated offence of that nature, which includes an intention to endanger life, attracts a potential maximum sentence of life imprisonment. The legislation in England and Wales therefore has the capacity to address the problem. However, antisocial behaviour and criminal damage legislation is devolved to Scotland, so it may well be that the hon. Lady’s lobbying should be directed at the Scottish Government to ensure—[Interruption.] I suspect she has that covered and is on it.

Sadly, because the matter is devolved, I cannot change the Scottish law, but the hon. Lady made her case very powerfully in this Chamber tonight. I note also that antisocial behaviour policy is devolved, and the 2014 legislation, which covers England and Wales, does not apply to Scotland.

Alison Thewliss: I am lobbying in all directions on this, the Minister can be assured of that. The issue seems to me to be that current provision is not providing enough of a deterrent and this is still happening right across different places, so perhaps a different approach, or more knowledge of that offence, might help.

Victoria Atkins: I think it is a combination. As we know all too well from the many debates we have had on the very serious topics that are looked after by the Home Office, legislation is but the first step. We have to ensure that people understand the legislation, and that the courts, the police and others who have an impact in this area apply the law appropriately. An offence of aggravated criminal damage carries the maximum sentence of imprisonment that we can impose in this country, so it may well be that getting the message out there through
the various schemes that have been outlined in this debate is a very much the way to ensure that people understand just how serious it is when they attempt to interfere with equipment.

Mr Sweeney: I certainly agree about the criminal sanctions, but the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) also made an interesting point about the technology and infrastructure that Glasgow is using, which is quite efficient. Could the Home Office find a way to jointly fund national work to understand what technologies are available and consider adopting a national standard for life-saving equipment on rivers and canals? Could it also look at ways of using new technologies so that if a lifebelt is tampered with or removed, the authorities are automatically informed through technology such as remote sensors, and can ensure that is rapidly replaced? In that way, they would be aware that something had been damaged at a particular location.

Victoria Atkins: The idea of technology is a very interesting one, and I suspect that it is being looked at—through our forums, for example. I am not in a position to commit the Home Office to anything at this stage, but my officials heard the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion, and I anticipate their looking into it.

This has been an important debate, and I thank hon. Members across the House for their contributions. Water safety is not to be taken lightly, and those who vandalise equipment must be made to understand that their actions could be life-threatening. We have robust measures in place to tackle such antisocial behaviour and to safeguard the public from drowning. I very much hope that the House is reassured that there are measures in place to tackle the issues that have been raised, and I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this important debate to the House, particularly in the heat of the summer sun.

Mr Speaker: Has the Minister concluded her oration?

Victoria Atkins: There is great deal I could talk about, Mr Speaker, but it would probably not be on topic.

Mr Speaker: I will take that as a yes. We are deeply obliged to her.

Question put and agreed to.

7.12 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Climate Change Adaptation

1. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What plans has she to implement the recommendations on climate change adaptation in the May 2019 Committee on Climate Change report on net zero carbon emissions.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): The Government recognise the need for urgent action on climate change—on both mitigation and adaptation. For example, we are investing £2.6 billion over six years in flood defences. Some sectors are already adapting to the changing climate. When I visited the Fruit Focus event in Kent, I learned that the climate is now better suited for apricot production and for vineyards. The good news is that this will mean more high-quality English sparkling wine to toast the health and success of our new Prime Minister.

Liz Twist: Do I detect an end-of-term feel about the Minister’s comments?

What analysis has the Minister undertaken of the impact on homes, infrastructure and communities as a result of climate change over the next 10 to 20 years? Will he share that analysis with the House, so that Members are able to assess the impact on our constituencies?

Mr Goodwill: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. The Committee on Climate Change assessed 33 sectors, and we welcome its report. We are committed to taking robust action to improve resilience to climate change. We will formally respond to the Committee’s detailed recommendations in October, in line with the timetable set out in the Climate Change Act 2008, and that will include the way climate change affects communities.

2. Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): What steps she is taking to designate forestry investment zones in England.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): We are piloting the first forestry investment zone in Cumbria to learn how best to support long-term forestry investment. I was delighted to visit Northumberland last week to discuss with my hon. Friend and others how to increase tree planting rates. We have everyone from the county council to the national park agreeing to work together to increase woodland creation in that great county.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I welcome the Minister’s visit to Northumberland last week and thank him for his kind words. Does he agree that what we need is a whole of Northumberland FIZ, which will be structured to allow long-term private investment to support local landowners to plant and, importantly, maintain extensive commercial and amenity planting projects, so that our 11 million new carbon sinks—our trees—will be a reality, not just a plan?

David Rutley: I welcome my hon. Friend’s further comments on the development of a FIZ in Northumberland and completely agree that we need to do more to make our long-term tree planting aspirations a reality. As we discussed last week, we need to explore further the opportunities around the potential FIZ in Northumberland, basing them around the lessons learned from the Cumbria pilot. I welcome the positive work that has already taken place. We clearly need to do a lot more to achieve our ambitious targets across the country and in Northumberland.

3. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Minister might be toasting the new Prime Minister, but I do wonder how much hot air is being generated and what contribution that will make to the net emissions target. The Scottish Government have committed to net zero by 2045, rather than the UK Government’s 2050 target. Is the UK not willing to match that level of ambition?

Mr Goodwill: When it comes to hot air, pots and kettles spring to mind.

I look forward to working with the Scottish Administration to achieve the target. This is not a party political issue. Every single part of this House wants to take action on climate change, and it is vital that we do so to deliver a cleaner and greener planet in the future.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): This is perfect weather for barbecues and enjoying Scottish beef. Does the Minister agree that the beef industry is doing its bit to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from burping cows?

Mr Goodwill: Methane is a very potent greenhouse gas, but it is interesting to note that, unlike carbon dioxide, which takes 100 years to dissipate, methane dissipates in about 12 years. That means that if we can reduce the current rate of methane production—never mind net zero—we will actually reduce the amount of methane in the atmosphere, which will be an important way of contributing to our net zero targets.

4. Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that tackling and adapting to climate change has the virtue not only of being the right policy—making sure that we continue to be a world leader in this regard—but of being popular?

Mr Goodwill: As we switch the way we support our farmers from the basic payment system to paying public money for public goods, getting action on climate change will be just one of those public goods that we can deliver outside the European Union.
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister knows that the Tory Administration in the 18th and 19th centuries stole the public land from the people. That is the truth of the matter. The enclosure Acts were a stain on the history of this country. Is it not about time that we gave that land back and grew trees on it—and that we did so seriously, not through playing around with words?

David Rutley: Of course we need to do more to plant more trees, and we are taking that action. We are already committed to planting 11 million trees by 2022 and we are well on target to achieve that aim, but our aspirations are much bigger—going to 12% level of woodland cover by 2060.

Plastic Pollution

3. Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle plastic pollution.

17. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle plastic pollution.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Theresa Villiers) rose—

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Theresa Villiers: Thank you. It is good to be back at this Dispatch Box.

Our priority is preventing plastic waste from entering the environment in the first instance. The resources and waste strategy sets out our plans to eliminate avoidable plastic waste, including measures to tackle certain single-use plastic items. This week we published Government responses to consultations on measures that include making recycling easier and ensuring that producers pay the full cost of managing their packaging waste responsibly.

Vicky Ford: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her new role.

Pupils from Kings Road Primary School and the Bishops’ Primary School in Chelmsford want to do more to reduce single-use plastic. I have obviously given them copies of “Vicky’s Guide to Going Green”, but what top tips would my right hon. Friend like to share?

Theresa Villiers: There are many top tips in our 25-year environment plan, and I commend my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), for his world-leading work on this matter. A key message to get across to all the schoolchildren around the country who want to take part in tackling plastic waste is: don’t drop litter.

Sir David Amess: I also congratulate my right hon. Friend on her appointment. Will she join me in congratulating the students from the National Citizen Service I met at Roots Hall in Southend on Monday, who, inspired by David Attenborough, are right at this very minute picking plastic from our beautiful coastline in Southend?

Theresa Villiers: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Both questions illustrate that there is a real attitude out there among the public that they want to be part of resolving this urgent problem. The Government will continue to support organisations such as the National Citizen Service to engage young people and ensure that they are playing a part in the Government’s determination to address this problem because people are concerned about it.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Nearly 40 million plastic bottles are used in the UK every day, but the Government’s bottle return scheme does not kick in for four years. Why so long?

Theresa Villiers: We have gone further than any other Government in history on tackling plastic waste. I acknowledge the concern felt about the matter that the hon. Gentleman has raised. We will always try to move as fast as we can to ensure that we are taking the most effective action possible, but we also need to take time to ensure that we get it right. I assure him that I will be working hard to ensure that this action is delivered as soon as possible.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I welcome the new Secretary of State to her place.

On 1 May, this House unanimously supported Labour’s declaration of an environment and climate emergency. The Center for International Environmental Law predicts that plastics will contribute to 13% of global carbon emissions by 2050 if no action is taken, yet the Government’s plans do not envisage that extended producer responsibility for packaging will come into force before 2023 or that a 75% recycling rate will be achieved before 2050. Does the Secretary of State accept that the emergency requires much faster action?

Theresa Villiers: I look forward to working with the shadow Front Benchers on these issues. We have gone further and faster than the previous Labour Government with radical changes, including the plastic bag tax and our plans to ban plastic stirrers and other plastic products. We are a world-leading country on this issue, and we will continue to be so because we are determined to tackle the problem.

Air Pollution: Local Authority Funding

4. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What assessment the Government have made of the adequacy of funding allocated to support local authority implementation of air pollution reduction plans.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Government have invested £3.5 billion in improving air quality and £495 million is specifically set aside for councils where they are in breach of nitrogen dioxide limits. We will continue to support councils in a variety of ways to improve air quality.

Jeff Smith: Residents and businesses want to play their part in Greater Manchester’s plans to reduce air pollution, but unless the Government will properly support plans for vehicle upgrades and for retrofitting, many businesses will not be able to afford to do so. When will the Government give the clarity and the assurances on funding that businesses in Greater Manchester need?
Dr Coffey: I have had to send back the plan to the Mayor of Greater Manchester because it is not ambitious enough in making changes in Manchester as quickly as possible to improve air quality for the residents there.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Local authorities will not be able to fix the massive air pollution that is caused by a third runway expansion at Heathrow. The new Secretary of State and I both voted against that plan, and of course the new Prime Minister is a long-standing opponent. But pollution goes far wider than air pollution—it is also noise pollution—and it is in conflict with our law on net zero carbon emissions by 2050 that this House passed unanimously. Will the new Secretary of State now insist that this project is put on hold and that a review of it is undertaken before any further work is done?

Dr Coffey: It is the absolute priority for the people who are developing the third runway to come forward with a plan that meets environmental targets in law. If they do not, they will not get the consent to make it happen. However, I am highly confident that the operators of Heathrow airport will be able to devise such a plan.

13. [912195] Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): People with lung conditions find it really difficult to breathe on days like today. Poor air quality contributes to poor lung health, and the World Health Organisation calls this a public health emergency. So will the Secretary of State, as her first act in post, introduce a clean air Act as a priority and a matter of urgency?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to talk about the importance of tackling air pollution with regard to lung health and other medical conditions. That is why we have been consistently working on this ever since I have been an Environment Minister, and air quality continues to improve. We are very conscious that the clean air strategy was welcomed by the World Health Organisation as being world-leading and something that it wanted other countries to pursue. The hon. Lady will well know that measures are being planned on air quality that will be in the forthcoming environment Bill.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Many parents, including those in Redditch, are worried about the impact of air pollution on their children’s lungs, especially when they are going to and from school. Will the new Secretary of State, who I warmly welcome to her place, ensure that local authorities’ funding under the clean air strategy is adequate to help them to tackle this problem?

Dr Coffey: I hope that my hon. Friend is aware that councils already have many powers to improve issues relating to cars and other vehicles, especially around schools. I would encourage her to work with Redditch Borough Council and Worcestershire County Council on taking advantage of those powers. She will also be aware that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport has indicated that we are going to increase the fines for idling.

### Tree Planting

5. Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): What plans she has to increase tree planting rates. [912187]

11. Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What plans she has to increase tree planting rates. [912193]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): To encourage more planting, we have modified our main grant schemes and announced additional funding of £10 million for urban trees and £50 million for the woodland carbon guarantee scheme. We have invested £5.7 million in the northern forest. We have also reappointed our tree champion to develop our tree strategy so that we can plan to consult on this later in the year. That demonstrates our commitment to achieving our goal of planting 11 million trees during this Parliament, and our wider aspirations.

Julia Lopez: I congratulate the Secretary of State on her welcome return to the top table. Earlier this year, her predecessor visited the wonderful Thames Chase community forest in my constituency and planted a tree to contribute to this growing woodland. With the forest likely to be impacted by the lower Thames crossing, will the Minister provide an update on the Department’s biodiversity net gain plans to ensure that major infrastructure projects have the potential to enhance, not detract from, precious green spaces?

David Rutley: I know how hard my hon. Friend works for her constituency. We have committed to mandating biodiversity net gain through the forthcoming environment Bill. That policy will deliver measurable improvements to biodiversity through development including housing and local infrastructure, thereby making sure that development has a positive environmental impact through habitat creation or enhancement. The Government are also exploring the best approaches to net gain for nationally significant infrastructure, including the lower Thames crossing.

Maria Caulfield: Trees are a vital tool in combating carbon emissions, but in Seaford and Alfriston in my constituency, trees are having to be cut down because of elm disease. What support can the Minister give my local council to ensure not just that those trees are replaced but that even more are planted?

David Rutley: As my hon. Friend knows, I am very aware of Seaford and Alfriston, and while no specific grants are currently available to replace elm in urban settings, there are opportunities for funding new planting in and around our towns and cities under the recently launched £10 million urban tree challenge fund. That fund will support the planting of at least 130,000 trees across towns and cities in England and contribute towards our manifesto commitment of planting 1 million urban trees by 2022.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Hyndburn Borough Council has planted an awful lot of trees. In fact, I believe that it has planted more trees than any other borough in Lancashire. When will the Government
reward Labour councils such as Hyndburn Borough Council for the work they have done to meet the Government’s targets?

David Rutley: I praise the work they are doing. There is a huge opportunity with the northern forest, which the Government have helped to kick-start. It will make a huge difference, working through many community forests. I was pleased to be able to plant the first Government-funded tree in Bury just a few months ago.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response. Tree cover across the UK mainland is approximately 12%, and in Northern Ireland it is only 8%. What is the Minister doing collectively with the devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to improve the lungs of the world by planting more trees?

David Rutley: I praise the work that is going on across the country. Clearly, there is important work going on in Scotland that we need to learn from. We are absolutely committed to taking forward this important work, as I know the hon. Gentleman is, because we need many more trees to achieve our targets in addressing and tackling climate change.

Single Use Plastics Directive

6. Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): What her timescale is for bringing forward legislative proposals to implement the single use plastics directive 2019/904. [912189]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Government strongly supported the single use plastics directive, partly because we were already undertaking several of the actions proposed. I am confident that the necessary regulations will be brought in within two years, as happens with directives, but as I say, we are already on the case.

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. I recently arranged for a bottle deposit scheme of the type used in Norway to come to Cheltenham high street, and I know from the reaction of my constituents that there is a huge demand to drive down the number of plastic bottles in our environment. Of course we have to get the detail right, but does the Minister agree that we should look at such a scheme very carefully, with a view to introducing it as quickly as possible?

Dr Coffey: Indeed. The Government published their response to the consultation just the other day, and we have indicated again our support for continuing with the scheme. I know that people are impatient—I am impatient. I have now been to about seven countries to look at their deposit return schemes. It is complex. We have the biggest on-the-go market of any country in Europe, and we need to ensure that we have a system that works, alongside all the other reforms we are making, such as extended producer responsibility and the plastics tax. It is important to ensure that those are co-ordinated and will have the desired effect.

Access to Food

7. Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on helping to ensure that everyone has access to (a) safe, (b) healthy and (c) affordable food. [912189]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): Ministers and officials regularly discuss all aspects of food security, including accessibility. We have long-established relationships with industry and work collaboratively to ensure that the UK continues to have access to safe, nutritious and affordable food from a wide range of sources, particularly from British farmers. I plan to visit the Game Fair tomorrow, so I will make a plug for British game and the grouse that will be coming into our larders following the glorious twelfth.

Bill Wiggin: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer, particularly because my newly appointed right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has not had a chance to speak to her Cabinet colleagues. The problem with safe food is that we need to be able to read on the label that it is safe. Natasha Ednan-Laperouse died because she ate food that was contaminated with sesame seeds, but the label did not make that clear. We still have a problem in this country with honesty in labelling. Can more be done, to ensure that the label says what it is?

Mr Goodwill: Clear labelling is vital, particularly when it comes to ingredients that may provoke allergic reactions. We have learned a very sad lesson from that situation, and the Government have responded.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): On the subject of the Game Fair, it is very sad that Chris Packham has been banned from attending to speak out against grouse shooting. I would have thought that the Minister would welcome free speech on the subject.

On food, the Government grant for school meals has not risen in the last five years. It is £2.30 per pupil. It is really difficult to provide nutritious meals for children for that amount. Can he speak to the Secretary of State for Education about that?

Mr Goodwill: I will certainly speak to the new Secretary of State for Education, a fellow Scarborian, to discuss that issue. It is very important that we have good, nutritious school meals available for children.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a great pleasure to see the new Secretary of State in her place. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) for all the work he did on agriculture. I want to emphasise that, as we produce food in the future, we can have a better environment, but let us use all the technologies and everything available so that we can have affordable, safe food.

Mr Goodwill: Yes, absolutely. There are a number of new technologies that we can use, not least the opportunities that gene editing may offer to produce healthier, more productive crops in our fields.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I welcome the new Secretary of State to her place. Changes to the Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies (England) Regulations 2018, in line with changes to EU rules for ovine age identification, would go a long way to help ensure access to safe and healthy food and would help our farmers, but I am repeatedly being fobbed off with an excuse that a consultation will be coming soon. When will we see it?
Mr Goodwill: Having spent a lot of my life looking into sheep's mouths in ageing them, I know how important it is to ensure that we have a system that we can demonstrate clearly does not present any risk to health. We were keen to move away from carcase splitting. We took a precautionary approach because of the delays in delivering Brexit, but I hope we can make progress once we have left the European Union.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Access to food also requires access to labour to plant, care for and pick it. Over the last year, I have had many representations from farmers in my constituency and from the National Farmers Union. What representations is my right hon. Friend making to Cabinet colleagues advocating a points-based system to make sure that that has sufficient flex so that there is access to labour not just seasonally, but all year round?

Mr Goodwill: My right hon. Friend and I are both former Immigration Ministers, so we know this issue. Indeed, one of the points made to me at the Fruit Focus event was the need to access labour to pick our fruit. The pilot scheme that my right hon. Friend brought forward during her time at the Home Office is a step in the right direction, but we do need to ensure we can have the workforce to pick the fruit, particularly given the weakness of the pound and the fact that perhaps not all European Union citizens are as attracted to come to the UK as they were.

Fast Fashion

8. Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): What plans the Government have to reduce the (a) environmental and (b) social impact of fast fashion. [912190]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Theresa Villiers): The Government will be working through the Waste and Resources Action Programme and with industry on developing an ambitious new phase of the sustainable clothing action plan. We are planning to develop regulatory standards and labels to support durable, repairable and recyclable products; consult on an extended producer responsibility scheme; and support innovation in textile recycling. We are also increasing the transparency of reporting required on modern slavery, and continuing to prioritise the enforcement of national minimum wage legislation.

Mary Creagh: I welcome the Secretary of State to her place, but the announcements she has just made will not go far enough to tackle the fast fashion epidemic, which is being promoted by shows such as “Love Island”. It may be bikini weather outside, but when bikinis are being sold for £1 on fast fashion websites, it is clear that workers are not getting what they need. When is she going to bring in extended producer responsibility and ban clothing from landfill?

Theresa Villiers: First, I very much look forward to working with the hon. Lady’s Environmental Audit Committee on these and other matters. I very much hope to appear in front of the members of her Committee when there is time in their diary.

The hon. Lady raises very important points. I think there is real consensus across the House that we need action. The Government have a credible plan, which we are delivering. As I said in response to earlier questions, we need to ensure that we get this right. I can assure her that we will be moving towards solutions on these problems in response to public concern.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree with me that fashion provides very important livelihoods for people in low-income countries around the world? As we, rightly, address the question of sustainability, we must never throw away their livelihoods, which are so important. In fact, we must seek to ensure that those livelihoods are improved.

Theresa Villiers: With all these matters, our goal should be to pursue both prosperity and environmental sustainability at the same time. My hon. Friend makes a very valid point that in taking forward our new regulatory structures to tackle this problem, we must also take into account the impact on developing countries and the interests of people on low incomes.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to her place. As we have heard, fast fashion has a negative impact on our environment. The Secretary of State mentioned environmental sustainability, but she repeatedly voted against measures to protect the environment and tackle climate change. How can we trust her to deliver the transformative change that we need to tackle the climate and environmental emergency we all face? Will she confirm that net zero is still the Government’s target, and if so, will she commit to taking the necessary steps that she previously voted against?

Theresa Villiers: I do not know whose voting record the hon. Lady has been looking at, but it does not sound like mine. The Government are doing more on climate change than ever before, and we are one of the first developed countries in the world to commit to the net zero target—not something that our Labour predecessors were prepared to do. I have backed, with enthusiasm, a succession of vital measures taken by the Government—for example, to ensure that more of our electricity is generated by renewables than ever before.

Topical Questions

T1. [912201] Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Theresa Villiers): I am delighted to have been asked to take up the outstanding work previously begun by my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), and the team of dedicated public servants at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and its agencies. I look forward to working to deliver the Government’s historic commitment to hand on the natural environment in a better state than we found it, by driving up animal welfare, championing and supporting our country’s fantastic food, farming and fisheries, and ensuring that we seize the opportunities offered by Brexit.

Maria Caulfield: I warmly welcome the Secretary of State to her role. My constituency has some of the best vineyards in the country, and places such as Breaky
Bottom, Ridgeview and Rathfinny produce award-winning English sparkling wine. What steps will the Secretary of State take to promote English sparkling wine at home and abroad, and may I invite her to visit one of those vineyards to taste that wine for herself?

Theresa Villiers: I would be delighted to take up the invitation to do a little tasting of the fantastic wines to which my hon. Friend refers. The GREAT campaign has a strong focus on the brilliant high-quality food we produce in this country. In June, English sparkling wine was promoted at various events in Japan, and the campaign plans to return there in September and October. In August and September we will support Wine GB at events in the United States.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State to her new position. When will we welcome back the Agriculture Bill and the Fisheries Bill? It is about time we saw them. We last saw them seven months ago, and we need them back.

Theresa Villiers: As the hon. Gentleman will know, such matters are in the hands of the Leader of the House and the official channels, so he might wish to raise the matter during the business question. I assure him that we wish to press ahead with these matters as soon as we are able to do so. This Government are getting on and delivering on their priorities, including the environment.

Dr Coffey: I would be delighted to take up the invitation to do a little tasting of the fantastic wines to which my hon. Friend refers. The GREAT campaign has a strong focus on the brilliant high-quality food we produce in this country. In June, English sparkling wine was promoted at various events in Japan, and the campaign plans to return there in September and October. In August and September we will support Wine GB at events in the United States.

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman has raised that issue before. It is important that people obey the law, but I encourage him and others to take evidence to the police so that the Crown Prosecution Service can take forward convictions where that is appropriate.

Dr Coffey: The Government share my concern that the Environment Agency states never be tolerated. The Government share my concern that the Environment Agency states that Yorkshire Water has unacceptable environmental pollution performance, and that Yorkshire Water discharged sewage into the River Wharfe on no fewer than 123 days last year?

Dr Coffey: The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): I am grateful for the answer that my right hon. Friend gives me. I am grateful for the answer that my right hon. Friend gives me. With colleagues what else we might be able to do to send the clearest possible signal that this behaviour should never be tolerated.

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It undertakes checks of the ecological health of rivers regularly and it will, as will Ofwat, take action against Yorkshire Water when it fails.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): Mansfield and Warsop are full of animal lovers, as is the rest of the UK. News of tougher sentencing for animal abuse is very welcome. What steps will the Department take, perhaps working with charities such as Battersea and others, to make sure that everybody is aware of the new sentencing rules, so that animal cruelty can be prosecuted as robustly as possible?

Theresa Villiers: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He makes a very good point. It is not enough just to change the law; we need to make sure there is a greater awareness of the changes that I hope are soon to be implemented. I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the coalition of charities that campaigned so hard for the proposed legislation, which will shortly come back to the House, to ensure that we raise the maximum sentences for animal cruelty.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): In private, the Government are apparently briefing local resilience forums about the impact of a no-deal Brexit on food supply and food prices, and are predicting mass disruption. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether that is true, and will she stop keeping people in the dark? Will she publish this information, so all of us can see whether there are adequate contingencies in place?

David Rutley: Of course it is right that any responsible Government should prepare for any scenario. We are working closely with all stakeholders to make sure there is a proper flow and supply of food, whatever the scenario.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): On Saturday, I met impassioned climate change activists Cliff Kendall and Donna Tyrelli. Cliff Kendall is on hunger strike to protect the environment. They suggest that the average household can reduce its energy bills by more than £250 a year by switching to renewable energy suppliers. What steps is the Department taking to educate households about such green initiatives that help to cut the cost of living?

Theresa Villiers: There is a range of programmes under way to encourage people to switch, both to ensure that they get value for money and to talk up the advantages of moving to a more sustainable electricity supply. I will certainly be taking a personal interest in these matters in my new role.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Improving the energy efficiency of our homes is one of the best ways to tackle climate change, yet since 2012 there has been a 95% fall in home insulation programmes. What has gone wrong?

Theresa Villiers: The Government have a strong record on climate change, but I acknowledge that we need to do more to ensure that people are able to insulate their homes. We will be working on that in the months ahead.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): A year ago, Lewis Pugh was completing his long swim along the length of the English channel, from Land’s End to Dover. That incredible feat highlighted the need for full protection of our seas. What plans does the Minister have to expand the number of areas of UK waters under full marine protection?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Lewis Pugh was one of our “Year of Green Action” ambassadors and I am delighted that he continues to raise awareness of this issue. My hon. Friend will be aware of the 41 new marine conservation zones that we have designated. It would really help if the Scottish Government could also start designating more marine conservation zones, so that together as a United Kingdom we would have more than 30% of our areas protected. I wish my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) well with his highly protected marine areas review.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the new Secretary of State apologise to Scottish farmers for Westminster’s stealing £160 million of EU convergence uplift, and will she do something to sort out that injustice?

Mr Goodwill: We have regular conversations with the Scottish Administration. We have made it clear that as we fund the new schemes in the United Kingdom, they will not be Barnettised and will take account of the nature of Scottish agriculture. Scotland will get a fair settlement.

CAROLYN McCOOK

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Behaviour on Social Media

1. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to promote positive behaviour on social media.

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church of England supports the Government’s aim to make this country the safest place to go online and has submitted evidence to the Government’s Online Harms White Paper. On 1 July 2019, the Church launched its digital charter, which thousands of individuals around the globe have signed up to and which the Government have welcomed and support.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. I am sure that she will share my serious concern about the level of hatred, intolerance and rage that appears online, especially on Twitter, sometimes with devastating consequences for young people who are very vulnerable. We have seen tragic examples of that. Will she take our appeal to the Church of England, asking that it does everything possible to work with other organisations to try to instil and inculcate in the next generation the importance of behaving normally and politely on social media?

Dame Caroline Spelman: As one of the largest providers of school education, the Church of England is encouraging all its schools to support the digital charter initiative. However, safe internet use applies to people who have faith or have no faith at all, and those of all ages. All Members of this House will be aware of the hate and hostility that many in this Chamber face on a daily basis, and we are working closely with all stakeholders to make sure that they get value for money and to talk up the advantages of moving to a more sustainable electricity supply. I will certainly be taking a personal interest in these matters in my new role.

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Theresa Villiers: The Government have a strong record on climate change, but I acknowledge that we need to do more to ensure that people are able to insulate their homes. We will be working on that in the months ahead.
basis. I urge all colleagues to consider joining up and supporting the digital charter so that we can foster a more positive experience for people online.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Can I urge the right hon. Lady to make sure that all the bishops—we seem to have a lot of them in the Church of England now—lead this campaign? I am sure that Rose, our wonderful chaplain, is going to be a very energetic Bishop of Dover. We all wish her well and will miss her, but let us get these bishops doing a bit of leadership on issues such as social media.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The bishops are all participating in social media and they are signed up to this charter. Let me share with colleagues some of the things that the charter advocates: that “what we post online” ought to be “fair and factual”; that we should engage constructively and think “the best of people”; that we should consider “the language we use”; and that we should “use social media in a way that genuinely engages others.”

These are good principles.

Since the Speaker’s Chaplain has been mentioned by the hon. Gentleman, I say for the record that I condemn absolutely the very unpleasant article in The Spectator about the Rev. Rose, who has served this House outstandingly; I spring to her defence.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady. I am bound to say to her that I do not read the organ in question and therefore I am not familiar with that piece. I have no idea about it and frankly have absolutely no interest in it whatsoever. I know the Rev. Rose extremely well. She has proved to be a magnificent and enormously popular servant of this House. She will be a wonderful bishop. Dover’s gain is our loss, and we wish her well.

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am bound to say to her that I do not read the language we use; and that we should consider “the best of people”; that we should engage constructively and think “the best of people”; that we should consider “the language we use”; and that we should “use social media in a way that genuinely engages others.”

Telecommunications Masts in Parishes

2. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If the Church of England will expedite the process by which parishes apply to host telecommunications masts.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Following on from my right hon. Friend’s question to me last month, I raised these concerns with the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and I have met with BT, EE and some of the small providers, including one from my right hon. Friend’s constituency, to discuss the challenges of providing reliable rural communications infrastructure.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Will my right hon. Friend also do the right hon. Lady a great service by saying yes to that. Do we not have a go at the Ministry of Justice and ask it to put sufficient resource into the tribunal system, so that case law can be expedited to make the new telecommunications code work?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I absolutely say yes to that. Perhaps my right hon. Friend would like to join me in going to meet the new occupants of the positions concerned.

It appears clear that the new digital code tends to favour large providers, and the consequence of their preference for using existing infrastructure is a greater digital divide.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Churches, by their very nature, are historically and architecturally important, and new telecommunications masts could have an impact on buildings. What is being done to preserve these buildings and ensure that their architectural and historical value is retained?

Dame Caroline Spelman: That is a very important question, because the Church of England has put its entire infrastructure at the disposal of providers, so that we can, using towers and spires, beam a signal into hotspots. Historic England is quite comfortable about listed buildings carrying small signal boosters, which are not intrusive.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Spending on Digital Campaigning

3. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the commission on reporting spending on digital campaigning in elections.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South): Transparency around spending on campaigning at elections helps voters to have confidence that campaigners follow the rules and limits on spending. Earlier this week, the Electoral Commission presented to Government statutory codes of practice on candidate and political party spending. If enacted, these codes will provide further clarity and consistency in reporting election spending, including on digital campaigning.

Alan Brown: I thank the hon. Lady for that answer. That concurs with reports from the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Electoral Commission, which are clear that the law on digital political advertising badly needs updating. Some people have called for a database of online political ads, giving full information on content, target and reach, and spend. That should guarantee transparency. Is the hon. Lady aware of measures being taken to reform the law, and does she share my concern that so many people from Vote Leave who abused the system are now in the UK Government?

Bridget Phillipson: The social media companies’ voluntary ad libraries and reports are useful tools in monitoring who is spending money on elections and other political campaigning. In its response to the online harms consultation, the commission recommended that the new regulator ensure common standards and obligations on what social media companies publish about political adverts and that there be significant sanctions if companies do not publish meaningful information.
Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): Following the exoneration of Darren Grimes in a recent court case, what confidence does the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission have in the commission?

Bridget Phillipson: In the past four years, the commission has carried out approximately 450 investigations into a variety of electoral offences. The results of five of these have been challenged in the courts, and the recent appeal is the only challenge that has been upheld. The commission will review the full written detail of the judgment once it is made public, before deciding on next steps, including any appeal.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

**Cox Report**

4. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What progress the commission has made in implementing the Cox report recommendations.  

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): Two of the three principal recommendations made by Dame Laura Cox have now been implemented. Implementation of the third, on the independence of the independent complaints and grievance scheme from MP involvement, is under way. The commission will be considering options in the autumn.

Justin Madders: As the right hon. Gentleman will be aware, last week we debated the Gemma White report and the real concerns of staff about the process. Does he agree that only when we have a procedure that is truly independent of Parliament, with effective, transparent sanctions, will we get the confidence of staff?

Tom Brake: I agree with that point. The hon. Gentleman may be aware that a staff team have been set up to look at the issue of independence and are considering the options. They have an independent challenge group, which will look at, for instance, the impact on parliamentary independence, the ability of Members of Parliament to operate, and ensuring that we have a system in which staff will have confidence.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): On that matter, if staff want to be treated as though this is a normal place to work, and therefore to be treated separately from the involvement of Members of Parliament, why not simply treat them as though they did work in any normal business and use the normal facilities of the law?

Tom Brake: I think that is a good point, and if the hon. Gentleman wants to submit his idea to the working group that is looking at the issue, it might want to take it into consideration when formulating responses.

**CHURCH COMMISSIONERS**

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

**FCO Support for Persecuted Christians**

5. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to help implement the recommendations in the final report of the Bishop of Truro’s independent review for the Foreign Secretary of FCO support for persecuted Christians.

Dame Caroline Spelman: We have had quite a lot of opportunities at hustings to ask quite a few leadership contenders what they would do about the report on Foreign Office support for persecuted Christians, and I am pleased to say that the new Prime Minister did give a pledge to follow through on this. If hon. Members have time to read the report, they will find that it is very revealing, and it acknowledged that a great deal needs to be done to provide more support for persecuted Christians around the world.

Diana Johnson: On 8 July, the now Prime Minister said: “If I am fortunate enough to become PM, I will always prioritise protecting religious freedoms and stand up for those facing persecution.” I know that it is very early days, but what plans does the right hon. Lady have to speak with the Prime Minister about exactly what he will do to support persecuted Christians around the world?

Dame Caroline Spelman: We have had quite a lot of opportunities at hustings to ask quite a few leadership contenders what they would do about the report on Foreign Office support for persecuted Christians, and I am pleased to say that the new Prime Minister did give a pledge to follow through on this. If hon. Members have time to read the report, they will find that it is very revealing, and it acknowledged that a great deal needs to be done to provide more support for persecuted Christians around the world.

Steve Double: One of the many important findings of the Bishop of Truro’s report is that it highlighted a lack of religious literacy at the Home Office, particularly when dealing with Christians fleeing persecution and seeking asylum. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Home Office should take heed of this recommendation, and does she believe that the Church has a role to play in improving religious literacy across Whitehall?
Dame Caroline Spelman: The report, which of course is a Foreign Office report, does reveal that lack of religious literacy, but the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster both wanted the proposal for improving religious literacy to extend to all Departments, because in a way there is hardly a Department that is not touched by the need for better religious literacy. I know that the issue of religious literacy in asylum applications has been raised in the other place and that bishops have had meetings with Ministers.

David Hanson: In a letter to me, the Government have indicated that they will look at sanctions against those who persecute Christians, or indeed those of other religious beliefs. Has the right hon. Lady had an opportunity to discuss with the Government what form those sanctions might take?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I have not discussed that with the new incumbent at the Foreign Office just yet, but I think that we need to go through all these serious recommendations that were made through the excellent work of the Bishop of Truro. For example, one of the recommendations, which I commend to the House, is a UN resolution to better protect Christians in the middle east and north Africa, whose population has dwindled from 20% to just 4%.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Last week, a number of MPs were the target of some really unpleasant social media attacks, simply for speaking and then voting in a conscience vote in this place according to their biblical beliefs on marriage and the sanctity of life. What is the Church of England doing to uphold freedom of speech and religion for Christians in the UK? This is a growing concern for thousands of Christians in this country today.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The hon. Lady might not have heard the answer to an earlier question, but actually the Church has seized the initiative by launching its own guidelines on safe and positive conduct on the internet. I commend that guidance to all Members present. It is certainly important that religious difference is respected. Dialogue is a two-way business, but as the Archbishop of Canterbury has said, the Church needs to model disagreeing well.

**HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION**

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

**Designated Smoking Areas: Health Risks**

6. Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment the Commission has made of the health risks of having designated smoking areas on the parliamentary estate.  

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The Administration Committee considers proposals for the provision of smoking areas. I can inform the hon. Member that, for instance, on 11 March it endorsed a proposal to close the smoking area outside the Woolsack bar towards the House of Lords end of the estate, and she may want to write to the Committee if she has concerns or proposals on this issue.

Rachael Maskell: Can we ensure that all designated smoking areas are risk-assessed—particularly the area between Portcullis House and Norman Shaw South, which is a major thoroughfare—not least because they are workplaces but also to ensure that we do the best for people’s health?

Tom Brake: I can confirm that the House authorities have identified and assessed several designated smoking areas, but I will draw to their attention the smoking area that the hon. Lady has referred to, because Members will know that when crossing from Portcullis to Norman Shaw, there is a little bit of passive smoking for those of us who are not smokers.

**CHURCH COMMISSIONERS**

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

**Festivals in Cathedrals**

7. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What recent assessment the Church of England has made of the effect of holding festivals in cathedrals on the number of visiting (a) worshippers and (b) non-worshippers.

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): Cathedrals all run a series of events and religious festivals throughout the year, which vary in size, and collectively they host over 11 million visitors a year. Lichfield cathedral, in my hon. Friend’s constituency, is an outstanding example of that and welcomes around 120,000 people a year to its excellent exhibitions.

Michael Fabricant: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for her answer. She will know that the Lichfield festival attracts over 50,000 people to the city of Lichfield and brings at least 10,000 people into the cathedral itself, so what action is her Department taking to encourage other cathedrals to do similar initiatives?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I find it an interesting idea that I have a Department, but the Church of England will seize the initiative next year; it is a great year for anniversaries in the Church of England, with the Pilgrim Fathers and Thomas à Becket, and it will be a year of cathedrals. The Association of English Cathedrals will provide a pilgrimage passport for those at home and abroad who want to visit as many cathedrals as possible.

**Strategic Development Funding: Keighley**

9. John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Whether the Church of England plans to allocate strategic development funding to Keighley constituency.
Dame Caroline Spelman: Mr Speaker, since this is the last question, I think, for me today I want to thank the parliamentary division in Church House and Simon Stanley in particular, as I do not yet know if I will be renewed in post; I sincerely hope so, but I imagine this is not high on the list of the Prime Minister’s priorities at the moment.

I am delighted to be able to tell the hon. Gentleman that the Archbishops’ Council recently awarded funding totalling over £1 million for Leeds diocese, £490,000 of which will be awarded to the Anglican churches in Keighley.

John Grogan: I feel that I will speak for many in saying I hope that the right hon. Member is reappointed by the Prime Minister by lunchtime, but further to her reply, does she agree that the work of the united parishes of Keighley is perhaps one of the finest examples in the north of England of faith in action, along with the work of the Catholic Good Shepherd Centre, the Salvation Army and, indeed, Keighley’s mosques?

Dame Caroline Spelman: In the diocese of Leeds, Bowling, Idle, Great Horton and Clayton have a strong focus on deprived areas and groups that the Church of England found hard to reach, and that is why this large sum of money has been conferred by the Church Commissioners to the diocese.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Electronic Voting

11. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Whether the Commission has discussed the potential merits of including trials of electronic voting systems in the restoration and renewal programme.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I commend the hon. Gentleman on being, I think, the sixth member of his party who in this Session has raised the issue of electronic voting; however, I am afraid that I cannot give him a different answer to the previous five responses. [ Interruption. ] I am afraid my response is that this is not a matter for the Commission; it would only be responsible for ensuring that, for instance, the funding that was necessary to ensure that that happened was in place.

Martyn Day: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his answer. I am sure when the Victorians built this place, the voting system we still have was state of the art, but now, for the modern age, we need to move to a current state-of-the-art system—electronic voting—and I hope he agrees that that would allow us more time to debate the substance of Bills.

Tom Brake: Absolutely; I agree that it is time for change, although I suspect that the new Leader of the House may not be giving his entire support to such proposals as we revert to the Victorian era. I draw to the hon. Gentleman’s attention the fact that the Procedure Committee is looking at electronic voting, and he has until 27 September to submit a request to it.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I noticed that the whole House cheered when the right hon. Gentleman said he had no authority over this matter, but does he recognise the fact that many people see the current voting system as a huge advantage, because it enables us to nab Cabinet Ministers as they come out of the Division Lobby?

Tom Brake: I would suggest to the hon. Gentleman that there are ways in which electronic voting can take place and he would still be able to nab a Cabinet Minister. I would also point out to him that Opposition Members often have difficulties in nabbing Cabinet Ministers in the Division Lobby.
Mr Speaker: Order. Just before we come to the business question, I am sure that all right hon. and hon. Members will join me in expressing thanks to Paul Evans CBE, currently the Clerk of Committees, who will retire at the end of August. Paul joined the House service in 1981 and has served in roles including Clerk of the Defence Committee and Head of the Table Office. In his current position, he has overseen this year’s celebrations of the 40th anniversary of departmental Select Committees. Paul is a great academic authority on Parliament and its procedures and a highly respected speaker, author and commentator. He is known as an innovator who combines a deep knowledge of procedure with an ability and willingness to challenge and change the status quo. He was one of the founding members of ParliON, the parliamentary workplace equality network, which focuses on social mobility. I have worked with him closely for a decade. I hold him in the highest esteem, and I feel sure that all in the House who know him will do so, too. Paul will be much missed, and we wish him well.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): May I ask the new Leader of the House for the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Thank you, Mr Speaker—[HON. MEMBERS: “Resign!”] It’s a bit early!

Monday 2 September—The House will not be sitting.

Tuesday 3 September—Proceedings in Committee and remaining stages of the Census (Return Particulars and Removal of Penalties) Bill [Lords].

Wednesday 4 September—Remaining stages of the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill.

Thursday 5 September—Debate on a motion on the future UK shared prosperity fund, followed by debate on a motion on the British housebuilding industry leasehold. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 6 September—The House will not be sitting.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. This is not exactly an energised list. I thought we were all supposed to be energising for the future, but maybe we can look forward to a further energised list. I want to start by thanking the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride) for engaging in such a supportive way in the House. He really wanted to know how the House worked. I congratulate the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) on her new role. I also want to thank a former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), who has stood down from his Front-Bench post after 20 years. He started as a special adviser to Douglas Hurd. I hope we see the like of those people again in the Conservative party.

I, too, want to pay tribute to Paul Evans, who has been absolutely fantastic. He has had a distinguished career in the House. He has been very supportive when I have asked him questions, and he has been really assiduous in the kind of work that he has done and in the Committees. If anyone cares to look at his “Who’s Who” entry, they will see that his recreations include the British constitution, walking, silence and empty places. Paul, how have you survived 38 years in the House of Commons? It is interesting that he likes the British constitution. I do not know why he is retiring—we need him more than ever now.

I welcome the Leader of the House; it is great to see him in that place. Perhaps I can suggest a few things to him. He does have staff, so the nanny can stand down. I know his previous job was to send googlies and a full toss to the Government, but he now has to try to get the business through. Along with the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), I want to ask him whether he will get a complimentary copy of “Erskine May” for us. We should not really have to buy it. I know it is online, but it would be really helpful if the main opposition parties had a copy.
Let me talk about the way that this happens. The deal is that I ask about business and the Leader of the House is supposed to respond. We usually get two weeks’ business; I wonder whether we could go back to the discipline of two weeks. I have a few questions for him.

What is going on with the conference recess? Is proroguing still on the menu? Can he rule that out? We know that the Prime Minister gave a mini manifesto on the steps of Downing Street. When will we have a new Session of Parliament? This has been the longest. The previous Leader of the House said that we had used up our allotted Opposition days; can we have some unallotted days?

What a mandate, what a ringing endorsement—less than 0.4% of an electorate. Some 46.8 million citizens can vote in a general election, but the Prime Minister was selected by 92,000 people—92,000 people, taking back control. He has not won the support of our country. The Prime Minister talked about the awesome foursome, but what about the gruesome twosome? I know that the Leader of the House respects Parliament, but given that the special adviser to the Prime Minister refused to obey an order of this House and is actually in contempt of Parliament, will the Leader of the House please say whether the special adviser can come to the Floor of the House while he is in contempt of Parliament? Will he get a pass? Perhaps we need counsel’s advice on this.

I know that the Leader of the House respects Parliament. There was a message sent from the Lords about a Joint Select Committee; will he look into that? I know that his predecessor, as we finished business questions, was on the way to the Lords. It is not difficult to set up a Joint Select Committee. There is not much work in the first week back. We know that the Exiting the European Union Committee has already produced a report on the effects on business under no deal. It cannot be difficult to set up a Select Committee, take the evidence that already exists and produce a report.

While the Tory party has been appointing its new Prime Minister, unprecedentedly, there have been 70 written statements—that is absolutely outrageous—over three days. There have been important ones, including one on the school teachers review body. What does it say in that statement? Yes, teachers can get a pay rise, but the Government are going to give only 0.4% to support teachers. This really is a tale of two Britains.

On the Philip Augar review, the previous Prime Minister said that she wanted to see it implemented, whereby tuition fees should be reduced from £9,250 to £7,000. However, the written statement says that the maximum tuition fee will remain at £9,250 for the 2020-21 academic year. Some parents can afford to pay the tuition fees up front. This really is a tale of two Britains, and, on the same day, the Secretary of State for Transport revealed that the cost of Crossrail has escalated.

As a keen parliamentarian, will the Leader of the House ensure, through the usual channels, that some of those written statements are debated on the Floor of the House? We can make an agreement and perhaps we can have a debate, given that the business is so light for the first week back.

The Leader of the House will know. I hope, that I have made a pledge that I will raise the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe every week until she is free. Richard Ratcliffe said that Nazanin returned to prison and that it was like proper torture. Will the Leader of the House raise this with the Prime Minister, and will the Prime Minister make amends by meeting Richard Ratcliffe as soon as possible and make that important phone call to the Iranian Government? A five-year-old girl is growing up not knowing what it feels like to hug and kiss her parents. The Leader of the House will know, as a father of six, how important that is.

I want to say thank you, Mr Speaker, to you and your staff and the Deputy Speakers for their unfailing courtesy and help to me; to the Leader of the House and all his staff; to the Clerks; to Phil and his team of doorkeepers; to the House of Commons Library; to the official reporters; to the catering and cleaning staff; to the postal workers; to security; and to our officers and Chief Whip, and his staff. I also welcome the new Government Chief Whip, who has actually shown me personally some kindness. I thank him for that.

All sorts is going on in our Whips Office: my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) has got married, Devena has got married, Millie has moved to the Department for Education, and we welcomed Keir William Stocks Sullivan on Monday 22nd—I send good wishes to Simon and his wife. Finally, I thank Sam Clark, who has been in the usual channels departments of the Opposition and the Government for six years. He is going to restoration and renewal—another big thing for the Leader of the House. I hope Sam will enjoy lots of Mars bars—that is a private joke. I obviously thank everyone in my office.

I say to each and every hon. Member: I know how hard this time has been, and I hope you all have a restful and peaceful summer recess.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank the shadow Leader of the House for her incisive list of questions and, indeed, for the suggestion that I replace nanny with the staff in the Leader of the House’s office. I think they might be a bit bemused if six children trotted in with me and expected to be looked after by House of Commons staff, so I will not go down that route.

“Erskine May” is available online for free. I understand that Opposition Members view themselves as modern, cutting-edge and thrusting. Therefore, going online might not be too problematic for them. Even I can do it occasionally myself. If they do not want to do that, the proper edition of “Erskine May” is available for £400 and may prove a good investment.

The business has been announced for a week, as has been standard practice for some time. I know that historically it was not, but you said yourself, Mr Speaker, that convention has to evolve, and this is one of those conventions that has evolved. Now, we merely have it for one week.

The hon. Lady asked about the conference recess. She knows that recesses are a matter for this House to determine. No doubt a proposal will be made through the usual channels, but I imagine that it would be convenient for Members to be able to attend their own party conferences. That is what has happened previously, and it tends to be to everybody’s benefit. [Interruption.] I am glad to see the Labour Chief Whip nodding, or at least appearing to nod, at that. I therefore think that something may be forthcoming in due course.
Mr Rees-Mogg:

The issue of Prorogation is absolutely marvellous, because the hon. Lady asked for a new Session and asked when this Session would end, and then asked me to promise that we would not prorogue. We cannot have both, because we cannot get to a new Session without proroguing. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has said that he views Prorogation as an archaic mechanism and that he does not wish to see archaic mechanisms used—[Laughter]. As I am now bound by collective responsibility, that is now also my view.

The Lords message about a Joint Committee will obviously be looked into. We always wish to treat the other place with respect; that is an important way in which we operate. That will be taken care of in due course.

On the written ministerial statements, I was going to use a word beginning with “d” and ending in “n”, with an “-ed” on the end—you are if you do and the same if you don’t—but Mr Speaker might rule me out of order if I did say that, which I do not want to happen on my first appearance at this Dispatch Box. Parliament wants to know what is going on and there is limited time for debates. Earlier this week, Mr Speaker granted me an urgent question on Batten disease. We know that the system for getting statements and urgent questions answered works. Therefore, if there are issues that people wish to raise from the 70 written ministerial statements, there are mechanisms that the hon. Lady. I am extremely well aware of.

As to the hon. Lady’s very important point about Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe, absolutely I will take that up. I promise that I will take it up every week for her. We as a nation should always put the interests of our citizens first; that is fundamental to how this country should operate in its conduct with foreign nations. The treatment that Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe has had to undergo is shameful and must be so distressing. When the hon. Lady talks about her child—a five-year-old—being deprived of a mother, that is the most awful thing that one can imagine. I have the greatest sympathy and yes, of course I will take this matter up.

May I conclude by reiterating the thanks that the hon. Lady gave to everybody in the House? How lucky I am now to be Leader of the House—what a privilege it is and what a fine House we have. I have always found that, whenever one wants to know what is going on in the House, the Doorkeepers know first and provide us with a fabulous service.

In paying tribute to Paul Evans as he retires, I should say that the British constitution is a hobby of all sensible people. It is the most interesting matter to discuss and be informed about. It is why £400 for “Erskine May” is such a good investment: it educates one about the British constitution. I wish him well in his retirement.

Finally, I pay tribute to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), who was such a distinguished Leader of the House and Lord President of the Council.

Mr Speaker: There are, of course, Greek antecedents of the word “archaic”—a concept and fact with which the Leader of the House himself will be closely familiar. However, I think I can say, without fear of contradiction and for the avoidance of doubt, that the word “archaic” as it is now spelt originated in the 19th century, and in France. By the standards of the Leader of the House, it is distressingly modern and also—I say this simply as a matter of fact—of foreign origin. He will have his own views about that matter and others.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I start by welcoming my hon. Friend—I do not think he is yet “right hon.”—to his post. I think he will bring modulated and very moderate tones to these debates. One thing is for certain: having a seat in business questions will now be an absolute must. I welcome my hon. Friend in that regard.

Nothing can be done in this Session, but I want to raise a particular issue. With Lord McColl, I am a co-sponsor of a Bill to change the process relating to modern-day slavery. I ask and urge my hon. Friend to press his colleagues at the Home Office, who have to date been utterly mealy-mouthed about the changes necessary to give victims of modern-day slavery the opportunity to come forward without fearing arrest and incarceration. Will he press his colleagues at the Home Office to urgently bring forward the Bill’s provisions as soon as possible, to improve the quality of the lives of those who suffer most? [Interruption.]

Mr Rees-Mogg: As I rise, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, has arrived to sit next to me. She is a very distinguished predecessor of mine, whom I congratulate on her promotion and return from the Back Benches.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) is absolutely right about modern-day slavery. It would be opportune to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), the former Prime Minister, for all the work that she did on modern-day slavery—the terrible and hidden curse that it is. I share his view that everything should be done to stop it. The Home Office should move in that direction and people should not fear criminal prosecution if they have been held as modern-day slaves. That would clearly be desperately unfair.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I join you in your warm tributes to Paul Evans, Mr Speaker. I wish him all the best in his retirement.

I thank our curious new Leader of the House for announcing the, well, meaningless stuff that we are coming back to in September. I warmly welcome him to his place. He is the fifth Leader of the House that I have had in this post, but it has to be said that he is by far the most exotic.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrea Leadsom) indicated dissent.

Pete Wishart: I did not mean to upset the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy with that remark.

It might be as well to point out that the hon. Gentleman is Leader of the House of Commons, not the House of Plantagenet or the House of Tudor. He will have, of course, a number of key responsibilities, prime among
them being restoration and renewal—perhaps not a concept for which he is particularly renowned, unless it involves one of his own houses.

I join everybody in paying tribute to the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride). We will now never get that holiday bus from hell, and I will forever miss his terrible jokes about music at my expense. Although he knew that his post would probably only be temporary, he did take his job in his “Stride”.

I do not know about you, Mr Speaker, but I went to bed last night and had this horrible nightmare that the UK Government had been taken over by rabid, right-wing Brexiteers. I am not particularly sure whether I am awake yet. May we have a debate about dystopian visions of hell, and have a look at where this Cabinet of dysfunctional Bash Street Kids fits in?

I presume that at some point when we get back after recess the Leader of the House will want to have some sort of debate about Brexit, given that it has been his life’s mission. He and his European Research Group colleagues are now the political mainstream in this House, so when will we get the chance to debate their big plans to crash out of the EU without a deal, and all the disastrous consequences that await us?

The Leader of the House is familiar with Scotland—he famously fought the Glenrothes by-election with his nanny and his Roller—so he knows there is no way on earth that Scotland is going down with his colleagues in their buffoon’s Brexit.

Lastly, Mr Speaker, I wish you and all the staff of the House a very happy recess. I wish the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), and the new Leader of the House a very warm recess the Leader of the House will want to have some sort of debate about Brexit, given that it has been his life’s mission. He and his European Research Group colleagues are now the political mainstream in this House, so when will we get the chance to debate their big plans to crash out of the EU without a deal, and all the disastrous consequences that await us?

The Leader of the House is familiar with Scotland—he famously fought the Glenrothes by-election with his nanny and his Roller—so he knows there is no way on earth that Scotland is going down with his colleagues in their buffoon’s Brexit.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I may be the fifth Leader of the House since the hon. Gentleman took up his post, but from what I hear it seems that his question is the same regardless, so it does not make any difference who the Leader of the House should be. I therefore fear that the answer is going to be much the same. I would point out that the House of Commons predates the House of Tudor: it started in 1265, and the House of Tudor obviously began with Henry VII—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): That’s wrong as well. It was 1341.

Mr Rees-Mogg: No, no. The hon. Gentleman is a very good parliamentary historian, but 1265 is when the burgesses came from the towns, as he knows perfectly well.

Anyway, on restoration and renewal, I had the privilege of serving on the restoration and renewal Joint Committee. It is extraordinarily important that the House of Commons is not only a beacon for democracy, as it was built to be in the 19th century, but a functioning, modern Parliament.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman will be reassured to know that he does not have to wait long: on Thursday 5 September we will be back here and we will have questions to the Department for Exiting the European Union. His wish is my command; it will be granted.
Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment, thank his predecessor for today's summer Adjournment debate, and pay tribute to the retiring Serjeant at Arms, the Speaker's Chaplain and the retiring Clerk.

Will my hon. Friend find time for a debate today on benefits paid to people without sight? Mrs Jill Allen-King has pointed to an anomaly whereby people born before 8 April 1948, who were on the standard rate of the disability living allowance, are now not entitled to the lower rate of the attendance allowance when they retire.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He reminds me to pay tribute, too, to the retiring Serjeant at Arms, who is a very distinguished figure. He is also absolutely right to raise the matter that he does. Blind and severely visually impaired people clearly face significant challenges in living independent lives. Up until April 2011, the disability living allowance failed to reflect those challenges. The Government have put in place changes to rectify this, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate, so that he can raise this particular concern directly with the appropriate Minister, but I will also pass on his concern after today's proceedings.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I really welcome the Leader of the House to his position, because the Liberal Democrats could not want for a better recruiting sergeant than him as we set up a contest between Victorian values and Liberal Democrat values. More seriously, will the Leader of the House make time available for the House to discuss his views on Northern Ireland and the checks on the Irish border—as we had during the troubles—how the Government can keep an eye on the border and be able to have people inspected and the impact that that would have on the Good Friday agreement?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I may be a better recruiting sergeant for the Liberal Democrats than the right hon. Gentleman, but I fear that that may not be a very difficult task. With regard to Northern Ireland and the border with the Republic of Ireland, the Prime Minister has made it clear that there will not be a border imposed by the British Government. The right hon. Gentleman is another fortunate man as there will be Northern Ireland questions on 11 September, and he can raise these matters directly with the relevant Minister.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I, too, warmly welcome the new Leader of the House. I was delighted that, on the steps of Downing Street, our right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made social care a priority. Does my hon. Friend know—perhaps luckily—that many people here know what that means, but my hon. Friend knows—perhaps happily.

My hon. Friend has a firm grasp of history; perhaps some would say he is living history. Does he agree that so much of the work we do here depends on our being here in the Palace of Westminster? I do not want to pin him down because I do not want him to rule anything in or out at this very early stage, but is he aware that many of us believe that if we do have to leave this Palace, it should be for as short a time as possible; that when we return, it should be exactly as it is now; that our priority should be the safety of the building; and that we should care about heritage, particularly the heritage of Richmond House?

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): May I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place following last night's brutal events in Downing Street? He will know, more than most on the Government Benches, that the job of the Leader of the House is to be the voice of Parliament in the Cabinet, rather than just the voice of the Cabinet in this place. We are in a very volatile situation, with the threatened Prorogation of this place as a tactic to drive us out of the EU without a deal, when he and I both know that there is no majority for that in this House. Will he give me a pledge that he will take his duties to this House seriously and warn the new Prime Minister that that way will cause chaos?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's question. She was herself a very distinguished shadow Leader of the House and she is somebody I have great admiration for in her appreciation for the Commons as an institution. I absolutely assure her that I take that part of my role extraordinarily seriously. I have perhaps a somewhat romantic view of the House of Commons—one I think I share with you, Mr Speaker—in that I believe it is our job to hold the Government to account, not simply to facilitate whatever the Government want to do. However, this House passed into law the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and the article 50 Act, and we only speak our view by legislation. We do not speak our view by mere motion, and mere motion cannot and must not overturn statute law. If that were to happen, we would not have a proper functioning representative democracy; we would have an erratic, changeable and irregular system of government.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What a pleasure it is to welcome my hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box: a fellow Ultramontane Catholic. I am not sure that many people here know what that means, but my hon. Friend knows—perhaps happily.

My hon. Friend has a firm grasp of history; perhaps some would say he is living history. Does he agree that so much of the work we do here depends on our being here in the Palace of Westminster? I do not want to pin him down because I do not want him to rule anything in or out at this very early stage, but is he aware that many of us believe that if we do have to leave this Palace, it should be for as short a time as possible; that when we return, it should be exactly as it is now; that our priority should be the safety of the building; and that we should care about heritage, particularly the heritage of Richmond House?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I share my right hon. Friend's admiration for the late Pope Pius IX. In terms of this House, what it represents and the symbolism of this building, what our Victorian predecessors did was to show, through their architecture, their belief in their democratic system and their confidence in our great nation. We should never do anything that undermines that. The idea that we should be in some modern office block in the middle of nowhere, or that we should fail to have the understanding and the glory of our democracy that this House, through its building, shows is one I utterly reject.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I welcome the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman to his new job? We will watch his performance with great interest.
Can we rely on the hon. Gentleman to be a champion for justice for everyone, regardless of their background, wealth or connections? On 10 January 2018, Katelyn Dawson was killed and two other women were very badly injured when a white BMW crashed into a queue of people as Katelyn was going to school. She was 15 and an only child. Could we have an early debate on what is going on in the Crown Prosecution Service? It has been many months and now the Crown Prosecution Service has decided not to bring any charge against the driver, Mr Richard Brooke. He got off because the CPS thought he was going to argue insane automatism, which is increasingly being used by wealthy and well-connected people to get off charges when they kill people.

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is an issue of the greatest importance. These terrible events move anybody who hears about them. The death of a 15-year-old through a criminal act is invariably tragic. I absolutely believe that one of the founding principles of our nation is that justice is blind and there is equal justice for everybody, and that is something that all Members of Parliament should commit to. As regards a debate, the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee will have heard the hon. Gentleman’s appeal, which I am sure that many other Members of the House may want to support.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): It is an absolute joy to see my imminently right hon. Friend in his proper place at the Dispatch Box, and of course I congratulate him. I know he will want to join me in congratulating our right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) on her return to Government. Can he look forward to the eagerly awaited and anticipated, I am sure, election of the new Chair of the Treasury Committee?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is a very important question. I threw my hat into the ring last time and it was thrown back at me very firmly. It is really important that our Select Committees have Chairmen in place. The matter will be dealt with in the normal way, but I would hope that it is dealt with urgently.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): This week, lots of children break for the summer holidays. For many, that is a joy and a pleasure. However, many parents will now have to pay for an extra 10 meals per week, per child that were provided through free school meals, and 20% of parents will go without a meal this week in order to do so. The Government have invested in a pilot scheme. May we have a statement in the first week back on how the pilots ran?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady is indeed right. This year, about 50,000 disadvantaged children in 11 local authority areas will be offered free meals and activities over the summer holidays, funded by £9 million from the Department for Education, following a successful £2 million scheme last year. She knows that there are means of obtaining statements or urgent questions to see that an answer is given, and no doubt you will reflect upon it, Mr Speaker, if such a request is made.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): May I welcome the new Leader of the House? He will know that his role, as has been said already, is to represent Parliament to Government and to say things that Parliament wants said and not necessarily what the Government want to hear. We have had an extraordinarily long Session. We need to end the Session, to have a new Queen’s Speech, to have new Opposition days, and, importantly, to have private Members’ Bills days. Will the Leader of the House consider arranging a Queen’s Speech in, say, November?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend may want to raise that question with the Prime Minister, who is making a statement later and who is the person who will advise Her Majesty on when the next Session of Parliament should begin. But obviously there will have to be a new Queen’s Speech at some point. I believe that this is the longest Session since the Long Parliament of the 1640s.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): My constituent Jackie Wileman was killed by a stolen lorry. The four men responsible had 100 convictions between them, yet will only serve between five and seven years. It is now nearly two years since the Government committed to raising the maximum sentence for death by dangerous driving, so will the new Administration make this a priority, and when exactly will the new Leader of the House make parliamentary time available for this?

Mr Rees-Mogg: These cases are absolutely terrible. I think I mentioned earlier an application to the Backbench Business Committee on this matter. The hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) are coming together in feeling that such a debate is necessary and important, and I feel that that is absolutely the right way to go. I have every sympathy for families in this terrible, terrible situation who feel that the law is not helping them.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): In welcoming my hon. Friend to his place, may I say how welcome it is for this House to have a Ministry committed to leaving the European Union in all circumstances? On that point, can we have a debate on preparedness for all outcomes, including a no-deal Brexit?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I share his view that it is jolly good news that we have an Administration who are committed to leaving the European Union, which is exactly what the British people voted for in 2016 and, indeed, what Parliament legislated for. Preparedness is of great importance. He may find that there are some encouraging words from the Prime Minister a little later, which may pre-empt an immediate debate.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Ind): Fourteen weeks today, we are due to leave the European Union, but with five weeks of recess and three weeks of anticipated conference recess, more of that time will be spent away from this place than here. The new Leader of the House told us that he believes in our parliamentary democracy. What plans does he have to recall Parliament, so that we can deal with the greatest issue to face our nation since the second world war?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Any visitor to the Chamber over the last few years would have heard hours of debate in this place on leaving the European Union. If they troubled
to wander to the other place, they would have heard even longer hours of debate on leaving the European Union. This is the most discussed subject that Parliament has managed in decades, and Parliament came to a decision when it legislated. I am sorry to repeat the answer, but I will have to carry on doing so. Parliament voted for the article 50 Act and the withdrawal Act. That set by law the timetable for leaving. That is the democratic decision of Parliament.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): As the self-appointed shop steward of the regular attenders of business questions club, I welcome our many guests and, in particular, the Leader of the House, of whom I have always been inordinately fond, not least because I know that not everyone enjoys the benefit I do of a working-class upbringing.

The Leader of the House will know that taxi and private hire vehicle licensing has been a matter of profound concern, so much so that an enlightened former Transport Minister commissioned a report on that subject, which was published in September last year, with the Government response published in February this year. We have heard nothing since. It is vital that we reform taxi and private hire vehicle licensing, so that the concerns of those who drive taxis can be taken into account and the welfare and wellbeing of those who travel in them can be protected.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Was it not Disraeli who said that London taxis were the “gondolas of London”? I share that view. We are very lucky to have the taxi drivers that we have. I think that the shop steward of these sessions will find that—[Interruption.] Well, are most shop stewards not self-elected? I thought that that was how those things worked. My right hon. Friend will be able to raise that with the new Secretary of State for Transport.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): With more people self-employed than on the minimum wage, and more people self-employed than in the public sector by 2020, any Government worth their salt, and a Government who say they are the party for the people and working people, should know that putting the self-employed at the top of their agenda is vital. Can we have a debate in Government time on self-employed workers’ rights, and particularly maternity and paternity rights?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The great thing to remember is that the self-employed are the entrepreneurs of the future. They are the ones who create the new businesses and new jobs. It is a fantastically dynamic part of our economy. The hon. Lady’s question is well timed, because I am sitting next to the new Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, who will have heard her plea and will no doubt take it into consideration.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his wonderful new role. I know that, as well as liking the British constitution, he likes cutting taxes, so can we have a debate on axing the reading tax? It is incredibly unfair that people who buy books or magazines online have to pay 20% more than those who do not.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend is a genius at getting debates in this place, so he hardly needs advice from me. He already has an Adjournment debate coming on 4 September, which I expect will be even better attended than this morning’s session. I feel that I am inadequate to advise him on how to achieve more debates, but his subject is indeed a worthy one, and I hope that his plea has been widely heard.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Leader of the House is known for his courtesy, so I am sure he will agree that language describing Travellers as an invasion or a disease, contrasting them with decent people or talking of them as a problem—all of which have been heard in this House in recent months—is deplorable. Will he arrange a debate, perhaps in Hate Crime Awareness Week after the recess, on how we can use language respectfully towards everybody in this country?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank the hon. Lady for her generous compliment. It really is important that we use language properly, that language is effective and that language is powerful. You, Mr Speaker, control how it is used in this House to ensure that it is orderly, but the general tone should be one of generosity and kindliness, and I would always encourage that. I do not think a debate on language in Government time is likely, but as I have said, there are Adjournment debates, Backbench Business debates and Westminster Hall debates. It is a really important issue, and I would encourage and share the hon. Lady’s view that good manners go a long way.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): May I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend on his new appointment? He is already looking like an old pro in the position. May we have an urgent debate on serious deficiencies in the enforcement of minimum wage legislation? A carer in my constituency is owed £63,000 in unpaid minimum wage, despite the Care Act 2014 requiring Luton Borough Council to have an effective monitoring process of the personal budget payments involved. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, as the enforcement agency, can take no action against the person cared for because she has no assets. How can my constituent get her unpaid minimum wage?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is a very serious issue. Regrettably, I cannot comment on individual cases, but I am clear that careworkers provide essential support to some of the most vulnerable members of society, and it is essential that they are paid in accordance with the law, including the national minimum wage, for the work they do. This is a responsibility of local authorities, which should ensure that personal budgets are sufficient to deliver a person’s care needs, including making sure that they cover the cost of wages, and local authorities have a duty to monitor how personal budgets are spent. However, the Department of Health and Social Care will take this up with the local authority and ask it to investigate what sounds like a very serious and concerning case.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am keen to move on to the statement by the Prime Minister at or very close to 11.30 am, so the normal practice of accommodating
everybody will not apply today. However, participation will be maximised by short questions and the Leader of the House’s characteristically pithy replies. Single-sentence inquiries are to be preferred.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I express my congratulations to the Leader of the House on the new job. He has said already today that he will be the voice of this Chamber and that he will hold the Government to account. Will he therefore tell us what he feels about the appointment by the new Prime Minister, as his closest adviser, of somebody who has been found in contempt of this House? What will he do to hold him to account for that decision, and what does he feel about it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Parliament did what it did. It passed its sentence; it did not use its ancient powers to imprison or fine the gentleman concerned, and it did not send him to the Clock Tower. Therefore, in effect, his conviction is spent, and I believe in the rehabilitation of offenders.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend to his new role. Ministers made a holding statement on the telecoms supply chain review this week, but Huawei and Chinese high tech were not part of that, or no announcement was made. Due to the seriousness of this issue, will the Leader of the House consider a debate in Government time so that the Government can outline options on the role of Chinese high tech in our critical national infrastructure? Apart from Brexit, this is one of the most serious issues we will face in the 21st century. Does he agree that we need more debate on it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is obviously an important issue, but the means of obtaining a debate are well known. I did express views on this before I was bound by collective responsibility, but I am currently waiting for the Government’s review.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Going back to the question from the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) about the taxi regulations, the Leader of the House never answered the question. When is the Minister responsible going to bring those proposals to the House, because the Minister told us it was only a matter of parliamentary time? Will the Leader of the House find the time?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman’s view of history is longer than mine. He said “recently”, but I do not think 1972 is that recent. It was then that the House abrogated parliamentary sovereignty and decided to hand it over to what then became the European Union. I am glad to say that we have taken back control and that Parliament will be sovereign once again. Parliament is sovereign by law, not by mere motion. The last time it was sovereign by mere motion was when it issued ordinances under Oliver Cromwell. Do I wish to go back to that, Mr Speaker? No sir!

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment, and I welcomed the new Prime Minister speaking about investment in primary care yesterday on the steps of Downing Street. In Crawley, too many GP surgeries are at or over capacity. May we have an early statement on that issue?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. He is right to raise this issue. GP practices provide a vital service to our local communities. We will continue to build on the recent changes to GP services in primary care, as set out earlier this year in the NHS long-term plan. That includes an extra £4.5 billion for primary care and community services, and up to 20,000 additional staff working in general practice over the next 20 years. I am sure that the Health Secretary will report back on that, which I hope will meet my hon. Friend’s demand for a debate.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Leader of the House is supposed to be a great defender of Parliament and parliamentary democracy, but in January he said: “If the House of Commons undermines our basic constitutional conventions, then the executive is entitled to use other vestigial constitutional means to stop it, by which I basically mean prorogation.”

Will the Leader of the House be Parliament’s man in Cabinet, or Cabinet’s man in Parliament?

Mr Rees-Mogg: You and I know perfectly well, Mr Speaker, that this constitution of ours, this precious vessel of our constitution, is bound by conventions, and it is overwhelmingly important that all those conventions are followed and obeyed. Such conventions are about
Mr Rees-Mogg: I am well aware of that important issue and I will pass it on to the relevant Minister.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The power to stop and search young people is viewed as useful in reducing serious youth violence. Will the new Leader of the House agree to a debate on that issue in Government time?

Mr Rees-Mogg: If Members would only bate their breath momentarily, the new Prime Minister will soon make a statement. He has already advocated ensuring that the police have our support for stop and search, and there may therefore be the opportunity to ask him about that in a moment.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): As we break for some restoration and renewal during the recess, my constituents’ lives are being blighted by two things: inconsiderate garden grabbing with no social purpose whatever, and the stealing of car parts to order. May we have a debate in Government time on those twin menaces, and on how we can reform the law to help my constituents?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is very important that we always stand up for and help our constituents. The Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee is still sitting here paying close attention to what is being said. I am sure his Committee will consider my hon. Friend’s request.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): I recently met matrons at my local hospital in Coventry. We talked about a range of issues, including the Government’s disastrous decision to abolish NHS bursaries, which they said had resulted in a 32% drop in applications to study nursing, thereby exacerbating the workforce crisis in our NHS, where we already have 41,000 nursing vacancies. Will the Leader of the House look for time to debate the problem of recruitment and retention in our nursing profession, and the need to introduce the NHS bursary?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The relevant Secretary of State has whispered in my ear, and I feel it should have a wider audience, that we have record numbers of nurses and record numbers in training. That is a significant success of this Government. If we wish to have a debate on the successes and triumphs of this Government, I would be all in favour.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Will my hon. Friend provide Government time for a debate on the future of the northern powerhouse, because we need to: d, deliver on the vision; u, unite the talents across the north; and d, defeat the poverty of Labour’s low aspiration? Will he reinset the all-important energy to the northern powerhouse?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is an absolutely brilliant point, which follows on from what I was saying. I think we should have days of debate on the wonderful successes of this Government. Some £13 billion has been spent on the northern powerhouse, and the Minister for the Northern Powerhouse is now attending the Cabinet. Triumph after triumph achieved by this Government and we have only had our new Prime Minister for 24 hours. It is absolutely amazing, but the issue that my hon. Friend raises is probably in the purview of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I congratulate the Leader of the House. He appears to be very well fitted to the role. I am very disappointed that in the first week back we do not have business with regards to a draft historical Bill on abuse for Northern Ireland. Will that be in the second week when we are back, as indicated by the Northern Ireland Secretary?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend should be aware that there will be Northern Ireland questions on 11 September, when he can raise that with the relevant Minister, but I accept that it is a really important issue.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): May we have a debate on the importance of a commitment, from both the UK and the EU, to continue to allow musicians and artists to work without hindrance in each other’s territories?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is obviously of importance. We want to be able to ensure that cultural exchanges continue. I am sure that this is something that will be achieved by the Government.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I congratulate the Leader of the House, with whom I spent many happy hours in the Procedure Committee, where he championed the rights of this House. He perambulated around the question of Prorogation. To be absolutely specific, will he confirm that the House will be sitting each week, every week between 8 October and 31 October?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Mr Speaker, we have got perambulators and nannies into this session, which I think must be a first for questions to the Leader of the House. The issue of Prorogation is one that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has said is an archaic usage, but there will have to be a Prorogation before there is a new Session. This is the routine constitutional position, and I believe in maintaining the constitutional conventions.

Mr Speaker: One sentence. I call Bob Blackman.
Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Transport for London is currently consulting on building high-density multi-storey housing on car parks at stations across London. May we have a debate in Government time on the impact on commuters right across the whole of south-east England?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I understand that my hon. Friend is likely to be called later in the general debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment. It will be a golden opportunity to raise this subject.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I do hope that recent kipper waving is not a red herring. [ Interruption. ] May I ask the Leader of the House when we can expect to see the Fisheries Bill back? [ Interruption. ]

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am frightfully sorry, Mr Speaker. I didn’t hear a word.

Mr Speaker: Let’s hear it again.

Cat Smith: I do hope that recent kipper waving has not been a red herring. When can we expect to see the Fisheries Bill back in this place?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Those kippers, I can assure the hon. Lady, were absolutely delicious. They were eaten by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister with gusto, showing his characteristic support for the British fishing industry. The hon. Lady knows that Bills come back through the normal channels, and all things will be well and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.

Mr Speaker: Gusto eating is a challenge to even the most vivid imagination, but we will reflect upon that, I feel sure.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Earlier this week a group of local authorities representing rural areas formed a coalition under the title Britain’s Leading Edge. Many of these areas have benefited from European funding. Once we leave the EU, will the Government continue their commitment to investing in these areas through the shared prosperity fund?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is of course our money in the first place, which is recycled. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has whispered in my ear, “SPF”, so yes, the money is there.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): When will the House have a chance to vote on their Lordships’ amendment to the Trade Bill for participation in the customs union?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Why on earth would anybody want to do that?

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend to his place. Will he join me in congratulating the team at Sainsbury’s in Kinross for getting the Perth and Kinross gold star for equality at work, and will he provide some Government time to discuss the Disability Confident and Access to Work programmes?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I extend my warmest good wishes to Sainsbury’s in Kinross for its brilliant achievement. I think it might be a slightly niche subject for a debate on the Floor of the House of Commons, however.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Antisocial behaviour and crime have risen steeply since 2010, and in the first half of July, 23 emergency service workers were assaulted in Hull, so I was very pleased to hear that the Prime Minister last night announced that there will be 20,000 new police officers. Can we have a debate on when those police officers are actually going to be on the streets, where they are going to be in the country and whether they will be equally shared around?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I wish the hon. Lady very many happy returns of the day? I understand that it is an auspicious day today. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will be making a statement. He has clearly made the extra 20,000 police an absolute priority. We need to ensure that everything is done to combat crime and ensure that people in Hull and everywhere else in the country are safe, but it may be sensible to ask my right hon. Friend later.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We must now move on, but in thanking the new Leader of the House, I note that there will be many opportunities to question him about future business in the weeks and months ahead.
Priorities for Government

11.32 am

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement on the mission of this new Conservative Government.

Before I begin, I am sure that the whole House will join me in paying tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) for all that she has given to the service of our nation. From fighting modern slavery to tackling the problems of mental ill health, she has a great legacy on which we shall all be proud to build.

Our mission is to deliver Brexit on 31 October for the purpose of uniting and re-energising our great United Kingdom and making this country the greatest place on earth. When I say “the greatest place on earth”, I am conscious that some may accuse me of hyperbole, but it is useful to imagine the trajectory on which we could now be embarked. By 2050, it is more than possible that the United Kingdom will be the greatest and most prosperous economy in Europe, at the centre of a new network of trade deals, which we have pioneered. With the road and rail investments that we are making and propose to make now and the investment in broadband and 5G, our country will boast the most affordable transport and technological connectivity on the planet.

By unleashing the productive power of the whole United Kingdom—not just of London and the south-east, but of every corner of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—we will have closed forever the productivity gap and seen to it that no town is left behind ever again and no community ever forgotten.

Our children and grandchildren will be living longer, happier and healthier lives. Our kingdom in 2050—thanks, by the way, to the initiative of the previous Prime Minister—will no longer make any contribution whatsoever to the destruction of our precious planet, brought about by carbon emissions, because we will have led the world in delivering that net zero target. We will be the home of electric vehicles—cars and even planes—which is being developed right here, right now. We will have the free ports to revitalise our coastal communities, a bio-science sector liberated from anti-genetic modification rules, blight resistant crops that will feed the world, and satellite and earth observation systems that are the envy of the world. We will be the seedbed for the most exciting and dynamic business investments on the planet. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise for interrupting the Prime Minister. There is far too much noise in this Chamber, and there are far too many Members who think it is all right for them to shout out their opinion at the Prime Minister. Let us be clear: it is not. The statement will be heard, and there will be ample opportunity, in conformity with convention, and as established by me over the last decade, for colleagues to question the Prime Minister, but the statement will be heard, and heard with courtesy.

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, I applaud your intervention. I also think there is far too much negativity about the potential of our great country, as I think you will agree. Our constitutional settlement, our United Kingdom, will be firm and secure; our Union of nations beyond question; our democracy robust; our future clean, green, prosperous, united, confident and ambitious. That is the prize, and that is our responsibility, in this House of Commons, to fulfil. To do so, we must take some immediate steps. The first is to restore trust in our democracy, and fulfill the repeated promises of Parliament to the people by coming out of the European Union, and by doing so on 31 October.

I and all Ministers are committed to leaving on this date, whatever the circumstances. To do otherwise would cause a catastrophic loss of confidence in our political system. It would leave the British people wondering whether their politicians could ever be trusted again to follow a clear democratic instruction. I would prefer us to leave the EU with a deal; I would much prefer it. I believe that it is possible, even at this late stage, and I will work flat out to make it happen, but certain things need to be clear. The withdrawal agreement negotiated by my predecessor has been three times rejected by this House. Its terms are unacceptable to this Parliament and to this country. No country that values its independence, and indeed its self-respect, could agree to a treaty that signed away our economic independence and self-government, as this backstop does. A time limit is not enough. If an agreement is to be reached, it must be clearly understood that the way to the deal goes by way of the abolition of the backstop.

For our part, we are ready to negotiate, in good faith, an alternative, with provisions to ensure that the Irish border issues are dealt with where they should always have been: in the negotiations on the future agreement between the UK and the EU. I do not accept the argument that says that these issues can be solved only by all or part of the UK remaining in the customs union or in the single market. The evidence is that other arrangements are perfectly possible, and are also perfectly compatible with the Belfast or Good Friday agreement, to which we are, of course, steadfastly committed. I, my team and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union are ready to meet and talk on this basis to the European Commission, or other EU colleagues, whenever and wherever they are ready to do so.

For our part, we will throw ourselves into these negotiations with the greatest energy and determination and in a spirit of friendship. I hope that the EU will be equally ready and will rethinks its current refusal to make any changes to the withdrawal agreement. If it does not, we will of course have to leave the EU without an agreement under article 50. The UK is better prepared for that situation than many believe, but we are not as ready yet as we should be.

In the 98 days that remain to us, we must turbo-charge our preparations to ensure that there is as little disruption as possible to our national life, and I believe that is possible with the kind of national effort that the British people have made before and will make again. In these circumstances, we would of course have available the £39 billion in the withdrawal agreement to help deal with any consequences. I have today instructed the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to make these preparations his top priority. I have asked the Cabinet Secretary to mobilise the civil service to deliver this outcome, should it become necessary. The Chancellor
has confirmed that all necessary funding will be made available—[Interruption]—£4.2 billion has already been allocated.

I will also ensure that preparing to leave the EU without an agreement under article 50 is not just about seeking to mitigate the challenges, but about grasping the opportunities. This is not just about technical preparations, vital though they are; it is about having a clear economic strategy for the UK in all scenarios—something that the Conservative party has always led the way on—and producing policies that will boost the competitiveness and productivity of our economy when we are free of EU regulations.

Indeed, we will begin right away on working to change the tax rules to provide extra incentives to invest in capital and research. We will now be accelerating the talks on those free trade deals, and we will prepare an economic package to boost British business and lengthen this country’s lead, which seems so bitterly resented by Opposition Members, as the No. 1 destination in this continent for overseas investment—a status that is made possible at least partly by the diversity, talent and skills of our workforce.

I therefore want to repeat unequivocally our guarantee to the 3.2 million EU nationals now living and working among us. I thank them for their contribution to our society and for their patience. I can assure them that under this Government they will have the absolute certainty of the right to live and remain.

I want to end by making clear my absolute commitment to the 31 October date for our exit. Our national participation in the European Union is coming to an end, and that reality needs to be recognised by all parties. Indeed, today there are very many brilliant UK officials trapped in meeting after meeting in Brussels and Luxembourg, when their talents could be better deployed in preparing to pioneer new free trade deals or promoting a truly global Britain. I want to start unshackling our officials to undertake this new mission right away, so we will not nominate a UK Commissioner for the new Commission taking office on 1 December—under no circumstances—although clearly that is not intended to stop the EU appointing a new Commission.

Today is the first day of a new approach that will end with our exit from the EU on 31 October. Then I hope that we can have a friendly and constructive relationship, as constitutional equals and as friend and partners in facing the challenges that lie ahead. I believe that is possible, and this Government will work to make it so. But we are not going to wait until 31 October to begin building the broader and bolder future that I have described; we are going to start right away by providing vital funding for our frontline public services, to deliver better healthcare, better education and more police on the streets.

I am committed to making sure that the NHS receives the funds that it deserves—the funds that were promised by the previous Government in June 2018—and these funds will go to the frontline as soon as possible. That will include urgent funding for 20 hospital upgrades and for winter readiness. I have asked officials to provide policy proposals for drastically reducing waiting times for GP appointments.

To address the rising tide of violent crime in our country, I have announced that there will be 20,000 extra police keeping us safe over the next three years, and I have asked my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to ensure that this is treated as an absolute priority. We will give greater powers—powers resisted, by the way, by the Labour party—to the police to use stop and search to help tackle violent crime. I have also tasked officials to draw up proposals to ensure that in future those found guilty of the most serious sexual and violent offences are required to serve a custodial sentence that truly reflects the severity of their offence, and policy measures that will see a reduction in the number of prolific offenders.

On education, I have listened to the concerns of so many colleagues around the House, and we will increase the minimum level of per pupil funding in primary and secondary schools and return education funding to previous levels by the end of this Parliament.

We are committed to levelling up across every nation and region of the UK, providing support to towns and cities and closing the opportunity gap in our society. We will announce investment in vital infrastructure, full fibre roll-out, transport and housing that can improve the quality of people’s lives, fuel economic growth and provide opportunity.

Finally, we will also ensure that we continue to attract the best and brightest talent from around the world. No one believes more strongly than I do in the benefits of migration to our country, but I am clear that our immigration system must change. For years, politicians have promised the public an Australian-style points-based system, and today I will actually deliver on those promises: I will ask the Migration Advisory Committee to conduct a review of that system as the first step in a radical rewriting of our immigration system, and I am convinced that we can produce a system that the British people can have confidence in.

Over the past few years, too many people in this country feel that they have been told repeatedly and relentlessly what we cannot do. Since I was a child, I remember respectable authorities asserting that our time as a nation has passed and that we should be content with mediocrity and managed decline, and time and again—[Interruption.] They are the sceptics and doubters, my friends. Time and again, by their powers to innovate and adapt, the British people have shown the doubters wrong, and I believe that at this pivotal moment in our national story, we are going to prove the doubters wrong again, not just with positive thinking and a can-do attitude, important though they are, but with the help and the encouragement of a Government and a Cabinet who are bursting with ideas, ready to create change and determined to implement the policies we need to succeed as a nation: the greatest place to live, the greatest place to bring up a family, the greatest place to send your kids to school, the greatest place to set up a business or to invest, because we have the best transport and the cleanest environment and the best healthcare and the most compassionate approach to care of elderly people.

That is the mission of the Cabinet I have appointed, and that is the purpose of the Government I am leading. And that is why I believe that if we bend our sinews to the task now, there is every chance that in 2050, when I fully intend to be around, although not necessarily in this job, we will be able to look back on this period—this extraordinary period—as the beginning of a new golden age for our United Kingdom.
I commend this future to the House just as much as I commend this statement.

Jeremy Corbyn: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his position and thank him for an advance copy of his statement.

No one underestimates this country, but the country is deeply worried that the new Prime Minister overestimates himself. He inherits a country that has been held back by nine years of austerity that hit children and young people the hardest. Their youth centres have closed, their school funding has been cut and their college budgets slashed, and with the help of the Liberal Democrats, tuition fees have trebled. Housing costs are higher than ever, and jobs are lower paid. Opportunity and freedom have been taken away. Austerity was always a political choice, never an economic necessity—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I indicated that people would not shout down the Prime Minister. Precisely the same applies to the Leader of the Opposition. Don’t try it: you are wasting your vocal cords and, above all, it won’t work. The right hon. Gentleman will be heard and these exchanges will take as long as they will take, whatever other appointments people might have. The right hon. Gentleman will be heard. Stop it!

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The right hon. Gentleman’s predecessor promised to end austerity, but spectacularly failed to deliver. People do not trust the Prime Minister to make the right choices for the majority of people in this country when he is also promising tax giveaways to the richest and big business—his own party’s funders. So can he now indicate when he will set out the detail of the exact funding settlement for our schools and for our hard-pressed local authorities and police, so that they can start planning now? We must also address the deep regional inequalities in this country. The northern powerhouse has been massively underpowered and the midlands engine has not been fuelled, so will the Prime Minister match Labour’s commitment to a £500 billion investment fund to rebalance this country through regional development banks and a national transformation fund?

The right hon. Gentleman has hastily thrown together a hard-right Cabinet. I have just a couple of questions on those appointments. Given his appointment of the first Home Secretary for a generation to support the death penalty, can he assure the House now that his Government have no plans to try to bring back capital punishment to this country? And before appointing the new Education Secretary, was he given sight of the Huawei leak investigation by the Cabinet Secretary?

I am deeply alarmed to see no plan for Brexit. The right hon. Gentleman was in the Cabinet that accepted the backstop and, of course, he voted for it on 30 March this year. It would be welcome if he could set out what he finds so objectionable, having voted for it less than four months ago. Can he explain this flip-flopping? The House will have a sense of déjà-vu and of trepidation at a Prime Minister setting out rigid red lines and an artificial timetable. There is something eerily familiar about a Prime Minister marching off to Europe with demands to scrap the backstop, so why does he think he will succeed where his predecessor failed?

However, I do welcome the Prime Minister’s commitment finally to guarantee the rights of European Union citizens. It is a great shame that this offer has only been made now, more than three years after my party put that proposal before this House. Our friends, neighbours and family should never have been treated as bargaining chips, which has caused untold stress and worry to people who have worked so hard for this country and the communities that make it up.

Does the Prime Minister accept that, if he continues to pursue a reckless no deal, he will be directly flouting the expressed will of this Parliament? Industry, business and unions have been absolutely clear about the threat that that poses: no deal means no steel, no car industry, food prices dramatically rising and huge job losses. Make UK, representing much of manufacturing industry, says no deal would be “the height of economic lunacy”.

Companies from Toyota to Asda have been clear about the dangers of no deal. Is the Prime Minister still guided by his “**** business” policy? Those recklessly advocating no deal will not be the ones who lose out. The wealthy elite who fund him and his party will not lose their jobs, see their living standards cut or face higher food bills.

If the Prime Minister has confidence in his plan, once he has decided what it is, he should go back to the people with that plan. Labour will oppose any deal that fails to protect jobs—[Interruption.] We will oppose any deal that fails to protect jobs, workers’ rights or environmental protections. If he has the confidence to put that decision back to the people, we would, in those circumstances, campaign to remain.

The office of—[Interruption]

Mr Speaker: Order. It will take as long as it takes. I have plenty of time; I am totally untroubled by these matters.

Jeremy Corbyn: The office of Prime Minister requires integrity and honesty, so will the Prime Minister correct his claim that kipper exports from the Isle of Man to the UK are subject to EU regulations? Will he also acknowledge that the £39 billion is now £33 billion, due over 30 years, and has been legally committed to be paid by his predecessor? This is a phoney threat about a fake pot of money, made by the Prime Minister.

We also face a climate emergency, so will the Prime Minister take the urgent actions necessary? Will he ban fracking? Will he back real ingenuity like the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon? Will he increase investment in carbon capture and storage? Will he back our solar industry and onshore wind—so devastated over the last nine years? Will he set out a credible plan to reach net zero?

I note that the climate change-denying US President has already labelled the Prime Minister “Britain Trump” and welcomed his commitment to work with Nigel Farage. Could “Britain Trump” take this opportunity to rule out once and for all our NHS being part of any trade deal—any trade deal—with President Trump and the USA? Will the Prime Minister make it clear that our
national health service is not going to be sold to American healthcare companies? People fear that, far from wanting to “take back control”, the new Prime Minister would effectively make us a vassal state of Trump’s America.

Will the Prime Minister ask the new Foreign Secretary to prioritise the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and is he working with European partners to restore the Iran nuclear deal and de-escalate tensions in the Gulf?

The challenge to end austerity, tackle inequality, resolve Brexit and tackle the climate emergency will define the new Prime Minister. Instead, we have a hard-right Cabinet staking everything on tax cuts for the few and a reckless race-to-the-bottom Brexit. He says he has “pluck and nerve and ambition”; our country does not need arm-waving bluster; we need competence, seriousness and, after a decade of divisive policies for the few, to focus for once on the interests of the many.

The Prime Minister: I struggled to discover a serious question in that, but I will make one important point that it is worth making: under no circumstances will we agree to any free trade deal that puts the NHS on the table. It is not for sale. I remind the right hon. Gentleman that for 44 of its 71 years of glorious existence, the NHS has benefited from Conservative policies and Conservative government, because we understand that unless we support wealth creation, unless we believe in British business, British enterprise and British industry, we will not have the funds; unless we have a strong economy, we will not be able to pay for a fantastic NHS. That is a lesson that the right hon. Gentleman simply does not get.

I struggled to see the country in the right hon. Gentleman’s description of the United Kingdom today. The reality is that unemployment is, of course, down under the Conservatives to the lowest level since the 1970s. Crime is down a third since 2010. We have record inward investment into this country of £1.3 trillion. We have fantastic new electric car factories—

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr McDonald, you really are at times a reckless delinquent. Calm yourself, man. I know you get very irate because you feel passionately. I respect your passion, but I do not respect your delinquency. Calm yourself, man; take some sort of soothing medicament and you will feel better as a consequence.

The Prime Minister: They do not like the truth that more homes were built in this country last year than in any of the last 31 years bar one. Wages are now outperforming inflation for the first time in a decade. The living wage—a Conservative policy that I am proud to say I championed in London and that was then stolen by our wonderful Conservative Government and made into a national policy—has expanded the incomes of those who receive it by £4,500 since 2010. That is a fantastic achievement, and it is a Conservative achievement.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about trust and asks, “Who can you trust to run the Government?” How on earth? He asks about Iran—a right hon. Gentleman who has been paid by Press TV of Iran and who repeatedly sides with the mullahs of Tehran rather than our friends in the United States over what is happening in the Persian gulf. How incredible that we should even think of entrusting that gentleman with the stewardship of this country’s security.

Worse than that by far, this is a right hon. Gentleman who is set on an economic policy, together with the shadow Chancellor who was sacked by Ken Livingstone for being too left wing—

Mr Speaker: I am answering; I am telling you—

The Prime Minister: It is only with an effort that I can master my feelings here, Mr Speaker. The right hon. Gentleman would not only put up taxes on inheritance, pensions and corporations; he would put up taxes on income to 50p in the pound. [Interuption.] There he is, the shadow Chancellor—the forger of the budget of 1984, Mr Speaker.

Give the Leader of the Opposition a chance and he would put up taxes not just on homes, but on gardens. He speaks about trust in our democracy. I have to say that a most extraordinary thing has just happened today. Did anybody notice? Did anybody notice the terrible metamorphosis that took place, like the final scene of “Invasion of the Bodysnatchers”? At last, this long-standing Euro sceptic, the right hon. Gentleman, has been captured. He has been jugged—he has been reprogrammed by his hon. Friends. He has been turned now into a remainer! Of all the flip-flops that he has now into a remainer! Of all the flip-flops that he has reprogrammed by his hon. Friends. He has been turned now into a remainer! Of all the flip-flops that he has performed in his tergiversating career, that is the one for which I think he will pay the highest price.

It is this party now, this Government, who are clearly on the side of democracy in this country. It is this party that is on the side of the people who voted so overwhelmingly in 2016, and it is this party that will deliver the mandate that they gave to this Parliament—and which, by the way, this Parliament promised time and time again to deliver. Indeed, the right hon. Gentleman and all his colleagues promised to deliver it. The reality now is that we are the party of the people. We are the party of the many, and they are the party of the few. We will take this country forwards; they, Mr Speaker, would take it backwards.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I unreservedly welcome my right hon. Friend to his place. Today the EU will have listened and realised that the days of supplication are over and that we are intent on a policy to leave the European Union. I urge him in the course of his attempts at the Dispatch Box not to be too unkind to his opposite number. The right hon. Gentleman has not just become a remainer: over the last three and a half years, he has been trying to remain again and again and again, despite his own party’s determination.

In the process of my right hon. Friend’s preparation to leave without a deal, if that were necessary, could he now not allow us to do this in private? Could he instruct
his right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to do all this now in public—week by week, to tell the world, the European Union and our colleagues that we are nearly ready, and then finally that we are ready to leave, if necessary, without a deal?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend very much for that excellent question and the point that he makes. It is vital now that, as we prepare for a better deal, a new deal, we get ready, of course, for no deal—not that I think that that will be the outcome and not that I desire that outcome. But it is vital that we prepare business, industry and farming—every community in this country that needs the relevant advice. As my right hon. Friend has wisely suggested, there will be a very active and public campaign to do so.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I should welcome the Prime Minister to his place: the last Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. It is often said that the Prime Minister lives in a parallel universe—well, my goodness, that has been proven beyond any reasonable doubt this morning. In fact, it looked as if he was about to launch himself into outer space.

There are questions to be asked as to the mandate that the Prime Minister has for the office that he now occupies. He has been appointed not by this House, not by the people but by the Tory party. What have they done? It horrifies me that the new Prime Minister finds his position through such an undemocratic process. Indeed, it was the Prime Minister himself who called the system a “gigantic fraud” when Gordon Brown was parachuted into office, just like he was, 12 years ago. Scotland did not vote for Brexit, we did not vote for no deal, and we most certainly did not vote for this Prime Minister.

Will the Prime Minister accept the First Minister’s call this morning for an urgent meeting of the Heads of Government? Scottish Government analysis has shown that a no-deal Brexit will hit the economy hard, with a predicted 8½ hit to GDP, threatening up to 100,000 Scottish jobs. Just this week alone, we have seen the International Monetary Fund, the Confederation of British Industry, the Trades Union Congress, the food and drink industry and the British Chambers of Commerce all warning of a no-deal Brexit. The Office for Budget Responsibility has revealed that a no-deal Brexit could lead to a plunge in the value of the pound and leave a £30 billion black hole in the public finances. What analysis has the Prime Minister made of no deal? When he was asked last week, he had no answer. He wants to drive us off the cliff edge and he does not even know the impact of the damage that will cause. This is the height of irresponsibility—economic madness driven by ideology—from the Prime Minister, supported by his new right-wing ideologues on the Front Bench.

A new deal from Europe is the stuff of fantasy. Time and again, Europe has made it clear that the withdrawal agreement is not open for negotiation. Last night, Leo Varadkar confirmed once again that it will not happen. The Prime Minister has no plan. He is full of bluster, but the consequences of his fantasy land will have devastating consequences. He is deluded. Let me warn the Prime Minister: if he tries to take Scotland and the United Kingdom out of the European Union on a no-deal basis, we will stop him doing so. This House will stop the Prime Minister. We will not let him do untold damage to the jobs and constituents of our country. Parliament will stop this madness in its tracks.

The Prime Minister was elected by 0.13% of the population. He has no mandate from Scotland. He has no mandate in this House. Scotland has had a Tory Government for whom it did not vote for 36 of the past 64 years. The Barnett formula that protects spending in Scotland has been criticised by the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary. Will the Prime Minister today rule out changing the Barnett formula, or is Scotland under attack from this Prime Minister?

The whole internal Tory party crisis has been a democratic outrage. Scotland’s First Minister has been clear that she is now reviewing the timetable for a second independence referendum. Scotland will not stand by and let decisions be taken by charlatans on our behalf. I ask the Prime Minister to do the honourable thing: call a general election and let the people of Scotland have their say.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his suggestion. I should point out that the people of this country have voted in 2015, 2016 and 2017, and what they want to see is this Parliament delivering on the mandate that they gave us, including him. I take no criticism of my election from the party whose leader, Nicola Sturgeon, replaced Alex Salmond without a vote, as far as I know. Did she not?

The right hon. Gentleman is completely wrong in his analysis and his defeatism and pessimism about our wonderful United Kingdom, which he seeks to break up, because if we can deliver a fantastic, sensible and progressive Brexit, which I believe we can, and the whole United Kingdom comes out, as I know that it will, what happens then to the arguments of the Scottish nationalist party? Will they seriously continue to say that Scotland must join the euro independently? Will they seriously suggest that Scotland must submit to the entire panoply of EU law? Will they join Schengen? Is it really their commitment to hand back control of Scottish fisheries to Brussels, just after this country—this great United Kingdom—has taken back that fantastic resource? Is that really the policy of the Scottish nationalist party? I respectfully suggest to the right hon. Gentleman that that is not the basis on which to seek election in Scotland. We will win on a manifesto for the whole United Kingdom.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Our history is littered with Prime Ministers being dealt an extraordinarily difficult hand but, by pluck and determination, finally winning through in Europe. To make it possible, though, every MP has to realise that this is no longer a conscience issue. We have to learn to compromise and vote for something that may not be the perfect solution for us personally but is best for our nation.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend very much for his remarks and for the spirit in which he made them. He speaks for many of us in saying that we need to get this done, we can get it done and we will get it done.
Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The 3 million EU citizens are our family, our friends, our neighbours, our carers, yet for three years they have been made to feel unwelcome in our country. They deserve better than warm words and more months of anxiety. They deserve certainty, now. The Prime Minister has made assurances, so will he back the Bill of my Lib Dem colleague Lord Oates, which would guarantee in law the rights of EU citizens? Or is he all talk and no trousers?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her own election and join her in insisting on the vital importance of guaranteeing the rights and protections of the 3.2 million who have lived and worked among us for so long. Of course, we are insisting that their rights are guaranteed in law. I am pleased to say that under our settlement scheme some 1 million have already signed up to enshrine their rights.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his place as Prime Minister and welcome the optimistic tone that he used in his opening statement. He has set out his priorities for Government, but will he consider two others? The people of Northern Ireland have been without a Government for two and a half years, and that has affected many, but most deeply it has affected those who were victims of historical institutional abuse and those who were severely physically and psychologically disabled in the troubles, through no fault of their own. Will he commit to deliver for those people?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend very much for what she has done. She has worked tirelessly to promote good government and the restoration of the Government in Stormont, and she has a record of which she can be very proud indeed. If and when Stormont is restored, it will be largely thanks to her hard work, efforts and diplomacy. I thank her very much. She is right to insist on the proper way of sorting out some of these very difficult legacy issues. I think it is common ground across the House that it is not right that former soldiers should face unfair prosecution, with no new evidence, for crimes or for alleged crimes, when the charges were heard many years ago. I thank her for what she has done in that respect as well.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): In following the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), may I also thank her for her public service to Northern Ireland? I warmly congratulate the Prime Minister on his appointment and thank him for the conversations that we have had, and we look forward to further conversations in the coming weeks to ensure that we can have a sustainable Conservative and Unionist Government going forward. The alternative is unthinkably in terms of national security and the Union of the United Kingdom, never mind the economic damage that would be inflicted upon this great nation of ours. I warmly welcome his positivity, his optimism; that is what this country needs. Does he agree that, in terms of our shared priority, the Union comes first, that we need to deliver Brexit with a deal, but that we must be prepared for no deal if necessary? We need to get the devolution settlement up and running, but let us strain every sinew to strengthen the Union, get a deal to leave on the right terms and get Stormont up and running again.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman very much for all the co-operation and support that has enabled the Government of this country to carry on and to protect the people of this country from the depredations of the Labour party, because, frankly, that is what we would face were it not for his encouragement and his support. He is, of course, right in what he says about the primacy of the Union. He and I share the same perspective that we can do that by coming out as a United Kingdom, whole and entire, getting rid of that divisive anti-democratic backstop that poses that appalling choice to the British Government and the British people—to the United Kingdom—of losing control of our trade, losing control of our regulation or else surrendering the Government of the United Kingdom. No democratic Government could conceivably accept that, and I am entirely at one with the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on getting off to a terrific start. His words yesterday outside No. 10 and again today will have brought real hope and inspiration to people and interests right across the United Kingdom. He touched on one of them just now. The common fisheries policy has been a biological, environmental, economic and social catastrophe that has ruined coastal communities and brought devastation to our marine environment. Some recent comments by Government Ministers have alarmed those fishermen that, perhaps, the negotiations will involve the CFP being used as a bargaining chip. Will the Prime Minister confirm to me that, on the day we leave, we will establish total sovereignty over the exclusive economic zone and all the resources within it, we will become a normal marine nation like Norway or Iceland, and, from then on, we will negotiate, on an annual basis, reciprocal deals with our neighbours?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend. Valiant for truth in these matters, as he has been for so long, he is, of course, quite right that we have a fantastic opportunity now to take back control of our fisheries, and that is exactly what we will do. We will become an independent coastal state again, and we will, under no circumstances, make the mistake of the Government in the 1970s, who traded our fisheries away at the last moment in the talks. That was a reprehensible thing to do. We will take back our fisheries, and we will boost that extraordinary industry.

Vytjie Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Prime Minister said in his statement that he had alternative arrangements for the border. I asked the Chancellor, the former Home Secretary, what those arrangements were and what the technology would be 17 times and he could not tell me. Can the Prime Minister tell me what the technology is and what the arrangements were, and what the technology would be 17 times and he could not tell me. Can the Prime Minister tell me what the technology is and what the arrangements are, or is this just more bluster and guff?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Lady knows very well, it is common ground between the UK and indeed Dublin and the EU Commission that there are abundant facilitations already available, trusted trader schemes, electronic pre-registering, and all manner of
ways of checking whether goods are contraband and checking for rules of origin, and they can take place away from the border. I want to make one point on which I think we are all agreed: under no circumstances will there be physical infrastructure or checks at the Northern Irish border. That is absolutely unthinkable.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): It is great to have an optimist as Prime Minister. Once we have left the EU, can we please have more service plots of land, so that people can bring forward their own housing schemes? Will he encourage the housing sector and the new Housing Minister to meet, as soon as possible, the Right to Build Task Force, which has already, for the mere expenditure of £300,000 from the Nationwide Foundation, added 6,000 to 11,000 extra dwellings to the pipeline?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend. Friend on the campaign that he has waged for so long. He and I have discussed this. I tried to steal his idea years ago. I support it unreservedly and I will make sure that the relevant meeting takes place as soon as possible.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister has set out his new Brexit policy, but did he notice that, yesterday, the Taoiseach said that any suggestion that a whole new negotiation could be undertaken in weeks or months is “not in the real world?” If Leo Varadkar is right and, as a consequence, the House of Commons votes in the autumn against leaving the European Union on 31 October without an agreement, what will the Prime Minister’s policy be then?

The Prime Minister: What the right hon. Gentleman has said is redolent of the kind of defeatism and negativity that we have had over the past three years. Why begin by assuming that our EU friends will not wish to compromise? They have every reason to want to compromise, and that is what we will seek—a compromise. I respectfully say to him, and indeed to all hon. and right hon. Members, that it is now our collective responsibility to get this done. Both main parties in this House of Commons know full well the haemorrhage of support that we face if we continue to refuse to honour the mandate of the people. I think that, if he talks to his constituents in Chesterfield—

Hilary Benn: Leeds Central.

The Prime Minister: I am sorry. Forgive me. I was thinking of the right hon. Gentleman’s father. His father, of course, was right.

If the right hon. Gentleman talks to his constituents in Leeds he will know that they want him to honour the mandate of the people, and that is what we will do.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I very much congratulate my right hon. Friend on assuming his role and on his cracking policies and appointments so far. Actions speak louder than words, and it says a great deal when the four great posts of state are held by descendants of immigrants, and we should take great pride in that. May I turn the Prime Minister’s attention very briefly to something that affects millions of people in this country, and that is cancer. His predecessor introduced the one-year cancer metric at the heart of the cancer long-term plan in order to encourage earlier diagnosis. This could save tens of thousands of lives a year. Will he look at that and commit to continue with that proud policy going forward?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The simple and short answer is yes, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health is only too happy to talk to him at his earliest convenience.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Lefarydd. Data shows that the Prime Minister faces a binary choice: delivering Brexit on 31 October or maintaining his grip over the four nations of the United Kingdom. He can indulge in bombard and gesticulation all he likes, but the facts are irrevocable, so can he confirm to me, which is his heart’s desire: leaving the European Union or retaining the United Kingdom? He has to pick one, do or die.

The Prime Minister: Diolch yn fawr, Mr Speaker. My short answer to the right hon. Lady is that, of course, the people of the whole United Kingdom voted to leave the EU, and the people of Wales, to the best of my knowledge, voted emphatically to leave the EU, and that is what we will do.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that he and I do not exactly see eye to eye on the question of the likely consequences of leaving without a deal, but may I ask him to maintain his optimism about the possibility of achieving a deal and to recognise that there lies within this House, I believe still, a possible majority in favour of almost any sensible arrangement? I personally will certainly vote for any arrangement he makes for an orderly exit from the EU.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend, who has been zealous in his pursuit of arrangements to prevent the no-deal option. I share his desire not to get to a no-deal outcome. I am delighted that he is willing to put his shoulder to the wheel and work to find a solution that will bring us together across the House and get this thing done, because that is what the people want us to do.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): If optimism was all it took to get things done, I am sure that thousands of people would be spending this blisteringly hot and sunny day waltzing across the Prime Minister’s garden bridge and jetting off on holiday from Boris island airport. As it is, people need real solutions to their problems. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that fixing the crisis in social care requires an immediate cash injection as well as long-term funding reform, and a system that works for disabled adults as well as older people; and that, above all, it means deciding that funding cannot be left to individuals and families alone? We must pool our resources and share our risks to ensure security and dignity for all.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady very much for her question. I agree very strongly with the thrust of what she says. I suggest it is high time that this House
again tried to work across parties to find a cross-party consensus about the way forward. That is absolutely vital. [INTERUPTION] If the Opposition are not interested, we will fix it ourselves, but I urge them to think of the good of the nation.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for the letter that he sent to the Defence Committee earlier this month, pledging what he called “an absolute commitment to fund defence fully.”

Does he accept that events in the Gulf have cruelly illustrated the fact that the size of the Royal Navy is now way below critical mass? Will he join the Defence Committee in wishing to reverse the reckless reduction in defence spending by successive Governments from 3.1% of GDP in the 1990s to just 1.8% in like-for-like terms today?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the campaign he has waged for many years to support our armed services. I share with him a strong desire to increase spending, particularly on shipbuilding, which not only drives high-quality jobs in this country, but is a fantastic export for the UK around the world. The ships we are building now are being sold for billions of pounds to friends and partners around the world. We should be very proud of what we are achieving.

Mr Pat McLafferty (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Do the Government stand by the commitment they made in the joint UK-EU statement of December 2017: “In the absence of agreed solutions, the United Kingdom will maintain full alignment with those rules of the Internal Market and the Customs Union which, now or in the future, support North-South cooperation, the all-island economy and the protection of the 1998 Agreement.”?

The Prime Minister: Of course, that is the very trap from which it is now absolutely vital that we escape. As the right hon. Gentleman says, that 8 December document effectively commits the UK to remaining in regulatory alignment in the customs union. We believe—and it is common ground in Dublin, Brussels and elsewhere—that there are facilitations available to enable frictionless trade not just at the Northern Irish border but at other borders too, in order for the UK to come out of the EU customs union while doing a free trade deal. That is what we are going to achieve.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his post; I so welcome his enthusiasm. Would he come down to our seaside towns, which desperately need love and investment? He would be most welcome to come personally. May I ask him to keep a focus on the future of seaside towns and the vital role they play in our communities?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. He is totally right to focus on seaside towns and coastal communities because too often they have been forgotten, as has their infrastructure. This new Government’s programme is to unite this country with infrastructure, better education and technology to bring opportunity not just to cities around the country, but to rural and coastal communities as well.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (IGC): But, despite all the optimism, if the Prime Minister fails to secure some magical, mythical new deal with the European Union, will he promise now at the Dispatch Box that the matter will return to this sovereign Parliament so that we can decide what happens next before 31 October? A simple yes or no will do.

The Prime Minister: This Parliament has already voted several times to honour the mandate of the people to come out of the EU, and that is what we should do. I think that the right hon. Lady herself voted to trigger article 50, unless I am mistaken. I would encourage her to stick by the pledge she made.

Anne Milton (Guildford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that although money for schools is very welcome, further education and apprenticeships are probably the best enablers of social mobility, giving people a second or third chance? Will he ensure that apprenticeships and further education have the cash that they desperately need?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for all the work that she has done in her career. She is absolutely right to raise the issue of further education and skills. Indeed, I had a long discussion on that very theme last night with the new Education Secretary, and that will be a priority of this Government. Yes, it is a great thing that 50% of kids should have the ambition to go to university, but it is equally important that other kids should acquire the skills that they need, which can be just as valuable and can lead to just as fantastic careers. It is vital that we invest now in further education and skills.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The UK’s air pollution is at illegal levels and scientists are clear that we need to do a lot more to address the growing climate crisis. Few will forget the Prime Minister’s pledge that we need to do a lot more to address the pollution. However, I would point out parenthetically that NOx pollution has in fact fallen by 29% under this Conservative Government. The hon. Lady did not point that out. I will study the outcome of the court cases with a lively interest.

The Prime Minister: Of course, the bulldozers are some way off, but I am following the court cases with a lively interest because I share the hon. Lady’s concerns about air quality and pollution. However, I would point out that NOx pollution has in fact fallen by 29% under this Conservative Government. The hon. Lady did not point that out. I will study the outcome of the court cases with a lively interest.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Angela Merkel has indicated that there might be some flexibility on the backstop. Does the Prime Minister believe, as I do, that the French and Germans are likely to put the EU under more pressure to be flexible?

The Prime Minister: We should approach these talks in the spirit of maximum optimism, although optimism seems to be a quality that is depredated on the Opposition Benches. It is a well-founded optimism because common
sense dictates that now is the moment for seriousness and compromise, and I think that is what we are going to find.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): This morning’s announcement of 12,500 job losses at Nissan worldwide is really worrying, although at this stage there is no indication that any of these job losses are going to be at the Sunderland plant in my constituency. But it does highlight the fragile nature of the automotive industry. This really should refocus our minds, therefore, on the existential threat that a no-deal Brexit would be to the automotive industry in the U.K.

Will the Prime Minister today rule out a no-deal Brexit and commit to an active, innovation-led industrial strategy that will protect our industrial towns and cities?

The Prime Minister: I will indeed commit to that approach, because I think that is the right way forward. If I may say so, Nissan in Sunderland is the most efficient plant in the world, and what a fantastic thing that is. Just in the past few weeks, as the hon. Lady will have noticed, BMW has announced a huge investment to build electric Minis at Cowley and Jaguar Land Rover has put £1 billion into electric vehicles in Birmingham. That, by the way, is how we will tackle the climate change issue—not with the hair shirt-ism of the Greens but with wonderful new technology made in this country.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): May I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on the new support for electric vehicles? Demographic trends have run. We will make sure that we look after the interests of leaseholders who are, I think, being cheated in this way, but we are also helping their colleagues. I am well familiar with the problem that my hon. Friend describes and the injustice that many leaseholders have been facing, and I side with him on that. I congratulate him on the campaign that he has run. We will make sure that we look after the interests of leaseholders who are, I think, being cheated at the moment.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The sixth principle of public life reads:

“Honesty
Holders of public office should be truthful.”

Can the Prime Minister stand at that Dispatch Box and tell us whether, in his public life so far, he has maintained that principle?

The Prime Minister: I think that if the hon. Lady looks at what I have promised the British public and promised the electorate in my political career, and looks at what I have delivered time and time again, she will see that when I have said I would deliver X, I have delivered X plus 20, whether it was cutting crime in London, investing in transport or building more homes—more, by the way, than the Labour Mayor ever did. I am very proud of my record and stand and fight on my record.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Can I urge my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to continue all the efforts the Government have so far been engaged in to secure and save a future for the British steel industry,
which is so important to the north of England? One way of doing that would be to commit quickly to HS3—Northern Powerhouse Rail.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his advice. Yes, I am a huge fan of Northern Powerhouse Rail. I went up to Manchester airport and saw the plan. It is a truly visionary and exciting plan, and I think we should definitely be doing it. If I might remind him, it is not just rails in this country that are built by British Steel in Scunthorpe; it may be to the advantage of the House and the pessimists of the Opposition to know that the TGV in France runs on rails made in Scunthorpe as well.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): The Prime Minister recently appalled and offended many people when he criticised investigating historical child abuse as “spaffing money up the wall”. What does he have to say to those who have suffered at the hands of predatory paedophiles, especially those who are still seeking justice, and will he now apologise?

The Prime Minister: This country is proud of its record as a world leader in fighting child sexual abuse, and under this Government we will continue to lengthen that lead.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I hope the Prime Minister agrees that having a general election might be something that the Leader of the Opposition wants but it is not what the country needs and it will not resolve the Brexit deadlock. Will he bring back any Brexit plan, put it to this House and then put it to the people, because that is the way we can finally break the Brexit deadlock, unite the country, move on, and get on to fixing the real problems that Britain faces, not least improving social mobility and achieving equality of opportunity?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend and I go back a long way and she and I agree on so many things, but on this I must, I am afraid, respectfully disagree. Having a second referendum, which is now Labour’s policy—it was not before, but it is now the party of return or revoke—would be catastrophic for our Union because it would of course undermine our most important case that when you have a referendum, that deeply divisive and toxic event should only take place once in every generation. That was what we said to the people of Scotland. How could we look at them and say we could not have a second referendum in Scotland if we had another referendum on the EU in the UK? It is simply the wrong thing to do.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Given the welcome change of the Prime Minister’s recognition of the benefits of migration, will he bring forward the reconsideration system proposed by the former Home Secretary, now Chancellor, for overseas students falsely accused of cheating in the English language test by the US firm ETS so that they finally have the chance to clear their name?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has made me aware of the issue to which the right hon. Gentleman refers. I will make sure that we write to him about what we are doing to address it. As he knows, I have a long-standing commitment to supporting the freedom of people of talent to come to this country. If he looks at my political record, I do not think, genuinely, that he will find anybody who has done more to champion the rights of immigrants to this city or to this country.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s commitment to infrastructure. In addition to his support for Northern Powerhouse Rail, will he consider looking at ways that HS3 can be constructed from the north, thus maximising the jobs in our region?

The Prime Minister: I have asked Doug Oakervee, the former chairman of Crossrail, to conduct a brief six-week study of profiling of the spend on HS2, to discover whether such a proposal might have merit, and I will ensure that I revert to my hon. Friend as fast as possible on its conclusion.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): Following today’s deeply troubling news from Nissan, has the Prime Minister spoken to the company about what impact this may have in Sunderland? Following his statement, what reassurance can he offer to the tens of thousands of workers in Sunderland and across the north-east whose jobs and livelihoods depend on Nissan’s continued success?

The Prime Minister: The automotive sector globally is suffering a contraction, partly as a result of the diesel crisis and the move to electric vehicles, and what is happening with demand in China; that is a fact. There is, as far as I know, no impact in Sunderland yet, but I draw the hon. Lady’s attention again to the massive investments that are none the less happening in our country, including in Oxford and Birmingham, with world-beating companies investing in British technology. It is worth billions of pounds, and we should salute it.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend, welcome him to his job and wish him the best of luck in achieving an amicable agreement with the EU. Violent crime concerns many of my constituents. In Essex, we are already seeing the impact of the extra 360 police who have been added to the force, so I thank him for promising 20,000 more across the country. Will Essex get its fair share?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. I want to pay tribute to the work of Roger Hirst, the police and crime commissioner in Essex, who is helping to deliver the numbers achieved. It is good news that we will have even more—20,000 more—and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is working on that.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Why does the Prime Minister refuse point blank to answer any questions put to him about his relationship with the former Russian arms dealer Alexander Temerko or the owner of the Evening Standard, Evgeny Lebedev, who has written in glowing terms about President Putin and Assad? What exactly do they have on him?
The Prime Minister: I struggle to find a point in the hon. Gentleman’s question. If he has an allegation that he wishes to make, I suggest that he sends it to me in writing, and I will be happy to respond.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on a brilliant start, and particularly his support of the health service. Is he aware that his counterpart in India, Prime Minister Modi, has oversight of two health Ministries: the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Ministry of AYUSH, which is for traditional and complementary medicine and has 7,000 hospitals? Will he ensure that the Health Secretary is in contact with AYUSH?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend and congratulate him on the heroic campaign he has waged to promote alternative medicines and therapies of all kinds. I feel sure that it would be to the benefit of my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary, who is not in his place—he has gone off to solve social care. I think it very important that we have an open mind about Ayurvedic medicine and other such therapies, but we should approach it on the basis of science first.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister’s guarantee for EU citizens extend to EU children in the British care system? If so, how will he achieve that without changing the existing arrangements?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I believe it does. We will ensure that local authorities are aware of their responsibilities.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister to his place and thank him for the passionate, optimistic defence of free market values that we have heard today. Will he look at the offer that we give our armed forces, in particular with a view to retention? May I also invite him to visit RAF Brize Norton, not only to thank them for the excellent hard work they do there but to see where we need a little bit of help?

The Prime Minister: I will be only too happy to visit my hon. Friend in Brize Norton; I have a feeling that I may be going there in the course of my duties anyway. I congratulate him on the campaign he wages and the interest he shows in our armed services, particularly the RAF. I will ensure that they get the pay they desire, and I believe that they are getting a new and improved pay settlement on Monday.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Does the Prime Minister agree that the UK, Europe and the world face a climate emergency? If he does, what is his plan?

The Prime Minister: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman asked that question because, as he knows, it is this party and this Government who are leading the world in setting a net zero target by 2050. There are people who do not think it can be done. There are all sorts of sceptics, pessimists and Britosceptics who think that this country cannot pull it off, but actually we can. We have cut carbon emissions in this country massively since 2010, and we will continue to do so. [Interruption.] The right hon. Gentleman says that it was his achievement.

I remind him that, even though the population of London expanded by 200,000 during my tenure as Mayor of London, we cut carbon dioxide emissions by 14% with new technology, and that is the approach we will adopt.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I share my right hon. Friend’s optimism for a deal, not least if we are fully prepared for no deal. As a Kent MP, may I ask him to ensure that those preparations will keep freight flowing through Kent’s ports?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. It is vital that we give business in Kent and hauliers of all kinds the logistical support they need, and as she knows, a huge amount of work is already being done.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): It is quite clear that this is now a Vote Leave Government. Contrary to what the Prime Minister said, he has been clear about the possibility of a no-deal Brexit. I want to take him back to his words as part of Vote Leave. He said on 1 June 2016:

“There will be no change to the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic.”

The day before the referendum, he said he wanted to reassure people that if they voted leave, “there won’t be a sudden change that disrupts the economy.”

No change to the border and no sudden change to the economy—does he stand by his promises, yes or no?

The Prime Minister: Of course, because that is the most sensible way forward. As the House will have heard several times, this Government will under no circumstances institute checks at the border in Northern Ireland. As for a smooth and orderly departure from the EU, that is now in the hands of our friends and partners, and I hope that they will see sense and compromise.

Mr Shai lesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): For decades, Members in this House across the political divide have been critical of other countries’ democratic processes. Does my right hon. Friend agree that failure to deliver on the public mandate to leave the EU would ensure that our credibility on the international stage was irreparably damaged?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is a sad irony that the Labour party, which purports to be the party of the people, is now the party that seeks to thwart the will of the people, and it sends a terrible message around the world.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What did the Prime Minister meet Cambridge Analytica about in December 2016, when he was Foreign Secretary?

The Prime Minister: I have no idea.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Luton and Dunstable University Hospital has a capital bid approved by the Department of Health and Social Care. Will the Prime Minister ask the Chancellor to look favourably on it?

The Prime Minister: Yes.
Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): My constituents are not looking for handouts; they want to be able to stand on their own two feet. They are ambitious and want to get on in life and provide for their children, but just sometimes they have to rely on universal credit. As it is structured now, people do not get a penny for the first five weeks, unless they take out a loan from the Government. That loan puts them into debt from the moment they start on universal credit. Will the Prime Minister please, please look at taking away that five-week problem?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman, I am sure, knows that people can get a 100% advance on universal credit on day one, and as he knows—[Interruption.] Labour Members want to scrap universal credit, and I hear what they say, but the old welfare system kept people trapped in benefits. Two hundred thousand people are going to be lifted out of benefits and into work thanks to universal credit, and it has added massively to the incomes of 700,000 families across this country.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): On the hottest day on record and with escalating tensions in Iran, does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree that now is the time for a UK nuclear renaissance, and may I add that Copeland is the centre of nuclear excellence?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, and she is entirely right: it is time for a nuclear renaissance. I believe passionately that nuclear must be part of our energy mix, and she is right to campaign for it. It will help us, by the way, to meet the carbon targets that the pessimists on the other side think are too ambitious.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I love our country, but what I love most about our country is the people—all the people. However, the reality, as all the evidence is showing, is that the richer are getting richer and the poorer are getting poorer, with those hit by austerity dying early. What is the Prime Minister going to do to address these inequalities now, not by 2050, or does taking back control mean that Copeland agree with me that campaigning for a referendum whose result you intend to ignore is pretty pointless?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, and it smacks of tyranny. It smacks of tyranny. These people pretend to be democrats, yet their plan is to quash the will of the people time and time and time again.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Last September, the Government announced a report on the merits of safe standing at football games. Two months ago, Ministers confirmed to me that they have the report, but that Members could not see it. The Prime Minister says he is a plain speaker. Could he exercise some plain speech today, and release this report and get safe standing going at our football grounds?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that very important point with me. I am informed that the issue of safe standing at football matches is currently under review, but clearly we take it extremely seriously.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): May I thank you to the Prime Minister? On his first day here in the House of Commons, he has given an unequivocal guarantee to EU nationals like my mother and father. That should have been three years ago by the previous Administration. Having met Mr Barnier last Friday, may I ask the Prime Minister, if he wants to take the country out on a no-deal basis, to confirm that he will do everything in his power to protect the 1.3 million British nationals living and working in the EU?

The Prime Minister: Of course. I thank my hon. Friend for what he has done to protect the rights not just, obviously, of his parents but of the 3.2 million—and of the 1.3 million UK nationals living and working in the rest of the European Union. It is self-evidently in the interests of our friends and partners on the other side of the channel that they should give symmetrical protections, and I am sure that they will. But I think the House would agree that it is also incumbent on us to look after the rights of the people who have lived, worked, dwelt among us and made their lives here, and that is what we are doing.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): I warmly welcome the inclusion of social care in the Prime Minister’s list of priorities for his Government. As he will know, there is the thorny issue of how we should pay for it. Two Select Committees of this House have worked together with a citizens’ assembly to reach consensus on how we should fund this fairly. Will the Prime Minister meet me and the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) to discuss how we reach a consensus and get it done?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady, and I will of course make sure that I study the suggestions she has made in her reports. They will of course be taken into account as we come forward with a solution—a plan—for social care.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Given the busyness of the last few days, the Prime Minister may have missed the new leader of the Liberal Democrats saying that she would ignore a leave vote in a second referendum. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that campaigning for a referendum whose result you intend to ignore is pretty pointless?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, and it smacks of tyranny. It smacks of tyranny. These people pretend to be democrats, yet their plan is to quash the will of the people time and time again.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Nowhere is enthusiasm and optimism more needed than in the agriculture sector, so may I welcome what the Prime Minister said in his statement about the future for food in this country?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much. He has been a doughty champion of food and farming in this country for many years, and he is quite right to be filled—suffused, as he is—with optimism about it.
Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Thank you, right hon. Friend. For his commitment to free ports, which is fantastic news for Teesside. Can I just push him on one issue regarding our local industrial strategy, which is of course the maintenance of the current Government approach to the sale of British Steel? This is essential for providing investor confidence.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, my hon. Friend, and he can take it that this Government are going to leave no stone unturned to get a good solution for British Steel at Scunthorpe, at Skinningrove and elsewhere.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): In the north-east, children and young people will be off school today, and they may well be watching this spectacle, but forgive me for not encouraging them to have faith in the Prime Minister’s bluster and warm words, because the simple fact is that a no-deal Brexit puts at risk our 63% exports to the EU and therefore their families’ jobs. Will he rule it out today?

The Prime Minister: I hope the children in her constituency that the hon. Lady describes will be able to learn from watching these proceedings that they are going to get more funding for their schools—£4,000 per pupil in primary schools, £5,000 per pupil in secondary schools—and I am sure that would be welcome news to them all.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): The vast majority of people in my constituency who voted to leave welcome the Prime Minister’s determination to deliver Brexit. Beyond that we welcome extra police numbers, because we share a concern about rising crime. When will we know the numbers for the different force areas?

The Prime Minister: I say to my hon. Friend that he will know them as soon as possible.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister talks passionately about unleashing the productive potential of the whole north-east—just as he did about freeing kippers, but without the detail. What three things does he admire most about the north-east, and how will a no-deal Brexit make it more productive?

The Prime Minister: I think the people of the north-east should be left to decide what they admire most about that fantastic region, and it would be patronising of anybody to say what they admire about any particular region of the UK. The north-east is the only region of the UK that is a net exporter—[Interruption.] Yes—I bet she didn’t know that! The hon. Lady is not interested in economic success. We are interested in backing business and industry—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. We must restore some calm. I have been listening with rapt attention to the Prime Minister, but I do not want his arm to collide with the microphone. That would be analogous to a tennis player crashing into the net, which I know he would never do, knowingly or otherwise.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Across the country more young people are carrying knives, and knife crime has gone up. In his previous role as the excellent Mayor
of London, my right hon. Friend solved that issue. What action will he now take to solve it across the country, given that it will take time for the new police officers to arrive?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for his campaign for safer streets in his constituency, and I was proud to work with him in London when we reduced serious youth violence by 32%. We reduced the murder rate by 50%—not even the pessimists and doubters on the Opposition Benches could contest that—and we kept that rate at fewer than 100 a year for four or five years running. We reduced knife crime in London with a very active policy of stop and search. I know Labour Members opposed that, but they were wrong, and we took thousands of knives—11,000 knives—off the streets of London. We saved lives across the city, and my hon. Friend can be proud of what he did to help that campaign.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The Prime Minister has stated his commitment to increasing school funding, but this week we learned that his predecessor’s announcement of a 2.7% pay increase for teachers will only be partially funded by the Government, and that schools will face budget cuts as a result. Will he demonstrate his commitment to schools by agreeing fully to fund that increase in teachers’ pay?

The Prime Minister: The position is very clear. We have committed to a £4.6 billion package of extra funding across the country, and that is what we will do.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Despite last night being the hottest night of the year, I slept soundly for the first time in months. Will the Prime Minister ensure that I and millions of others can sleep soundly in our beds?

The Prime Minister: I hesitate to do anything to disrupt my hon. Friend’s nocturnal arrangements in any way, other than to say that I think the whole country can sleep soundly in the knowledge that we will come out of the EU on 31 October. We are going to get it done, deliver on the mandate of the people, and take this country forward in the way that I think it wants.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Which workers’ rights does the Prime Minister want to enhance that we are currently prohibited from doing by the EU?

The Prime Minister: That will be a matter for this House, and the hon. Gentleman should welcome that opportunity. If he is now saying that he does not wish to do anything to improve the rights of workers in this country, or that the entire corpus of EU law must remain whole, inviolate and untouched, that is why the people of this country are fed up with remaining in the EU—they want legislation for the advantage of the people of this country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The model of brevity from Hove must now be matched by that from Cheltenham.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The Prime Minister’s father is a great champion of the environment. Will my right hon. Friend continue that noble family tradition?

The Prime Minister: I certainly will, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on everything he does to promote the environment. It is amazing that thanks to the work of colleagues on the Government Benches, the environment and green issues are now seen as the agenda that we Conservatives lead on. We will continue with that, and make improvements to our environment that will be of immense value to the people of this country.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Ind): Yesterday the Prime Minister started in the job that he always wanted. How will he guarantee that millions of people across our country do not see their employment end because we are hurtling towards a no-deal Brexit that does not command the majority of this House?

The Prime Minister: The answer is for the House of Commons to do what is sensible and right, deliver on the mandate of the people, and get Brexit done by 31 October. That is the right thing to do.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement on increasing funding for education. Will he expand on what we might do to help those with special needs, not just in my constituency but across the whole country, who have considerable requirements?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is entirely right. He may have noticed that we announced policies to allow the establishment of schools for those with special educational needs, and in areas where local authorities need those SEND schools, we will fund them.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): The new Prime Minister has outlined a significant spending programme. The new Chief Secretary to the Treasury has already committed to Government debt falling every year, and we know that a no-deal Brexit would be a significant cost to the national finances. How are those three things compatible with each other?

The Prime Minister: The answer is that the spending commitments so far are really rather modest, and they can be amply financed by the strength of the UK economy, which the Labour party would jeopardise through its retrograde policies.

Mr William Wragg (Hazels Grove) (Con): Will schools get some of that welcome extra cash in this financial year or must they wait until the next year?

The Prime Minister: It is my intention for schools to get that extra cash as fast as it can be humanly expedited.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Some 80% of children excluded from mainstream schools have special educational needs and disabilities. It is not enough simply to fund new specialist schools; we need mainstream education to support special educational needs and disability. What is the Prime Minister’s plan for that? It ain’t just about cash.
The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. All schools need SEND funding, and that is part of the £4.6 billion programme that we have announced.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that, notwithstanding his commitment to increase capital funding to rebuild the NHS estate, we should focus on improving mental health care across our country? That will build on the work that I and other Members of the House have done over the past five years to ensure that we also deliver for those with mental health issues.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is entirely right. We should promote mental health in this country by giving businesses incentives to look after the mental health of their employees, and prevent the burden from falling so heavily on the NHS and social services.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): The Prime Minister said that he wants to govern for the whole country, but in a previous role he accused my constituents of wallowing in their “victim status”, repeated offensive and proven untruths about the cause of the Hillsborough disaster, and called Liverpool “self-pity city”. Will he apologise from the Dispatch Box to the people of Liverpool for the offence he has caused?

The Prime Minister: I ask the hon. Lady to look at my political record and at what we have achieved. Look at what I have done, as a one-nation Conservative, to lift and help with policies that are uniformly delivering better outcomes for the poorest and neediest in society. That is what I stand for, that is what I believe in, and that is what the whole Government will deliver.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend welcome the findings of the alternative arrangements commission, led by me and my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan)?

The Prime Minister: I do. They are, if I may say, a withering retort to the gloomsters on the Opposition Benches who say there is no solution and who begin the prospect of negotiations by saying that defeat is inevitable. That is not true. As my right hon. Friend has identified, the facilitations and the remedies do exist. What it takes now is the political will to get there.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The Conservative party 2017 manifesto says:

“We need to deliver a smooth and orderly departure from the European Union”.

That phrase is repeated eight times in the document. Does the Prime Minister therefore agree with me that he has no mandate to deliver no deal?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will know, since he is a keen student of the Conservative party manifesto, that the Government were committed both then and since to preparing for a no-deal outcome. Not that we want that. [Interruption.] I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) who reminds me from a sedentary position that the policy was that no deal was better than a bad deal. We do not want it, but the way to avoid it is to prepare well for it.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister and welcome him to his role. Some 19% of my constituents still do not have access to 10 megabytes of broadband, affecting their business, educational and leisure opportunities. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister commit, as he has done during the campaign, to delivering broadband to every one of my constituents?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. She may have noticed that in the course of the recent election campaign I made it absolutely clear that we will accelerate the programme of full fibre broadband by eight years, so that every household in this country gets full fibre broadband within the next five years.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister order an inquiry into the £76 million that was wasted paying management consultants to work on the “Shaping a Healthier Future” programme for north-west London, which the Health Secretary has now abandoned after nine years?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly say that the “Shaping a Healthier Future” programme for north-west London has not perhaps delivered the results that we wanted. I think the hon. Gentleman and I share a constituency interest, shall we say, in ensuring that we get the improvements to healthcare not just in north-west London but across the country. That is why this party and this Government are spending an extra £20 billion. That is why yesterday I announced new upgrades for 20 hospitals across the country, including some, I believe, in north-west London.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister to his role and his commitment to infrastructure in the north of England. Will he commit to the Government continuing to invest in small projects across the north of England, such as the M55 Lytham St Annes bypass?

The Prime Minister: I lost count, in the course of the recent campaign, of the number of dualling schemes and bypasses that I seemed to commit myself to. I will certainly make sure that we invest massively in road. Although I believe passionately in mass transit, there is no doubt that for many people investment in improving our roads is absolutely essential for economic progress.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The Prime Minister said that some may accuse him of hyperbole. I do not. I accuse him of getting his facts wrong. The First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, was elected by the Scottish Parliament in 2014, defeating Ruth Davidson by 51 votes. Will he apologise for getting it wrong?

The Prime Minister: I was relying on the very clear advice of a very distinguished colleague of mine. I will undertake to write to the hon. Lady with further and better particulars about the dispute that seems to have arisen between us about that point of fact.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My right hon. Friend, I know to my core, is a great one nation Conservative. In that spirit, will he find time in his very
busy schedule to take a close look at my six-year campaign to ban unpaid internships, which I am sure he agrees would bring great meritocracy to this country?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely endorse my hon. Friend’s campaign. We should be a meritocracy and people should be able to access jobs not according to who they know, but according to their talents. He is entirely right.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The office of Prime Minister is accountable to this House, so detail is needed. Exactly what changes to the withdrawal agreement does he believe he can achieve?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. The answer, I think, was contained in my statement. She will have heard it, along with the House. As a first step—let me put it that way—we need to get rid of the backstop. I listened to the debate. It was opposed by people on all sides of the House. If our friends and partners will see their way around to doing that, I believe we would be well on our way to solving the problems.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend support the establishment of a stand-alone UK investment and development bank, such as those that the Netherlands, Germany and France have even though they are also members of the European Investment Bank, which we are about to leave? Could one of the first investments be a giga battery factory in the west midlands?

The Prime Minister: Not only will I endorse that suggestion, but I invite my hon. Friend to meet my right hon. Friend the Chancellor at the earliest possible opportunity to discuss it.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): What does it say to the promises of restoring sovereignty to this House that the Prime Minister made when he was leading the leave campaign that he has appointed Dominic Cummings as one of his major policy advisers? Was he right to defy a Select Committee and not attend?

The Prime Minister: The Government are appointing a fantastic team that will take this country forward. It is absolutely astonishing: the hon. Gentleman talks of the campaign to leave the European Union; Opposition Members voted to trigger article 50. It is an utter disgrace that they are now trying to reverse that result.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend’s programme for government. As he employs an additional 20,000 police officers, can he ensure that county areas such as Warwickshire get their fair share?

The Prime Minister: Not only that, we must do much more to ensure that police in rural areas get out to victims of crime in a timely and efficient way. I know that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will be insisting on that as well.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): If the Prime Minister actually cares about it, why did he devote only one sentence out of 61 sentences in his speech last night and only two sentences out of 97 in his statement today to the climate emergency?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for parsing and counting the lines in my speech. I can tell her that by what I have said today the House will know that we place the climate change agenda at the absolute core of what we are doing. By the way, she will also I think acknowledge that it is this party, by committing to net zero by 2050, that is not only leading the country but leading the world. This party believes in the private sector-generated technology which will make that target attainable and deliver hundreds of thousands of jobs. That is the approach we should follow.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): In this new spirit of optimism on the Government Benches, will my right hon. Friend tell one of his Ministers to organise a city status competition, so at long last Southend-on-Sea can become a city?

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, I think I have no alternative but to answer in the affirmative to that question.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Prime Minister has repeated that this United Kingdom will leave the European Union by 31 October with or without a deal. Will he tell the House what range of figures he is working to, as to the impact on GDP of any outcome?

The Prime Minister: That is why it is absolutely vital that we prepare for a no deal. After all, the more determined and the more capital our preparations, the less likely the risk of any disruptive or disorderly Brexit.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): My right hon. Friend’s commitment to 20,000 new police officers is very welcome, as was the now Chancellor’s commitment to a new policing covenant. We have managed to get “Back Boris” over the line; when does he expect to complete the job on “Back bobbies”?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. The answer is as soon as possible—certainly within the next three years.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (IGC): The Prime Minister surely does not agree with the Home Secretary about the return of the death penalty, does he?

The Prime Minister: I have the fullest admiration for the Home Secretary’s policies on law. I do not support the death penalty, but what the people of this country want to see is proper sentencing for serious violent and sexual offenders—[Interruption.] I am glad to see some nodding from those on the Labour Benches. There are Members opposite who know where their constituents truly are on some of these issues, and they are right, unlike the current leadership of the Labour party. That is what we will do, but of course, we will also be pursuing all the preventive measures necessary to reduce our prison population and to pursue a humane and liberal approach at the same time.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on his election. Britain is establishing itself as a world leader in the new technologies of the fourth
industrial revolution. Will he support our small businesses and start-ups that create the wealth that funds our public services?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for all the good work that he has done to promote investment in such start-ups. I look forward to further conversations with him about ways that we may encourage that investment.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The Prime Minister says that he believes in the London living wage, yet so many cleaners in Whitehall are still not paid it. Will he commit today from the Dispatch Box that every single entry-level worker and cleaner in Whitehall will be paid the living wage, regardless of whether they work for the Ministry of Justice, the Department for International Development or any others?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for that important point. I have to say that—[Interruption.] The answer is yes. I was very proud when I was running for International Development or any others?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I remind colleagues of the one-sentence imperative.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): May I welcome my right hon. Friend to his post? I also welcome the comments that were made earlier about the SNP’s policy on fishing: to take us back into the CFP. Will he also confirm that as we come out of the CFP, we become an independent coastal state, only negotiating on access to our waters on an annual basis?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is completely right. I congratulate him on the vision that he has for promoting Scottish fisheries and for using the opportunity of coming out of the EU to build that extraordinary industry. He and I have discussed it and I think that we should be taking forward the plans that he suggests. It is quite dismal to listen to the SNP because, as I say, it would give back to Brussels control over our fishing. What kind of a manifesto is that? I bet the SNP U-turns on that before too long.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Why does the Prime Minister think he is so unpopular in Scotland? Just by him being Prime Minister, support for independence for Scotland rises to 53%. Is it all this Eton schoolboy bluster and buffoonery, or is it because he is prepared to take our nation out of the European Union against its will on a no-deal Brexit?

The Prime Minister: I think that possibly the reason why I seem to get a good reception in Scotland—which I did—[Interruption.] When I went to Aberdeen—I remember arriving and meeting some friends in Aberdeen airport—there was a very friendly reception throughout. It may be because the people of Scotland recognise that they have a commonsensical Conservative approach, which would not hand back control of their fisheries to Brussels just as Scotland has regained control of its fantastic fish.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for bringing some sunshine into this place. I invite him to come to the sunshine coast of Clacton, if he can put up with the 1 hour and 40 minute journey that it takes to cross the 69 miles. Will his Government please focus on infrastructure to places such as ours, which are so often overlooked?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing some sunshine into this place. I think that he and I are at one in agreeing that people should serve appropriate sentences for serious crimes.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): As London Mayor, the Prime Minister courted popularity with pledging an amnesty for illegal immigrants and his vocal opposition to Heathrow expansion. Now that he is in position to do something about those two issues, is he a man of his word?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady will know very well, I have answered the question on Heathrow. I remain deeply concerned about the abilities of the promoters of the third runway to meet their obligations on air quality and noise pollution. I will follow the court cases with a lively interest.

As for the amnesty on illegal immigrants, it is absolutely true that I have raised it several times since I was in Government, and I must say, it did not receive an
overwhelming endorsement from the previous Prime Minister when I raised it once in Cabinet. I think that our arrangements, in theoretically being committed to the expulsion of perhaps half a million people who do not have the correct papers, and who may have been living and working here for many, many years without being involved in any criminal activity at all—I think that legal position is anomalous. We saw the difficulties that that kind of problem occasioned in the Windrush fiasco. We know the difficulties that can be caused and I do think—I will answer the hon. Lady directly—that we need to look at our arrangements for people who have lived and worked here for a long time, unable to enter the economy and to participate properly or pay taxes, without documents. We should look at it. The truth is that the law already basically allows them an effective amnesty—that is basically where things have settled down—but we should look at the economic advantages and disadvantages of going ahead with the policy that she described, and on which I think she and I share a view.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Does the Prime Minister share Margaret Thatcher’s belief in home ownership, and will his Government do everything they can, perhaps including implementing some of the stamp duty reforms that I suggested last week, to promote the home ownership dream?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for everything that he has done to promote home ownership and the stamp duty reforms. I believe that in this fantastic capital city of Europe and of the world, stamp duty is choking the market at the moment. We need to think about the way it is working and to see what we can do to free it up and give more people the chance of home ownership.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): In 2012, when the majority of the Members of the Scottish Parliament wanted to hold an independence referendum, the Prime Minister’s predecessor and friend, David Cameron, agreed the means to do so. Now that the same mandate exists, is he brave enough to do the same, or is he afraid that he will be the last Prime Minister of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I think that distinguished former Prime Minister’s commitment was—and it was universally agreed—that the event in 2014 was a once-in-a-generation referendum, and that is the way it should be.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that under the Conservatives, record numbers of women are in work in this country. If we are to be successful post Brexit, we will have to make sure that we continue that. Will he join me in helping those 50,000 women a year who feel that they have no option but to leave their job because of pregnancy discrimination? Will he help to reform the law, so that more of those women can be productive members of society?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for that very cunningly posed question. I think she may be fortunate, because I am given to understand that one of the hospitals in question serves the Chancellor’s constituency as well.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I know that those in government have to make tough investment decisions, so I want to know which is the Prime Minister’s priority: Crossrail for the north, fully electrified from Hull to Liverpool, or Crossrail 2 for London?

The Prime Minister: It is like asking a tigress to choose between her cubs. I refuse to choose.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Will the Prime Minister commit to fighting on behalf of persecuted Christians worldwide, following the release of the recent Truro report?

The Prime Minister: I certainly will. I thank my hon. Friend for his question.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s carelessness and lack of attention to detail aided and abetted the Iranian regime in locking up a British citizen. I ask the Prime Minister to put right what he did so wrong, and take personal responsibility for ensuring the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe.

The Prime Minister: Of course, we work very hard to secure the release of Nazanin and all dual nationals who are held, in my view unfairly and illegally, by the Iranian regime. It is time that an innocent woman was released.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): We in Harlow are optimistic, too—optimistic that the Prime Minister will cut the cost of living for working people and invest in skills and apprenticeships—but we are particularly optimistic because he said yesterday that there would be 20 new hospital upgrades. Can we be optimistic about getting the new hospital in Harlow that we desperately need?
The Prime Minister: I think I had better be careful here. There will be 20 new hospital upgrades, and details of the programme will be announced forthwith.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Having been incarcerated for over 600 days now, and having made accusations of torture against the Indian state, Jagtar Singh Johal has, since incarceration, seen in post two Prime Ministers, three Foreign Secretaries and four Under-Secretaries, one of whom was suspended from their position. Can the Prime Minister assure my constituent, a UK national, that his Government, in making their trade deals with the Indian state, have my constituent’s name at the top of the agenda? Will he seek a meeting with the Foreign Secretary, me and the Singh Johal family at the soonest opportunity?

The Prime Minister: I know that the Foreign Secretary will take up the case of Jagtar Singh Johal assiduously, as all previous Foreign Secretaries have done.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I very much welcome the Prime Minister to his place, and welcome his commitment to making religious freedom a key priority. That being the case, given that he supported the campaign on Asia Bibi from the Back Benches, and in the light of the report of the Bishop of Truro, will cases like that now be looked at differently by the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for the campaign that he managed on Asia Bibi, and indeed others. It is very important that our country sends a clear signal that we will provide a beacon for people facing such distress and persecution.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Further to the Prime Minister’s answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), will he commit his Government to lifting the ban on asylum seekers working if the state takes more than six months to resolve their case?

The Prime Minister: The Home Office is currently reviewing that matter, and we will make an announcement shortly.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): I was delighted that the Prime Minister spoke at the very earliest opportunity about adult care and the changes needed to it. May I commend to him particularly the joint report of the Health and Social Care and Housing, Communities and Local Government Committees, which I took part in, and which talks about insurance-type solutions as well as hypothecated taxes?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I do not want to prejudge what we will do, but we will put forward a detailed plan for how to deal with social care, and I hope it will attract cross-party support.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Will the Prime Minister look closely at reversing UK Government plans to close East Kilbride’s Centre 1 tax office, the closure of which would cause the loss of thousands of jobs in my constituency? Will he be true to his word today that no town will ever again be left behind?

The Prime Minister: I will make sure that the Chancellor writes to the hon. Lady about that matter at the earliest opportunity.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Single mums often come to my constituency when non-resident parents do not fulfil their duties. What is the Prime Minister’s plan for tackling this problem?

The Prime Minister: We must work with our partners around the world to make sure that non-resident parents fulfil their duties. As the hon. Lady knows, there are conventions to insist on that.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I begin by thanking the new Prime Minister for all the good work he is doing to make the case for Scottish independence. How long does he honestly think he can set his face against the right of the sovereign people of Scotland to decide their own future?

The Prime Minister: As far as I can remember, in 2014 the people of Scotland had a referendum, and the hon. Lady’s side did not prevail; the people of Scotland voted to remain part of the United Kingdom, from which there are many benefits—economic, political and geo-strategic. That is a great future for the people of Scotland, and one that I think will prevail.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): To inform the debate, could the Prime Minister tell the House what the tariffs are under World Trade Organisation rules for sheep, planes and cars—the key industries in my constituency that will be damaged by a no-deal Brexit?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows full well, our intention is to make sure that there are no tariffs imposed, and that we leave with a zero-tariff, zero-quota outcome, which I am sure that he would support.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): There was no mention of defence in the Prime Minister’s statement, and still less of nuclear deterrence. Does he recognise that we are in a race against time to build the new Dreadnought class of submarines in order to maintain continuous at-sea deterrence? Will he throw the whole weight of Government behind that vital task?

The Prime Minister: I admire the hon. Gentleman’s commitment to a vital national asset that is, of course, made in his constituency. I only draw attention to the real risk that would be posed not just to the economy but to the security of our country, if it should ever be governed by the party that he has rightly left.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: One sentence of fewer than 30 words. I call Jack Dromey.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Yesterday, 50 representatives of 2 million workers in manufacturing came to Parliament to detail their grave and growing concerns over the threat of a no-deal Brexit. They asked whether the Prime Minister would meet them, so that
he could hear at first hand just how serious a no-deal Brexit would be for them. Will the Prime Minister agree to do that?

**The Prime Minister:** I am grateful, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he is doing to work with manufacturing industry. I give him my absolute assurance that we will do everything we can to protect just-in-time supply chains. As he may know, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is now in charge of making those preparations. I am sure that he would be only too happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and the representatives that he mentioned.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Prime Minister famously said “F*** business” in the context of Brexit. Does he not accept that communities such as mine depend on manufacturing such as JLR? By logical extension, does he mean f*** my community?

**The Prime Minister:** People across this country will have heard me mention the JLR investment in Birmingham three times already today. It is a measure of this country’s success that it continues to attract such fantastic investment from JLR, and indeed from other car companies, and that is because we have cut corporation tax, whereas the Labour party would put it up to the highest level in Europe. That is the risk posed to JLR and to many other businesses around the world.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): Of course, as a result of this Prime Minister’s Brexit obsession, the United Kingdom that the people of Scotland voted for in 2014 no longer exists, so can he confirm that he is both familiar with and supportive of the principles of the claim of right for Scotland?

**The Prime Minister:** I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer that I have given several times already today, which is that the people of Scotland had a vote in 2014, and they voted overwhelmingly to remain in the Union. They were absolutely right, and I see no reason to dissent from that view.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister mentioned aviation. Norway has an aviation emissions plan that includes making all short-haul flights electric by 2040, and it includes research and development to achieve that. Does he have that scale of ambition?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman will have noticed that in my opening statement I mentioned electric planes.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): The Prime Minister will know that, in order to make the United Kingdom the home of electric vehicles, he will need to protect the intellectual property of those making the electric vehicles. Will he therefore step in and save Wrightbus—a company that he is very familiar with—which is facing significant economic hardship at present? Will he make that a priority?

**The Prime Minister:** It is a great pity, in my view, that the current Mayor of London—not a patch on the old guy—decided to cancel the contract with Wrightbus of Ballymena, which has been of great value to the people of this country. I give the hon. Gentleman an assurance that we will do everything we can to ensure the future of that great UK company.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): Optimism is one thing, but pantomime is quite another. On what is likely to be the hottest day on record for the UK, it is astonishing that the Prime Minister is seeking to outsource tackling climate change to the private sector. Can he tell us one thing that his Government are going to do in the next month to tackle the climate emergency?

**The Prime Minister:** I will tell the hon. Gentleman one thing that we are doing: we have secured for this country the COP 26. We will be hosting the world climate change conference here in the UK, once again showing the world what UK technology and technological optimism can achieve.

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): We know that the Prime Minister is opposed to a second Scottish independence referendum. That is not my question. My question is this: if the people who actually live in Scotland elect a Parliament in Edinburgh, and if by a majority that Parliament votes to consult people on their constitutional future, will he respect that decision—yes or no?

**The Prime Minister:** It was common ground across all parties, including the Scottish nationalists, that the referendum was a once-in-a-generation decision. That decision was taken in 2014, and that was the right answer.

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister’s commitment to invest in frontline healthcare. Bedford Hospital urgently needs funds in order to expand and meet the needs of our growing population. Will he give our hospital the money it needs?

**The Prime Minister:** We will of course make sure that the £20 billion extra that we have committed to the NHS goes to the frontline and to all hospitals in this country.

**Mr Gavin Shuker** (Luton South) (Ind): The central policy of the Government is now to deliver Brexit in October, including without a deal. As such, it is unclear whether the Prime Minister commands a majority in this House. Will he now do what the Leader of the Opposition will not do: prove his own political virility and table a motion of confidence for the House to vote on when we return?

**The Prime Minister:** The House of Commons has voted several times to honour the mandate of the people. It is the law of this country that we leave the European Union on 31 October. That is what democracy requires, and that is what we will do.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Despite his Unionist bluster, the Prime Minister cannot deny his anti-Scottish sentiments, which are on the record books. As a gesture going forward, will he at least find the
money to repay the £160 million of EU convergence uplift funding that was stolen from Scottish farmers by Westminster?

The Prime Minister: Had the hon. Gentleman been paying the slightest attention, he would have heard that I have pledged to restore the money to Scottish farming, and it is thanks to the Scottish Conservatives that we have done so.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): In his statement the Prime Minister said that he wanted to close the opportunity gap, but two thirds of his Cabinet were privately educated, which is more than double the composition of his predecessor's first Cabinet. He is not leading by example, is he?

The Prime Minister: I think that what the people of this country want to know is what is the Government's programme for taking this country forward. I think that the contrast is between a Conservative party, which is the party of the people, and which wants to improve healthcare and invest in public services, and the Labour party, which would destroy the UK economy and ruin the livelihoods of everybody.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister says that he wants to leave no town behind and to unleash this nation's productive potential. If that is not just empty rhetoric, will he commit to saving the Caley railway works in Springburn in my constituency, which are due to close tomorrow? I want to see the railway works reopened as quickly as possible, so will he form a cross-Government taskforce to save them as quickly as possible?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, business support is a devolved matter, so he should look to the Government of Scotland—the incompetent Government of Scotland—as his first port of call.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) rose—

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: What an invidious choice. I call Mr Peter Grant.

Peter Grant: The very limited guarantees contained in the EU citizens settled status scheme come nowhere near the promise the Prime Minister has previously made that no EU national will be any less favourably treated after we leave the EU. Therefore, as well as the settled status scheme, will he now guarantee the right to healthcare, pension rights, the right to leave and return, the right to bring over family, the right to vote and all the other rights currently enjoyed by EU citizens? And does he need to get permission from his Chancellor of the Exchequer before answering that question?

The Prime Minister: Those guarantees, as the hon. Gentleman knows, we are giving unilaterally, in a supererogatory way. Of course, I want to see a symmetrical response from the other side of the channel, but I think that we should be very proud of the steps that we are taking.

Stephen Gethins: This session has underlined what my constituents believe: that the Prime Minister does not have a clue what is he doing. Will he tell us how he responded to the Fife packaging company that had to write to him to explain that the kipper packaging rules are made in Westminster and have nothing to do with the EU?

The Prime Minister: It really is extraordinary that the Scottish nationalist party is returning to the issue of fish. It is now clear that its whole policy is not just to join the euro and submit to the whole panoply of EU regulations, but to hand over control of Scottish fisheries—Arbroath smokies, kippers and all—to the EU. That is its policy, and I would like to see it try to get elected on that.

Mr Speaker: Order. I thank the Prime Minister most warmly on this his debut outing at the Dispatch Box for his answers and his patience and courtesy, and for responding to 129 inquisitors.
Speaker’s Statement

1.39 pm

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed with the next business, let me just say that, following the appointment of the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) to the Cabinet, I am expecting there to be a vacancy for the Chair of the Treasury Committee, a matter to which, if memory serves me correctly, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) referred much earlier in our proceedings. I shall announce the arrangements for the election to this post alongside any further Select Committee Chair elections that may arise when the House returns in September. I hope that it will be possible to hold the election or elections in the second week of the September sitting: I hope that is helpful to colleagues who take a proper interest in the scrutiny function of our Select Committees.

Points of Order

2 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Yes, indeed. I will come to the hon. Gentleman, but I want to save him up; I do not want to squander him at too early a stage in our proceedings, so we will keep him on ice and come first to the point of order from Jenny Chapman.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would be grateful for your advice. If we exit the EU without a deal, we can no longer export millions of lambs slaughtered in the UK for consumption in the EU. This represents a third of the industry, and in this event if a wasteful cull of millions of lambs and breeding flock is to be avoided, arrangements need to be made now to store the meat safely. We do not have anything like the cold storage capacity needed to do this at the moment. Knowing this, on 17 July, I tabled a number of written parliamentary questions to the Government to establish what the plan is. Although distinct and tabled with advice from the Table Office, they were inexplicably grouped by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and its answers tell me nothing other than that there are contingencies, but it will not answer my questions, which is what those contingencies might be. I would be grateful for your assistance, Mr Speaker, on how I can get the truth from the Government.

Mr Speaker: I am advised, although I do not know whether the hon. Lady is yet aware—a simple nod of the head would suffice—that she has secured an Adjournment debate on Tuesday 3 September on this matter.

Jenny Chapman indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: The nod suggests that she has seen her emails and is aware of that, although it does not satisfy her now. Well, that debate will take place and she will have the opportunity to explore these matters. In the meantime, what can she do? First, she can before the rise of the House further questions, and it may be possible for there to be named day questions; I cannot say for certain off the top of my head, but that is possible. Secondly, although it may be suboptimal so far as the hon. Lady is yet aware—a simple nod of the head would suffice—that she has secured an Adjournment debate on Tuesday 3 September on this matter.

Jenny Chapman indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: The nod suggests that she has seen her emails and is aware of that, although it does not satisfy her now. Well, that debate will take place and she will have the opportunity to explore these matters. In the meantime, what can she do? First, she can before the rise of the House further questions, and it may be possible for there to be named day questions; I cannot say for certain off the top of my head, but that is possible. Secondly, although it may be suboptimal so far as the hon. Lady is concerned, she can either raise these matters herself among the matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment—that is to say, for the benefit of those observing our proceedings, this afternoon in the debate almost immediately to start—or she can cajole, exhort or entice a right hon. or hon. Friend of hers to do so. That may be unsatisfactory, but it is better than nothing. She can also, of course, correspond with Ministers.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill) rose—

Mr Speaker: But meanwhile, the hon. Lady has apparently excited the interest and attention of the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.
Mr Goodwill: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. May I reassure the hon. Lady that we are well aware of the difficulties the sheep industry would meet with in a no-deal Brexit situation and we have a number of contingency plans in place? This is not something the Government are ignoring: we are absolutely on top of the job, and certainly I will be happy to meet her—and I hope that I will be the person to respond to the debate in September.

Mr Speaker: Well, I must say to those observing our proceedings that that is quite an innovative use by an occupant of the Treasury Bench of the point of order procedure, because that is not so much a job application but is rather a “please can I keep my job” application from the right hon. Gentleman, displaying an ingenuity and perhaps a cheekiness which may or may not avail him—only time will tell, but the puckish grin etched on the contours of his face suggests that at least he has not lost his sense of humour.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you are aware, the Government were found to be in breach of the arms export regime by the Court of Appeal. The Government have applied to the Supreme Court for a further, final appeal. A Minister told the House that they would review hundreds of applications, but I am told that in the application to the Court of Appeal the number of applications to be reviewed is significantly—almost half—lower than the number told to the House. However, the Court of Appeal documents are sealed and I cannot see them. Can you advise me, Mr Speaker, how I can best see whether what they are telling the Court of Appeal is the same as what they are telling Parliament? Normally, I would go through the Committees on Arms Export Controls, but four of our last meetings have been cancelled because they were inquorate. I also ask you, Mr Speaker, how we could pursue a system where the Committees on Arms Export Controls becomes a stand-alone Committee, as the Committee itself has asked.

Mr Speaker: I am not responsible for Select Committees or quite what the architecture is of individual Committees and how they might interact with each other—whether they are combined or whether there are separate. That is a matter for others, but what I would say to the hon. Gentleman is that, if memory serves me correctly from perusal of the intended speaking list, he is intending to favour the House further with his dulcet tones in the course of the afternoon, and therefore he can draw attention to these matters. As to whether there is an incompatibility between what is said in the House by a Minister and what is lodged before a court, I know not, and that may be so, but even if it is so, it does not necessarily follow that anyone has been misled; it rather depends on what was said at the time. There may have been a guessestimate of numbers and that might have changed, but I do not know, so I reserve judgment on that. But what I would say is that the hon. Gentleman has ventilated his concern and if he aspires further to ventilate his concerns on these matters this afternoon, there is a reasonable prospect that he will have the chance to do so.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In a debate last week on High Speed 2, the Minister, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), was asked very directly whether any non-disclosure clauses had been included in redundancy agreements with former staff at HS2. She said on several occasions that no such non-disclosure clauses were included in those redundancy arrangements. A subsequent parliamentary answer to that debate confirms that, in fact, there were a number of such non-disclosure clauses in agreements with staff who were made redundant. Is there anything at this stage I can do, Mr Speaker, in terms of making the Minister accountable for the answers she gave during that debate?

Mr Speaker: Every Member is responsible for the veracity of what he or she says in this House. In the event that a Member discovers he or she has inadvertently misled the House, it is incumbent upon that Member to correct the record. That obligation applies across the House, and of course it applies to Ministers as well as to those who are not part of the Executive branch. I rather imagine that the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) will have her attention drawn erealong to what the hon. Gentleman has said; if she judges it necessary to act, she will do so. If she does not, it is something that he will have to pursue by other means. I know that he would not expect me to be the arbiter of right or wrong, but I have tried to guide him procedurally.
Summer Adjournment

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

Mr Speaker: Before I call the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) to open the debate, I am afraid I am obliged to inform the House that there must, with immediate effect, be a six-minute limit on Back-Bench orations. We will be led in this important mission by Sir David Amess.

2.9 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Before the House adjourns for the summer recess, there are a number of points I wish to make. It is really good to see so many colleagues recognising that this is such a valuable debate.

The all-party parliamentary fire safety and rescue group will not shut up until sprinklers are installed in all high-rise buildings and the cladding issue is dealt with following the disaster at Grenfell, just as I will not shut up about city status until it is awarded to Southend-on-Sea. I am glad that the new Prime Minister has said we are going to get it.

Two of my constituents, Stephen and Rosalind Clifton, have paid full contributions for 47 years and, extraordinarily, now find that they do not qualify for a full state pension, so I want an answer from the Treasury Bench on that.

Recently, Mrs Margaret Toothill came to my surgery and told me that in January this year, her granddaughter, Maisie, died in her sleep from a sudden epileptic seizure at the age of 22. The condition is called sudden unexpected death in epilepsy or SUDEP. The charity SUDEP Action has been helping the family with their loss and is calling on the Government to do more to prevent such incidents. Specifically, it is calling for a Government inquiry into avoidable epilepsy deaths and a funded annual risk check for people with epilepsy.

I am very concerned about the number of constituents whose visit visas are being turned down. There does not seem to be any fairness in this. An Australian constituent of mine signed up to an organisation called Sopra Steria and paid £2,400 to try to get a visa. It was a complete mess and now they find they have lost their money and they are having to pay for access again.

Carl Beech—I mean, for goodness’ sake! Harvey Proctor was my neighbour when I was Member of Parliament for Basildon. Leon Brittan died with his name being trashed, and there is Lord Bramall. The way the courts dealt with this matter just is not good enough. People can never restore their reputations, but there should be some compensation. My former colleague, Harvey Proctor, has lost everything, including his home and any future employment.

I recently had a meeting with the Schools Minister—I hope that he is still the Schools Minister—together with my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Dudderidge), regarding primary and secondary school funding in our area. We are losing out to London’s schools. Darlinghurst Academy has recently had a wonderful Ofsted report, and I congratulate Emma Nicholls, the executive head, and Mrs Beverley Williams, on all that they have achieved.

I was once a paid advocate for the Caravan Club, although I am not any more. It has advised me that two motor homes that are identical in almost every way can be charged either £265 or £2,135 in vehicle excise duty. This really needs to be looked at by the Treasury, and these vehicles should be classified as commercial vehicles. Recently, I parked my car on a meter but did not have my mobile phone—

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir David Amess: Yes, but I just want to point out that the clock has not stopped. Okay—it has now.

John Woodcock: The hon. Gentleman is making a really important point. Is he aware that many manufacturers around the country, including Forge Europa in Ulverston, which makes lights for many motor homes, are deeply concerned by this proposed tax change?

Mr Speaker: If the clock was not functioning, it must have been because it was smiling on the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), perhaps because it approves of his views on Southend city status. Who knows?

Sir David Amess: You are too generous, Mr Speaker. I did not want to deprive other colleagues of their time, but I thank the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) for making that point.

Prosto tells us that 12,000 chaps lose their lives as a result of prostate cancer each year. I congratulate Paul Sayer, a local constituent, on his work on this. We had a reception in the Jubilee Room that was attended by colleagues, and a new non-invasive treatment is now available.

Last weekend, I was in Albania supporting the National Council of Resistance in Iran and visiting the home of Mother Teresa, but I could not see a statute of Norman Wisdom. We really need to do more to support those people, and it was great to visit Ashraf-3 camp.

On ending the debt trap, I absolutely support The Sun newspaper’s “Stop the credit rip-off” campaign. So many of our constituents are being tempted to get even further into debt, which is not satisfactory.

All colleagues apparently love Southend airport, but the residents of Wells Avenue are not too keen on the huge jets that are now are pouring fumes into their back gardens. I am meeting them on Friday, when I hope we can deal with that matter.

I recently attended the Tamil sports day. They are wonderful people, but there is still concern about the people lost in Jaffna, and we need some reconciliation there.

The Smart Energy Partnership showcase is doing its best to help blind and partially sighted people to switch suppliers.

A local constituent called Kelly Swain is an absolute wonderful person, but there is still concern about the people lost in Jaffna, and we need some reconciliation there.

The Smart Energy Partnership showcase is doing its best to help blind and partially sighted people to switch suppliers.

A local constituent called Kelly Swain is an absolute inspiration for what she has done for Young Minds to show how beneficial alternative therapies can support people with their various challenges.
Recently, I attended the hearing loss action day—I think I am beginning to need help with that myself—in Southend, and it was very good indeed in the way it was run.

Mrs Sharon Williams and the N-Act Theatre Company are touring Essex with shows that are trying to encourage young people to turn away from crime.

South Essex College has built a new facility in Stephenson Road, and it is doing a wonderful job with apprenticeships. Westcliff High School for Girls is now the computer hub for the whole of Essex, which is a wonderful achievement. It is a marvellous school.

The Lighthouse care home is a wonderful care home that is helping people with learning difficulties.

I recently visited the Refill Room, where Gemma and Alan are recycling products, and I support them.

I recently hosted the Bengal Pride awards in the House of Commons.

Jota Aviation is giving all sorts of opportunities to young people to go into the aviation industry.

Figure of Eight is helping people with learning difficulties, and we saw the unveiling of pictures by some of its pupils.

The South East Essex Schools Music Association festival was a wonderful celebration of musical talent at the Cliffs Pavilion in Southend.

The 150th anniversary of St Helen’s Church was led by the Philippine community and was a wonderful day of celebration. The mosque open day in Southend was a great success.

Armed Forces Day was on 29 June, but it is so sad that Charles Benford has died today at the age of 100 before he could be awarded the freedom of Southend. That is such a shame.

Leigh Town Council’s community day was a wonderful event.

I wish all colleagues, the Speaker, the Deputy Speakers, and all the servants of the House a very happy summer.

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who as usual made reference to his wish to see Southend receive city status. It is a great status to have, and we were fortunate in Preston to receive city status in 2002 as a result of the Queen’s golden jubilee. It was heavily contested and took place in jubilee year, so I am afraid he might have to wait until there is another jubilee year.

I stand here feeling bewildered following the statement from the Prime Minister about his plans for the future. The comments that we have heard today are comments that we have heard many times from the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), who is full of bluff and bluster, but there are many serious issues up and down the country, many of which are important topics being faced by those in my own constituency.

Universal credit continues to be a scourge for people in Preston, with something like twice as many claimants of jobseeker’s allowance migrating to universal credit in the city of Preston. To me, this is an indicator of the state of the economy in many parts of the country. London will not be greatly affected by Brexit, but the people of Preston will be very hard hit by it, and the region as a whole will see a reduction of up to 12% in GDP. The less money people have in their pockets because of the transition to universal credit, the more difficult life is going to be for my constituents.

We have also seen serious poverty in many places, including my constituency. Something like 38% of children in Preston—that is nearly 8,000—are living in poverty. The Prime Minister says that the best way out of poverty is to have a job. Yes, that is the case, but 70% of children living in poverty live in a household where at least one parent is working. That poverty cannot be allowed to continue. We will expect the Government and the new Prime Minister to deal with that.

Another issue that has affected many of my constituents is the personal independence payment. The reassessments that have gone on in that area are absolutely ridiculous. People with serious disabilities and illnesses have been given zero points, and many of them—more than 50%—have to win on appeal. Again, this should not be allowed to continue, and I want to see the new Prime Minister and the new Government doing something about this.

I want to discuss foreign policy, because although there are many problems in my constituency, we have a multi-ethnic, multi-faith community that looks not just inwards to what is happening in Preston and in Lancashire but outwards to what is happening elsewhere in the world. There is continued dismay, anger and upset at what is going on in the occupied territories in Palestine.

On Monday, Israeli troops accompanied by bulldozers began ruthlessly demolishing homes in the Palestinian village of Sur Baher, close to the separation wall in the occupied west bank. Residents of the village’s Wadi al-Hummus neighbourhood were shocked to see 16 residential buildings, which hold about 100 apartments, targeted on the pretext of security. Innocent Palestinians were watching as their homes were destroyed in front of their very eyes.

I was also dismayed today when the Prime Minister talked, in answer to questions, about Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who has been detained since 2016. How can this Prime Minister look in the mirror or sleep at night with a conscience, given the comments he made which have contributed to this poor woman’s plight? The latest we hear is that she has been chained down and held as a prisoner. That is terrible, and it cannot be allowed to continue.

Another issue that is greatly affecting people in Preston is drug crime, which is rife in a deprived ward in my city. I recently met with local councillors from Deepdale ward, who witnessed horrific gang-related violence on
the streets in broad daylight while out canvassing at local elections. Young people and children are used to distribute illicit drugs on the street, and shockingly, this activity takes place in broad daylight within yards of school playgrounds. It is rife up and down the country, and many of us here know about county lines because we are experiencing them at first hand.

I want to speak about gambling not just by adults but by young kids and children. I am hearing about kids with mobile phones who have their parents’ credit cards and are playing during lessons, gambling large sums of money—thousands of pounds, in many cases, of their parents’ money. The Gambling Commission tells us that 55,000 11 to 16-year-olds have serious gambling addictions. The country is in a mess. We have a new Prime Minister and a new Government. Let us see whether they can deal with it.

However, the stand-alone maternity department is at more risk. The reason is that people are not using it. This is one of those “use it or lose it” cases. I urge all those in my area who are talking to their patients—pregnant women—to say, “Look, there is this alternative.” Clearly, it has to be a safe alternative, which I fully understand, but I want that stand-alone maternity unit—

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I know Stafford quite well. If those people are not using the unit, where are they going?

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Most women will be going to a consultant-led unit in Stoke, Wolverhampton or Walsall. I understand that, and they may have received advice from their GP on the issue—this has to be clinically led—but I very much value the stand-alone unit in Stafford and want it to continue.

We also have a problem with shortage of general practitioners in Stafford. In fact, there is a shortage across the country, so I welcome the new medical schools that are being opened. I am delighted that my wife, who is a GP, was up in Sunderland this week giving some training at the new medical school, which is about to be opened. I welcome the ones that are going to be opened in Chelmsford and other places.

I want to raise a few other issues, such as visas, including for foreign spouses and partners. Many people have come to my surgery with real problems in getting visas, including visas to visit, let alone visas for residence, and those issues need to be looked at more sympathetically, as does the issue of visas for visitors from Africa. Last week, the hon. Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) and I published a report on the difficulties that African visitors have in getting visas. These are Government officials and business people. I had one case recently involving the headmaster of a school in Ghana who was coming to visit his brother for a couple of weeks—a very distinguished man. Of course he does not want to stay in this country—he would much rather go back and teach his students in Ghana—but it has taken ages and he still does not have that visa. We must, must do better and I urge all Members to read the report that we jointly produced.

Turning to business, this is a minor matter, although not so minor for those affected by it—bailiffs. The behaviour of bailiffs has been considered by the House and new rules have been put in place. However, there is also the matter of fees. Sometimes, fees go up enormously—exponentially—over time. We should look at capping bailiff fees. I understand that bailiffs are necessary; their role is important in enforcing payment of debt, but it must be carried out in a reasonable manner.

We also need to look at the infrastructure for charging electric vehicles. We talk about needing to move to electric transportation. Quite frankly, the charging infrastructure is very poor. It is getting better, although not nearly fast enough, but the grid is simply not there to support it, nor is the generating capacity. I have asked questions about this in the past. I believe that we are too complacent. If we are to move to electric vehicles fast—we are making them in the west midlands and in Sunderland—we need the infrastructure to support that.
[Jeremy Lefroy]

Finally, two issues. First, I welcome the start, after about 30 years of discussion, of the African continental free trade area. This will be tremendous for the African continent, but also for all those such as the United Kingdom who wish to trade and invest far more with our friends and neighbours across the Mediterranean in Africa.

Secondly, I have recently had the pleasure of being appointed to the Environmental Audit Committee. We have heard that Natural England is grossly underfunded and cannot do the work that needs to be done on all these fantastic sites of special scientific interest, so I ask the Treasury to look carefully at restoring the funding that has been cut from Natural England.

2.29 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I will focus on the rise in pensions mis-selling and say why this growing problem needs an urgent response.

Just this week, an investigation by The Times found that £60 billion had been moved out of defined-benefit pensions in recent years. That is much higher than was previously thought. The Financial Conduct Authority says that most savers would be better off staying in defined-benefit schemes, but The Times says that a third of all transfers now exhibit red flags. Already, pensions mis-selling is costing savers £4 billion a year. Those are concerning figures; behind them are pensioners and families who have worked hard only to find that their pensions and pension pots have been put at risk by rogues.

South Wales was at the centre of a mis-selling crisis with the British Steel pension scheme two years ago. Steelworkers were aggressively targeted by unscrupulous advisers when deciding what to do about their pension options. At least several hundred of them received unsuitable advice, while the response of key regulators was halting and insufficient. I hope that the authorities and the police will take firmer action in future. This was a serious example of what can go wrong, but many of the underlying causes are still there.

The new Administration urgently need to do three things. They should get the regulators to improve their performance, legislate for tougher action against mis-sellers and protect hard-working people’s life savings from the scammers and the swindlers. The Conservative-led coalition Government’s attempt at pensions liberalisation a few years ago is starting to sour. This new Conservative Government must sort it out quickly.

2.32 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), who raised an important issue that affects constituents across the country.

Before we rise for the summer recess with a spring in our step after the zinging performance by our excellent new Prime Minister, I wish to raise a number of issues for the Government to think about over the summer and for us to concentrate on.

During questions to the Leader of the House, I raised the consultation that is under way across a number of areas in London on Transport for London building high-density, multi-storey housing on car parks attached to stations. That will dramatically reduce the number of car parking spaces available at the terminus of every single line in London and affect commuters right across the south-east who drive to a station, leave their car and use public transport to travel in. Equally, there is a concern that the properties that will be built will be rabbit hutch es and will become the slums of the future, causing further problems.

Bob Stewart: Building is taking place on railway car parks in my constituency. That is pushing people out on to other local roads and clogging them up even more.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend; that is clearly another impact.

That leads me to my next issue, which is the bus consultations that are going on in London. The proposals will increase the speed at which buses move around London, but reduce the continuity of service between buses and stations. Residents in my constituency will have to change buses twice to reach Northwick Park station, whereas currently they can get on one bus and reach the station on public transport. That is absurd.

I have raised before at questions to the Leader of the House the impact of the illegal occupation by Travellers of areas in my constituency. We had—I use my words carefully—an illegal occupation on Stanmore Lodge. They were then evicted and moved to Stanmore marsh, which once again is public land. They were removed from there and moved to Canons Park. They then moved to Hatch End and then Whitchurch playing fields. Harrow Council and the police worked quickly to remove them, but we need new laws that prevent illegal occupation from taking place. It is not only the illegal occupation that has an impact, but the clear-up costs after these people have left. That is left to the council tax payer to pick up, which is clearly grossly unfair.

We have a new Chancellor who, in a previous role in government, was very helpful to the victims of the Equitable Life scandal, but there is still unfinished business. The people who were scammed by Equitable Life are still owed £2.6 billion. I hope that the Chancellor will live up to his word and honour the Government’s commitment to fund in full the settlement for those individuals.

I have raised the Vagrancy Act before. It is a disgrace that this country still has on the statute book the Vagrancy Act 1824, which criminalises people for being homeless. People should be helped into housing, not arrested because they have nowhere to live. I hope that the new Government will take action to remove it from the statute book and to ensure that prompt and proper action is taken against aggressive street begging, which is a real problem in this country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), who is no longer in his place, has spoken about leasehold reform. The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee has produced an excellent report—well, I was party to it and to the evidence—and we had a debate in this Chamber on the need for the reform of leasehold. The Government must take that up quickly and deliver.
There is also the challenge of financing local government, on which the HCLG Committee will publish a report shortly. We need to reform the financing of local government, because it is suffering from a lack of finance and a crisis in the provision of services. The basis on which any finance is provided to local government across the country is unfair, so reform is necessary.

I am delighted that shortly before my right hon. Friend the previous Prime Minister left office, the Government released the long-awaited prevention report, which contains action on smoking and obesity and a number of other measures. I am, as many people know, the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health, as well as an avid anti-smoker. We have to ensure that we become a smoke-free society as quickly as possible. At the moment, the ambition is too slow and we have to speed up the process. We can use the taxation system to discourage people from smoking and put a levy on the tobacco companies, which make millions of pounds of profit from a drug that kills people who use it in the way they intend. The burden on the national health service and smoking cessation services could be paid for by that levy if we were bold enough to implement it.

I attended the recent rally in Ashraf in Albania with my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and I hosted a meeting in this place on human rights in Iran, at which one of the guest speakers was Richard Ratcliffe. I have said previously in the House what an honourable man he is in his suffering. He has been deprived of having his wife beside him and his child is not able to share family life, but he is diligent in trying to ensure that his wife is released from prison and returned to her family. Given the situation arising in the Gulf, we need to make every effort possible, but the reality is what that we need is regime change in Iran and the end of the theocracy.

What is going on in Sri Lanka right now for the Muslim minority is a disgrace. Those people need protection and they need support from this Government. I trust that our new Foreign Secretary will provide it.

As we rise for the summer, some people may be going on holiday. On Monday, I shall be assembling my work experience team of students, who will find out what it is like to be an MP during the vacation. I look forward to that and to assisting—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I ask all Members, if they take an intervention, please to try not to use the extra minute. We are really struggling; the time limit will now go down to five minutes.

2.39 pm

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who spoke with great authority about a large number of international issues, as well as about his local buses; I always instinctively trust a Member of Parliament who knows about his local buses. It is also a great pleasure to take part in a debate started with such panache by the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess).

It was Lord Hague of Richmond who said that early-day motions in this House were “parliamentary confetti”. Although he is a distinguished Yorkshireman, I disagree with him—for me, they are the bread and butter of our Parliament. I want to bring to the attention of the House, before we adjourn for the summer recess, three early-day motions that just happen to be in my name, which the House may have missed while other things have been happening over the last few days.

Early-day motion 2649 calls for a review of the Heathrow expansion decision. It is supported by nearly 30 hon. Members—including some Labour Front Benchers, which I was pleased to see; I hope that it will be supported by the Labour leadership. Things have changed over the past year: we have declared a climate emergency, and we now have a target of net zero. In the north of England, it has become very apparent that, given our net zero target, any expansion of Heathrow will choke off any possible expansion of routes in the north of England. The Prime Minister famously said that he would sit down in front of the bulldozers to stop Heathrow expansion. I am not asking him to do that, but I do think that a review is the least that we can expect.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend and neighbour is making an excellent speech. It is vital that we cancel the third runway at Heathrow and that we share the reduction in aviation emissions right across the country, so that we do not play airports against each other.

John Grogan: My hon. Friend makes a good point. There is express provision for such a review in the Planning Act 2008, so it would not be difficult.

I move on quickly to early-day motion 2650, which is about commercial local radio and Bauer. Although it stands only in my name at the moment, I am confident that at least a dozen MPs will sign it overnight. It deals with an important issue of commercial local radio, to which two things have happened in recent years. The market has consolidated: Global and Bauer now own over half the market. Furthermore, Ofcom has weakened the regulations so that local radio stations now have to have only three rather than seven hours of local content on a weekday and local content can come from regional centres; it need not come from the area of the franchise.

Bauer is trying to buy over 30 local radio stations in four different groups. The good news is that yesterday the Competition and Markets Authority stood up to it and said that there was a clear competition case to decide on a weekday and local content can come from regional centres; it need not come from the area of the franchise.

Bauer is trying to buy over 30 local radio stations in four different groups. The good news is that yesterday the Competition and Markets Authority stood up to it and said that there was a clear competition case to answer. There will be a phase 2 investigation of these possible purchases of Bauer’s. The fear must be that local advertisers will be taken out of the market, all the advertising will become national and Bauer will follow Global in closing local studios; Global has already closed 10 local studios. If the purchases go through, Bauer will own exactly 80% of the Yorkshire commercial local radio market; 16 of 20 stations. I fear for stations such as Stray FM, which covers part of Keighley constituency. I fear that, ultimately, programmes will be made just from Leeds and London.

The third early-day motion to which I want to draw attention, Mr Deputy Speaker, may be to your taste: it is to do with cricket and football World cups and free-to-air TV. It is EDM 2608. One thing that the retiring Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport did in his last few days in office was to announce for the first time in about 20 years additions to the list of events...
that must be shown on free-to-air TV. He said that he wanted a consultation on future women's World cups and future women's FA cup finals and that they should be listed just as the men's events are. Some 11 million people were inspired by the football World cup this year, and that will now also be true for future women's football World cups: women will have equal status with men when it comes to great sporting events. The right hon. and learned Gentleman also suggested that the Paralympics should be added. I would like his successor to go further and to add the cricket. We cannot just have one game every 15 years, courtesy of Sky and its owners Comcast—at the very least, England internationals in the cricket World cup and in the T20s, as in Australia, should be free to all the nation, to inspire them.

Finally, I want to preface an early-day motion that is not yet on the Order Paper but will be in September. It is to do with the private security industry. One of the great benefits of being an MP is that, courtesy of Mr Speaker, we can see in the new year on the Terrace. I was coming to do that last year and met Mr Michael Thompson, who turned out to be from Keighley. He was outside the Palace. I kept in touch with him over the months that followed. He told me that the firm he was working for, 24/7 Security, have not paid a lot of people—not just on that occasion but on others, including the Leeds festival and so on. The security industry is very heavily regulated for the individual security guards but not when it comes to the contracting companies. Under the Private Security Industry Act 2001, there is provision to have such regulation of the contracting companies. I hope that, as we approach the 20th anniversary of the Act, we will review the situation.

Finally, I wish you a happy summer holiday, Mr Deputy Speaker. Particularly in view of the county of your loyalty, I wish you a happy Yorkshire Day on 1 August next week.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Lancashire will always be there first.

2.45 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): In just over one hour, the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission, which I have the privilege of chairing, will be publishing its latest report—a substantial and groundbreaking one, entitled “The Limits of Consent: Prostitution in the UK.” That is not a subject often considered in this place. We need to. The whole basis of the report is that those personally abused in this way will not fear being treated as criminals. If anyone is under any illusion as to what the trade really means and its links with organised violent crime, drug and people trafficking and international money laundering, they need only read our report.

By creating a new offence, we will help to halt human trafficking into this country by making it a less attractive destination for those who engage in the heinous organised international trade in human beings for the purposes of prostitution. We can strike a spoke into the wheel of modern-day slavery and challenge and call to account the often violent and degrading sexual exploitation associated with the trade. Sadly, all these crimes are still growing in this country. It is indeed a heinous trade. I have heard it said, “You can sell a drug once, but you can sell a girl a thousand times.” I heard of one trafficked girl who decided one day that she would count how many men were sent to abuse her; after 100, she stopped counting.

The experiences in other countries support our proposed approach. The UK needs to be at the forefront of this human rights work. Our report is different from others in this policy area because it gives in-depth consideration to the questions of principle around prostitution that are often neglected—questions such as: what does it mean to make a free choice? Is prostitution inherently harmful? What does sexual consent really mean in the context of prostitution? We found more agreement on these issues than one might first expect from a superficial reading.

The report, which is the fruit of more than a year of research and inquiry, meticulously weighs the evidence in favour of and against different legislative models and solutions. I pay tribute to the lead commissioner on the report, Luke de Pulford, and thank those who gave their time to help draft it. I also pay tribute to the many survivors of prostitution and the dozens of concerned interest groups that gave evidence to us. I thank in particular one remarkable woman, the brave survivor Rachel Moran. I implore colleagues to read her book “Paid For: My Journey Through Prostitution”, which tells her heart-scorching personal story. I challenge any colleague then to deny that these abused women, and some men, need our effective help, and need it now.

In the coming months, I shall bring forward a private Member’s Bill to strengthen the law around sexual consent and end the demand for prostitution in this country—an approach that I know has cross-party support. If enacted, the Bill will repeal criminal sanctions against prostituted people while creating a public sector duty to enable those caught in prostitution to exit, and to give them safe homes, health help, support and protection, as well as the educational skills that so many never have the chance to develop because frequently they are drawn into prostitution in their early teenage years. Our report can be found at Scribd.com. I ask for support from all colleagues from all parties in this endeavour.

2.50 pm

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who, through her care, compassion and faith, does so much good work in this place.
I speak first as the co-chair of the drugs, alcohol and justice cross-party group and as a member of the all-party group on alcohol harm. Earlier this month, a major review revealed that one in 10 people in a hospital bed in this country is alcohol dependent, and that one in five is doing themselves harm by drinking. In response to the review Professor Ian Gilmore, chair of the Alcohol Health Alliance, said:

“More than 80 people die of alcohol-related causes across the UK every day, and there are more than 1 million alcohol-related hospital admissions every year in England alone.”

We urge the Government to prioritise reducing the harm that alcohol causes. They need to take action and introduce targeted, evidence-based measures, including minimum unit pricing to raise the price of the cheapest, strongest alcohol products.

The massive burden that alcohol puts on the NHS highlights the need for the urgent adoption of measures presented in the alcohol charter, which was launched by the drugs, alcohol and justice group and the all-party group on alcohol harm and is supported by more than 30 organisations. However, the Government have not produced their promised alcohol strategy. They have postponed ministerial meetings to discuss the charter and barely mentioned alcohol in their new prevention Green Paper. I very much hope that the new Prime Minister, the new Chancellor and, indeed, Ministers across Government, including from the Department of Health and Social Care, the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Education—they all have a part to play—will adopt a more enlightened approach. A serious, joined-up approach based on the charter recommendations could reduce the blight of alcohol harm significantly.

Let me turn to other issues. Together with colleagues from across the House, I have raised the issue of access to the drug Spinraza for patients with spinal muscular atrophy. Yesterday, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence published its final guidance on the drug. There is good news for those patients who will soon start to access the drug through the managed-access agreement, which must be implemented quickly and fairly, but it is disappointing that it does not include full access for SMA types 1, 2 and 3. We look forward to further clinical evidence being gathered, with a view to future positive changes being made to the managed-access agreement eligibility criteria. NICE and NHS England can expect continued pressure for those changes from MPs, as well as from patients, carers and clinicians—in fact, from all those involved in Muscular Dystrophy UK, TreatSMA, and Spinal Muscular Atrophy UK. The objective is access to Spinraza for all who need it, and the campaign will continue until that goal is reached.

Finally, I am sure the whole House will join me in congratulating Depaul on its 30th anniversary, which was celebrated in the Lords yesterday. Depaul runs fantastic services for homeless young people in North Tyneside and throughout the UK. Its work is guided by the belief that no matter what they have been through, young people can reach their potential if they have a safe, stable home and a support network that they can depend on. When the House returns, I will carry on working with Depaul UK to make the case for more Government investment in homelessness prevention, such as the Nightstop volunteer host service, and for a fairer welfare system in which young people do not have to wait five weeks for their first universal credit payment and in which local housing allowance is unfrozen and is worth at least the 30th percentile of local rents.

I wish everybody an enjoyable and fruitful time during the summer. I do hope that everyone finds time to pursue some relaxation during this recess.

2.55 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon).

May I begin by putting on record my thanks and, I am sure, the thanks of all Scottish Conservative colleagues here in Westminster, Holyrood and across Scotland for the sterling service of the previous Scottish Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell). He has been a staunch supporter of Scotland and the Union, and really was Scotland’s man in the Cabinet. I know that his successor, my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack), will continue that work, but my right hon. Friend certainly made me and my colleagues who joined this place in 2017 feel extremely welcome. We valued his support—no one more so than me for his efforts to get the Moray growth deal over the line. I read an article by the Scottish journalist, Stephen Daisley, today in which he said that my right hon. Friend’s time in office as the Scottish Secretary was the longest since Lord Lang. He was appointed by David Cameron to the shadow Cabinet 13 and a half years ago, which meant that he was the longest serving Scottish spokesperson for either party since Willie Ross served under Harold Wilson, and that is a commendable record.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): There would not be a Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal without the former Secretary of State either, so I put on record my grateful thanks to him too.

Douglas Ross: I appreciate that comment from my hon. Friend.

May I also use this opportunity in the House of Commons today to thank another person for sterling service, and that is Clare Russell who will shortly retire after 14 years as the Queen’s representative as Lord Lieutenant of Banffshire? In those 17 years, she has organised more than 40 royal visits, the last of which was for the Earl and Countess of Forfar to visit Glenfiddich Distillery in Moray. Over and above the royal visits that Clare Russell organised and participated in, she has been part of countless community events throughout Banffshire. She is always ably assisted by her husband, Oliver.

The Lord Lieutenant of Banffshire was presented with the Commander of the Royal Victorian Order by Her Majesty in 2018 and a few years earlier received an honorary degree from Aberdeen University. I want to say from these Green Benches that the people of Banffshire are extremely grateful for the commitment and dedication that Clare Russell has shown to our area and for the 17 years of great service. We are also extremely grateful to her for everything that she has done to promote Banffshire and for being the Queen’s representative in our area.
I also want to use the time available today to mention once again our armed forces, who are an integral part of the Moray community. Time and again, I mention RAF Lossiemouth and our brave men and women who serve there, and, of course, those at 39 Engineer Regiment in Kinloss at Kinloss barracks. Tomorrow, I will be joining them in Grant Park in Forres where there will be an Operation Trenton medals parade. The regiment will march down Forres high street and assemble in Grant Park. I hope that this great weather that we are currently having will continue for the men and women who will receive their honours tomorrow.

A slightly negative point that I feel I must bring to the attention of the Chamber today is the closure of the East Beach bridge in Lossiemouth. This is an extremely popular beach in Lossiemouth where I enjoy taking my family and our dog for a walk. Indeed, I even train on the dunes sometimes at East Beach, but, yesterday, after a report from the public, Moray council carried out an inspection and the bridge was closed. It was estimated just on Tuesday this week that 3,500 people cross that bridge in a single day, and the East Beach at Lossiemouth attracts tourists all year round. I hope that we can find an immediate solution to these problems, and that the UK Government, the Scottish Government and private investors can get involved to ensure that the bridge reopens as quickly as possible. It is such an important attraction to the area, and there are real concerns from the business community that its closure could affect tourism in the area. I spoke to the chairman of Lossiemouth Community Council, Mike Mulholland, this morning and was told that there would be an emergency meeting at 12 o’clock this afternoon to get an update from the council. I worry that there will not be an immediate solution, but we all must work together to try to get the bridge opened as quickly as possible.

Finally, in the last few seconds I want to mention the great community spirit in Moray. Just last week I visited the baby bank that has been set up by Susan and Ian Sutherland, who collect clothes and the other goods that people require for young babies and distribute them in the local community. The project originally started in their dining room and has now moved into premises in Urquhart. Those people are doing great work, and I praise them and all the volunteers in Moray who do outstanding work throughout the year.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): People who have watched this House during this Session might think that all we do is talk about Brexit, but we have also been addressing the absolute disaster that universal credit is proving to be and the devastating effect it has had on too many families. We have also been very engaged with the issue of many seriously ill people receiving the wrong personal independence payment assessments. Many of these people are terminally ill and some have got zero points at assessment. I am still battling against failed assessments and it is totally unacceptable. My Access to Welfare (Terminally Illness Definition) Bill has not been able to move forward because we have not had ongoing sitting Fridays. That is really frustrating.

Another issue we face is that of the bereavement benefits lost by children and their parent when the person they lost was not married to the child’s mother or father. It is absolutely shocking. We were promised that that would be resolved, but we are still waiting. There is also the matter of child trust funds, some 2,700 of which are dormant in my Bridgend constituency, with claimants who did not even know they had a trust fund waiting for money that could change their life. What are we going to do to make that possible?

The devastation of Brexit has led to the closure of the Ford plant in my constituency, with the loss of 1,700 jobs there and 12,000 job losses at Ford across Europe. I am not involved in the meetings between Westminster Ministers and Welsh Assembly Ministers, yet it is to me that people come to know what is happening. Can we have access to the relevant people for my constituents and those of my colleagues in the south Wales region whose families are terribly worried about their future? Those who work in small and medium-sized enterprises are also devastated. We need to know what is going on, with regular feedback.

Earlier today, the Leader of the House talked about the important role the Foreign Office plays in protecting British citizens when they are abroad. My constituent John Tossell left his hotel on 17 June wearing a T-shirt, shorts and open-toed sandals, with €10 in his pocket. He disappeared. He was last seen going for a swim near the Windmill hotel in Argassi on the island of Zante. Can anyone who is going to Argassi on holiday please look out for this man? Will they look at their holiday photographs and let his family know if they have seen him? Also, will the Foreign and Commonwealth Office agree to keep the family aware of what is happening in the investigation throughout the summer?

Bridgend is a great place with great people, great hospitality and the best further education college in the United Kingdom. If anyone is wandering into Wales, I suggest they visit Porthcawl, where we have sea, sun, surfing, sandcastles, strolling on the prom and probably the best Italian ice cream in the whole of Wales. Our lifeboat, which is one of the busiest in the UK, keeps people safe in the water; hon. Members would be amazed at how many people on this island nation have no understanding of the risks of going into the sea. Our National Coastwatch Institution is absolutely superb. It is possible to walk from Newton bay down the River Ogmore, along a local nature reserve and right around the coast to the site of special scientific interest at Kenfig. It is an amazing opportunity to visit Wales and see the wonderful life that we are determined to protect and to ensure remains a part of the European Union. I will certainly be doing my best, when the House comes back, to ensure that that continues.

We all have to thank all the staff of the House—especially the catering staff who keep us going, the Doorkeepers who keep us informed and the security staff who keep us safe, but also the guides who show our visitors around the place. I also want to thank my staff, both in my Bridgend office and my Westminster office, because none of us would get through the volume of work without them.
This is a company that is not engaged—that has basically shown a blank face to us in recent months—and then, on concluding that it is going to sell the site for property development, entirely residential, has realised that it needs the support of the stakeholders on my property development, entirely residential, has realised then, on concluding that it is going to sell the site for a future use of the site.“

"We note that the draft Local Plan has been published on the Council’s website and is due out for public consultation imminently. Following our initial review there appears to be no provision for the redevelopment of this site. The scale of the site—standing at 22 acres—provides your Authority with a significant opportunity to prioritise brownfield redevelopment as part of the overall spatial strategy avoiding the need for unnecessary development on greenfield land.”

It concludes by saying:

“In parallel to this, we would ask you to engage with”

Charterhouse Property Group

”so that it maximises the prospects of obtaining planning consent for a future use of the site.”

This is a company that is not engaged—that has basically shown a blank face to us in recent months—and then, on concluding that it is going to sell the site for property development, entirely residential, has realised that it needs the support of the stakeholders on my taskforce, most notably the planning committee. I find this quite extraordinary. When I first heard that the company had instructed a commercial agent last October, I “mystery shopped” the estate agent. I simply said to it, “I represent a large number of people with an interest in the site”, which was factually correct, asked if the site was going to be sold for residential development, and was told, “We consider all bids.” At this point, I challenged Delphi on its intentions, and it continued to say that its priority was industrial use.

My position is, first, that our planning authority should stand firm. If a planning application comes in, it should reject it as being out of policy and say that this site should remain for jobs and employment because it is absolutely key to our local economy. I say both to Delphi and to the property development company that were their application to be rejected—which, as we know, happens in the system these days—and they appealed with all their legal power and the rest of it, I would have no hesitation in asking for it to be called in by the Secretary of State, because, I can confirm to the House, we have had interest from companies that want to buy the site for industrial use—for new technology. One was from a company that has strong links to China regarding bringing forward electrical automotive technology. The truth is that companies like that do not have the muscle of the property developers, and in this case Delphi has decided that it wants the biggest bang for its buck.

I recognise that Delphi has offered excellent terms of severance, and the staff who are leaving do so with contracts that many newer employees in companies would envy, if we are honest. But the fact is that we have a Government, as we heard today, who want to see us pushing forward with investment in new technology. When we have an employment site with brilliant staff, which is the asset in this case and the reason why people have been interested in it, we should be looking to maximise the potential for the local economy, rather than selling to the highest bidder and leaving the site vacant for years as we go through the courts with applications for commercial and residential development. I hope we can still have a mixed-use site that maintains employment, and if Delphi wants to do that, I will work with it.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). Like the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), I want to raise the issue of avoidable deaths as a consequence of epilepsy. This issue does not get enough focus in the House. It causes a great deal of distress, for obvious reasons, to many families.

There are 21 epilepsy deaths each week in the United Kingdom. The organisation SUDEP Action does an excellent job in not only supporting bereaved families but highlighting this issue. What we want from the Government is an inquiry into avoidable epilepsy deaths; a funded annual risk check for all people with epilepsy; local training, so that all frontline professionals have greater awareness of this issue; and a willingness that has not been present for a number of years for Ministers to meet SUDEP Action and Members of Parliament to address these issues. A remarkable woman in my constituency called Lynn McGoff lost her daughter Samantha Ahearn 10 years ago to an avoidable epilepsy death. She has raised more than £45,000 for SUDEP Action, and she is a great advocate and campaigner for
this cause and many others. Her courage, and that of the many people like her who turn personal tragedy into campaigns, is an inspiration to us all.

As we speak here today, there is a real risk that the English Football League is about to give Bury football club notice that it will have to leave the league due to a series of administrative issues. I want to use this speech to ask the English Football League to sit down with me, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith) and the club to do everything we can to prevent that from happening, because it would be a devastating blow to the town of Bury.

When we come back, I hope to be in a position to confirm that we have submitted a bid to the Government for a new secondary school in Radcliffe in my constituency. It is a scandal that that community has not had a secondary school for well over 10 years, but we are making tremendous progress in submitting a bid to the Government, and I hope the Government will look upon it favourably. Likewise, for Prestwich precinct, we are making a bid to the town centre fund administered by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

I want to touch briefly on the issue of antisemitism. It is important to say that this has ruptured the relationship between my former party and large sections of the Jewish community, and the consequence is that the majority—this is not an exaggeration—of Jews in the United Kingdom fear that they would not feel welcome in this country if my former party, under its current leadership, were to win an election. I therefore ask those who are still members of that party in this House to understand the impact of that on people’s everyday lives and their duty to send different messages to the Jewish community in this country from those they have been sending in recent times. That is a very serious issue.

I also want to raise the matter of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I had the privilege of meeting her husband Richard, as many others did, outside the embassy. The way Iran has behaved is scandalous. Whatever we say about wanting to stay part of the nuclear deal, Iran is a rogue state. It continues to fund and encourage terrorism around the middle east and then, despite this country staying in the nuclear deal, it imprisons and treats Nazanin in the most appalling manner. We should use every opportunity in this House to condemn the Iranian regime and say that we will not take our eye off the ball until she is released.

I want to raise the question of HS2. What I have discovered in recent weeks about HS2 is shocking. It seems that a significant number of former senior staff were made to sign non-disclosure clauses, as part of redundancy notices, because they had brought it to the attention of the company’s senior management that they were not providing accurate information to this House about the true costs of HS2. People were marched off premises and made redundant purely because they were whistleblowing and saying that this House and the public were being misled about the cost. I urge the Government and the Department for Transport to come totally clean and to be transparent about this issue, because if they do not come clean, we will drag out of them this information about what I believe is a public scandal.

May I welcome the new Prime Minister’s commitment to come forward with a fundamentally new plan for social care? This is one of the great public policy challenges of our time. Elderly people and their families, as well as disabled people and people with mental health problems, are being let down. I hope that the new Prime Minister is genuine in his commitment finally to bring forward, on an all-party basis, a radical plan for the reform of social care.

3.15 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis). I was deeply impressed by what he said about antisemitism, and also about whistleblowing. I am the co-chair of the all-party group on whistleblowing. Just a couple of weeks ago, we produced a significant, I believe, report entitled “The Personal Cost of Doing the Right Thing and the Cost to Society of Ignoring it”. In that report, we call for a review of the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. It was passed 20 years ago and was groundbreaking at the time, but it is well past the date for it to be reviewed. The hon. Gentleman highlighted a case in point where the Act should be protecting whistleblowers but does not. The report also makes the case for an independent office for the whistleblower.

I was enlivened—I think the whole Chamber was—by the exciting, energetic and enthusiastic performance of our new Prime Minister earlier today. Had I taken my turn and bobbed for two and a half hours, I would have asked my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to commit to taking seriously the recommendations arising from the review that Lord Dunlop will produce later this year. It is very important for the sake of our Union that the United Kingdom Government update their structures and configuration to make them fit for the post-devolution Britain we live in.

I would like to raise the lack of any ministerial statement on the shocking rise in drugs-related deaths in Scotland, the highest per capita death rate in Europe. It is beyond my reasoning why Home Office Ministers were so reluctant to come here and make a statement on this important subject. I would like a meeting with the new Leader of the House to discuss how the Government respond to matters relating to Scotland in general. The sovereign Parliament of the United Kingdom must surely have an interest in all aspects of life in all parts of these islands.

Every Friday and Saturday, I spend time doing the thing I enjoy most about this job, which is speaking to my constituents, most frequently on their doorsteps. I am struck by the things that concern my constituents—not the things that fill up column inches of the national newspapers or the hours of ongoing, 24-hour rolling television news but the things that fill the columns of the Stirling Observer and the airtime of Central FM and Stirling City Radio. Those are the things my constituents care about, so let me mention some of them very quickly.

Since I was elected, I have been involved in a campaign to increase the number of Changing Places. Changing Places are toilets and changing facilities for people with a wide range of disabilities. They are fully equipped with showers, hoists and changing tables to make it possible for families caring for family members and
others who suffer from severe disability to enjoy the facilities that we all—those of us who are able-bodied—take for granted. I opened a new Changing Places facility in my first few months as an MP at the Blair Drummond safari park, working with Gary Gilmour, the manager there. It really brought home to me the effect that these facilities can have on individuals and the families who need them. They enable them to enjoy a day out without anxiety about the hygiene and care of the people they love.

I am working with Stirling shopping mall manager, Gary Turnbull, because it would like to have a Changing Places facility there. I am also working with the centrepiece of Stirling’s sports village, the Peak, and Active Stirling, because it would like a Changing Places facility, as well as with the McLaren Leisure Centre in Callander—led by its chairman, David Moore, and manager, Trish Thompson—which is planning a Changing Places facility soon. I want to pay tribute to the local area access forum, under the chairmanship of Robert Dick. It does so much to highlight these issues, and so much more, and I pay full tribute to it. I hope that Ministers will consider looking at policy on these issues. Why is it not required that these facilities are installed at motorway service stations and other key public facilities that make such a difference to the quality of people’s lives?

I pay tribute to Grant Wallace, a local driving instructor, and to local Councillor Martin Earl, who saved the Callander test centre from the clutches of the DVLA, which wanted to shut it down and save £2,500. Together with Mark Griffiths they came up with a novel solution so that Callander could retain its DVLA test centre and also make that saving. I also pay tribute to Valerie Brand from Buchlyvie, who managed to change the route of the C12 bus so that people in rural Stirling had access to a proper bus service, and to Donald and Alicia Fraser who set up a transport scheme in Killin to ensure that people could access appointments at hospitals and other far away medical facilities. Rural communities are often forgotten, but they should not be.

I would like to mention many other things, but one success story involves my constituent, Helen Bovill, who was concerned about the state of a public walkway. She got in touch with her councillor and her MP, and this is the kind of civic volunteering that people could access appointments at hospitals and other key public facilities that make such a difference to the quality of people’s lives?

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I pay tribute to Grant Wallace, a local driving instructor, and to local Councillor Martin Earl, who saved the Callander test centre from the clutches of the DVLA, which wanted to shut it down and save £2,500. Together with Mark Griffiths they came up with a novel solution so that Callander could retain its DVLA test centre and also make that saving. I also pay tribute to Valerie Brand from Buchlyvie, who managed to change the route of the C12 bus so that people in rural Stirling had access to a proper bus service, and to Donald and Alicia Fraser who set up a transport scheme in Killin to ensure that people could access appointments at hospitals and other far away medical facilities. Rural communities are often forgotten, but they should not be.

I would like to mention many other things, but one success story involves my constituent, Helen Bovill, who was concerned about the state of a public walkway. She got in touch with her councillor and her MP, and this is the kind of civic volunteering that people could access appointments at hospitals and other key public facilities that make such a difference to the quality of people’s lives?
Putin's behaviour in Ukraine, not least the illegal annexation of Crimea and the illegal terrorist activities he continues to fund and co-ordinate in east Ukraine. As we have a new UK Government and all the disaster that undoubtedly will flow—I hear the word “ Opportunity” from the Treasury Bench; I am sure those on the Government Benches disagree with me—I appeal to Members not to forget Ukraine, because it has to fight every single day for its independence and its sovereignty. It has just entered uncharted political territory. An entirely new Parliament was elected earlier this week. The governing party, under President Zelensky, managed to achieve a majority for the first time since independence in 1991. It should also be noted that it has elected its first ever ethnic minority Member of Parliament in the country’s history. That is a bit like the Scottish National party in 2011, which achieved a majority in our country for the first time and elected the first ever ethnic minority Member of the Scottish Parliament.

Ukraine requires our support and I encourage the fraternal support of Members of this House through the all-party group on Ukraine. It is undoubtedly a testing ground for the hybrid war that is creeping and crawling more and more into western democracies, including our own. It is incumbent on all of us to understand that; it is not enough to stand up and thump one’s chest about how terrible President Putin is and say all the right things that you read in The Times that morning. We must also understand what that interference might look like in the form of Russian oligarchs and their money in this country. This week, the United States House of Representatives announced that it will be looking into the use of Russian oligarch money in UK political parties. That is a damned sight more than what is happening in this Parliament. We will be letting the electorate down if we do not grapple with that issue after the recess.

Finally, I say to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to all the staff of the House, all the Members here present, and those who are already enjoying their gin and tonics on the train or on the terrace, I hope they enjoy the summer.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): There are certainly no gin and tonics in this Chamber, may I add.

3.29 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What a pleasure it is to follow such a compelling speech from the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald). It is to his great credit and of great use to the House that he raised the issues that he did. The effort to do that had to be led by grieving families, in the main. The Kirkup report in 2015 was groundbreaking and had the full support of the former Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), who is now returning to the Back Benches. It drove forward patient safety and transparency right across the NHS, so it is of huge concern that very serious concerns and allegations are now surfacing about the neurology department in Morecambe Bay and about the way that, it seems, the trust is treating a man who was a very highly respected consultant for many years within that department. He felt forced to retire a number of years ago and this week, he published a book, “Whistle in the Wind: Life, death, detriment and dismissal in the NHS—A Whistle-blower’s Story”. I urge the Minister to get word to the Health Secretary to instruct his officials to read that and perhaps to look at it personally. The author makes deeply alarming allegations of malpractice over several years, a number of which concern consultants who are still working in that department. He details a process where he was, in his view, singled out over a period of 10 years, accused anonymously of racism and felt forced to leave the trust.

It is right that these allegations are treated fairly and without prejudice to either side, but what is not right is the way that the trust is seemingly not learning the lessons of transparency. It is refusing FOI requests made by our brilliant local newspaper, which has led the way on this matter. We all owe a debt of thanks to Amy Fenton, a reporter who is just not taking no for an answer. She is being told time and again that she cannot have information from the trust. The Health Secretary must look at this, and I hope that he will come back to us when the House comes back in September.
Skegness (Matt Warman) mouths “It’s devolved” from the Treasury Bench; let me point out the nuances of the devolved arrangements.

There is an ongoing effort to market the site to international investors. That could involve the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but interestingly BEIS does not wish to engage in that effort, or to collaborate with the Scottish Government. I condemn the Scottish Government for their inaction, which is for entirely different reasons, but the UK Government could certainly add their efforts to a combined, collaborative approach. I am dismayed that the Prime Minister and his predecessor had neither the wit nor the tact to offer that to the campaign. It would become anyone who aspires to lead the country to seek to work in collaboration with all parts of all Administrations across the United Kingdom to achieve this objective.

Stephen Kerr: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the best strategy for preserving the Union would be to banish “devolve and forget” for good?

Mr Sweeney: I could not agree more, to put it succinctly.

There needs to be much more effort to collaborate across Governments. Where different aspects of problems can be solved at different levels of government, that ought to be discussed collaboratively and efficiently, rather than people simply mouthing “It’s devolved” and abrogating any sort of responsibility. That is not acceptable, frankly.

In Springburn, there is a long-standing tradition of railway engineering excellence that goes back to the dawn of the railway age. It is the railway metropolis of Scotland. It once exported half the world’s locomotives to all parts of the world. People look at the Finnieston crane in Glasgow—that great icon of the city’s skyline—and think it is to do with shipbuilding, but it was entirely to do with taking locomotives down to the docks to load them on ships and export them all around the world. I had the idea of bringing one of the old locomotives back to the Caley works and restoring it to working condition. Unfortunately, the Scottish Government did not entertain that solution.

In the next few days, we hope to have a meeting with the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity in Scotland, but of course, that will be closing the door after the workers have left, which is a great shame. We need to come around rapidly and create a cross-governmental taskforce at UK and Scottish Government level to reopen the Caley railway works quickly. I hope to work constructively, and in a spirit of collaboration, with all Governments in all parts of the UK to achieve that objective. I hope that Members on the SNP and Government Benches here are receptive to that.

That is just one example of how we can bring a local issue to national prominence through agitating here for a solution. Hopefully that nuanced expression of what could be done has been heard by those on the Treasury Bench. We can look forward to correspondence on this in the next few days, and hopefully can pull together a plan to save the works and restore them to production as quickly as possible.

There are many other wonderful aspects of my community, which is why I am so proud to represent it in Parliament. Often, there is innovation in the face of adversity; I think many Labour Members could reflect on the same theme. In the wake of a decade of austerity, many people are rising to the challenge of trying to help their community. Public services have been extracted, statutory responsibilities have been reduced, and there has been further erosion of the public realm and public service, which is a great shame, but the situation has also brought out the best in people and brought about great innovation. There is an opportunity for the Government to identify where people on the ground are innovating and doing very well indeed in offering really productive and efficient services to their community. We can perhaps think of those services as benchmarks and templates that could be scaled up to national level.

We could look more effectively at what is done very well locally. I have a couple of examples. I recently worked in the constituency with a local community activist, Susan Wilson, who is a local community champion in Tesco’s by day, and does a lot of other voluntary work outside that. She is a real dynamo in the community. She works with the Allotment Angels in Reidvale. That is part of the Include Me 2 Club, a fantastic charity that helps adults with additional support needs and disabilities. It helps many local people, including people from sheltered housing and a homeless man who, as a result of his voluntary work on the allotment, was recently able to find a job building a wonderful community garden. That is a real exemplar of fantastic community innovation in the face of adversity.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman also congratulate Susan Wilson’s mother, Jan O’Neill, who has done some great charity work, including raising £99,000 for the ACCORD hospice? That is celebrated in an early-day motion that has been launched today.

Mr Sweeney: I welcome those sentiments and commend the family, who are certainly a tour de force. Susan’s mother was also able to attend the recent garden party, which she thoroughly enjoyed. It was a fantastic opportunity. I hope that the hon. Gentleman and I can both welcome them to the House of Commons in the near future to celebrate their great success in the community. That is just one example of the fantastic and inspiring work that we often discover as Members of Parliament—having lived in an area our whole lives, we then discover so many wonderful hidden nuggets of excellence that we would never previously have thought existed.

Another such example is Glasgow’s No. 1 Baby and Family Support Service, which sprang up in response to much of the poverty that young parents find themselves in as a result of the benefit cuts and sanctions that we have seen the Government implement in the transition to universal credit. It is looking at setting up community baby banks so that necessary equipment and facilities can be made available. People can then come and access vital supplies, such as nappies, and even share prams. Those are expensive items that are only really needed for a temporary period, so it makes total sense to exchange them. It is a wonderful service that has been developed there, and I often wonder why on earth we do not invest in making it a national system. It would be much more efficient and environmentally friendly. We should be looking to our communities for examples of excellence that can then be turned into Government
policy. Those are just some of the wonderful ideas that I see sprouting up. Often adversity and necessity are the mother of invention, and I think that we should learn from that in the midst of our communities.

This has been a wonderful opportunity, not much longer than two years since making my maiden speech, to bring these great examples of community resilience to the Floor of the House of Commons. I intend to keep working as hard as I can to help my constituents in the face of adversity, such as the closure of the Caley, and to promote the excellent ideas that are carried out within the community. Hopefully we can do a little bit, as MPs, to improve lives and improve our country one step at a time.

3.42 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), and I commend the work that he has described, not least his campaign to save the Springburn works.

Years ago, as a Minister in the Treasury and the then Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, I played my part in encouraging universities to commercialise their superb research outcomes. I think that was the right thing to do, but there is growing evidence that in some very prestigious institutions that approach can go badly wrong.

My constituent Sunil Purushothaman qualified as a doctor at Guy’s Hospital in 1998 and worked as a doctor for two years. Fascinated since childhood by electronics, he was very interested in its medical applications, so in 2000 he started a PhD at Imperial College, supervised by Professor Christofer Toumazou, who is now regius professor of engineering at Imperial. My constituent came up with the idea of using a common electronic device for DNA testing. Professor Toumazou thought it was a good idea but told my constituent that in order to obtain a PhD under his supervision, under the terms of what he called a “pipeline agreement” that he had with Imperial College, my constituent would have to write a patent for the new idea and to vest it in Professor Toumazou’s company.

My constituent has since discovered that there was no such pipeline agreement and that obtaining a PhD did not require him to write a patent application, still less to vest it in Professor Toumazou’s company. However, he felt that he had to do as he had been told, and so he did. Initially his idea was just a vague idea, but it proved to be a very good one and in 2004 he demonstrated it successfully. The demands of delivering it were immense, and it took Mr Purushothaman six very stressful and demanding years. He obtained his PhD in 2006.

In August 2003, Professor Toumazou arranged the establishment of a company, SuniSeq Ltd, subsequently DNA Electronics, to commercialise my constituent’s idea. Professor Toumazou instructed him to raise investment of £50,000 to buy the rights to his patent from Toumaz Technology. A third of the shares in DNA Electronics were vested in Mr Purushothaman.

On completing his PhD, Mr Purushothaman finally left Imperial in March 2006. He was due to start GP training a few months later, but instead, tragically, he suffered a nervous breakdown brought on by the strain at Imperial. He was unable to work at all for over 10 years. He continued to receive demands from DNA Electronics, addressed to him as shareholder, adding to the pressure he was under. So in 2010 he handed all his shares over to the company, receiving no payment at all for them, and he agreed to have his name taken off a European patent of his work, leaving Professor Toumazou as apparently the main author. My constituent was in fact the sole author of that work.

Mr Purushothaman’s invention achieved immense commercial success, which continues, for DNA Electronics, and great wealth and numerous awards and honours for Professor Toumazou. My constituent has had no benefit from his invention at all. Robbed of a promising career, he has endured over a decade of hardship.

The central problem was that Imperial College’s intellectual property policy specifies, rightly, that any IP created by its students should be vested in the first instance in the college. In the case of Mr Purushothaman’s invention, that never happened; it was vested instead in Professor Toumazou’s company. That should never have happened.

I have been writing to the provost of Imperial about this for over four years, but he has never been willing to meet to discuss it. Professor Toumazou’s behaviour has been a disgrace, but has led to him being showered with wealth and honours. And I am sorry to say that Imperial has facilitated a shameful cover-up.

Anyone planning pioneering scientific work, even at an institution as reputable as Imperial, needs to be aware of what can go wrong. Students’ IP should be protected. A change in the law, in my view, is going to be needed.

3.47 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I rise today to talk about the academisation of two schools in my constituency: Moulsecoomb primary school and Peacehaven community school. They are at opposite ends of my constituency and in different local authorities, one Labour-controlled, one Conservative-controlled.

Moulsecoomb primary school has had a total funding cut of £388,000, equivalent to £595 per pupil, since 2015, and in the last 12 months it has lost 11 staff, predominantly support staff. Moulsecoomb primary school is in an area of multiple deprivation and has risen to many challenges, including having great expertise in special educational needs provision, but unfortunately it does not fit into the Ofsted checkpoints.

Two years ago, the Ofsted inspectors came and rated the school “requires improvement”, so with the Labour-led local authority, the local community and the fantastic new head we went to work implementing all the Ofsted recommendations. I can say that, its performance in terms of almost all the indicators and results has improved, and all the recommendations of that previous Ofsted report have been implemented. But when Ofsted inspectors returned a few months ago, they rated it “inadequate” because for some reason it did not fulfil their new box-ticking exercise; the goalposts had been moved and the school now has an enforced academisation order. I have a message to those Ofsted inspectors that went to Moulsecoomb: “Frankly, I think you were inadequate and I think you should go back and reinspect—not you individuals; we should get a new bunch to come instead.”
This academisation is opposed by all groups on the council in Brighton and Hove—the Labour administration, supported by the Greens, and the Conservative opposition—this is not a party political issue; this is an issue of justice and fairness, of which Moulsecoomb school has been robbed.

Peacehaven community school has had an even greater crippling cut: £1.2 million, equating to £627 per student. This is a school that we opened up in 2001 after a long campaign by my predecessor—my Labour predecessor, I might add—and the community. When I went to school, we were shipped over 10 miles up the road to the local secondary school, Priory School. Now, having a local secondary school in the community is so important. This school’s Ofsted rating is still “good”, but the county has used a devious device. Because the results dipped for one year, it has put forward an interim executive board. It abolished the governing body without consulting the parents or the co-operative trust that owned the school. The co-operative trust is opposing the academisation that is now being forced upon it by the county.

Since the executive board has taken control, we have had five headteachers in five years and results have worsened, rather than improved. Swale Academy Trust, which has of course supported the executive board, has set the framework to enable it to take over the trust. It has bullied the trust board to a stage at which it is threatening legal action against a legitimate trust that is holding out because it wants to consult the parents. This kind of academisation is totally wrong, and it is happening because East Sussex County Council is running a bare-bones statutory budget. The Conservative-led council is now doing only the minimum under the law, and it is unable to support the schools in that local area that it needs to support. We have garnered support from other local secondary schools that will support Peacehaven in its improvement and transition, but nothing has happened and we are not listened to. The staff have resorted to balloting on a strike, and I am supporting the National Education Union and the GMB in those actions.

I beg Ofsted to come back and re-evaluate Moulsecoomb Primary School and I beg the Secretary of State to rescind the order or at least allow a parent ballot on the issue. In regard to Peacehaven Community School, I beg East Sussex County Council to stop its love-in with Swale, which has failed the school, and to allow the school to be returned to the community where it belongs. The reality is that the academy programme is a failed programme set up by a previous Government, and we now need to reverse them all.

3.52 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Our new Prime Minister urges us to embrace a spirit of optimism, so I am going to meet him in that challenge as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on taxis, I have good news for the Government, who lack a majority and find it difficult to legislate: this is one area where they would find cross-party support if only they would bring forward the Bill we have been waiting for. When I was first elected in 2010, there were 14,000 licensed private hire drivers and 3,800 London taxi drivers. The Government has embargoed the low-carbon vehicles; they are making is 2,800 London taxi drivers and 850 private hire drivers; huge amounts of taxpayer money wasted on a vanity project, Boris island airport, which never even made it past the artistic licensing phase; the water cannon that he purchased but was never able to use; the fact that crime, including violent crime, rose before he left office; the ticket office closures; the bluff, bluster and bombast, which we saw so heartily represented at the Dispatch Box today; and a careless lack of attention to detail, which have left a British citizen languishing in an Iranian prison, not because—let us not make excuses for the Iranians—the actions of the previous Prime Minister's Foreign Secretary led to her detention, but because this Prime Minister, through his careless disregard for briefing and his careless use of language, aided and abetted the Iranian Government in making her suffering and the injustice she is experiencing last that much longer. It is totally appalling.

I am afraid that the record of the Prime Minister as Mayor of London is not one to be proud of: millions of pounds wasted on a garden bridge that was never built; millions of pounds wasted on a cable car with no passengers; huge amounts of taxpayer money wasted on a vanity project, Boris island airport, which never even made it past the artistic licensing phase; the water cannon that he purchased was never able to use; the fact that crime, including violent crime, rose before he left office; the ticket office closures; the bluff, bluster and bombast, which we saw so heartily represented at the Dispatch Box today; and a careless lack of attention to detail, which have left a British citizen languishing in an Iranian prison, not because—let us not make excuses for the Iranians—the actions of the previous Prime Minister’s Foreign Secretary led to her detention, but because this Prime Minister, through his careless disregard for briefing and his careless use of language, aided and abetted the Iranian Government in making her suffering and the injustice she is experiencing last that much longer. It is totally appalling.

I am afraid that optimism is no substitute for a plan. In the unlikely event that the Prime Minister were minded to keep his pledge to lay in front of the bulldozer at Heathrow airport,” I would be the first to volunteer to drive it. I am afraid that in the Prime Minister and in what we heard from the Dispatch Box today there is no plan for our country. In fact, the spending commitments
he made on schools, health and so many other areas of public policy were not about a vision for the future; they were an admission of nine years of failure—school cuts, NHS cuts, police cuts, and every single one imposed by the party he leads and most of which he voted for once he was elected to this place.

We will judge this Prime Minister on his record. It is not a record to be proud of. It does not inspire confidence in his ability to lead our country. It is not a change of Prime Minister that we need; it is a change of Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am delighted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), for whom I have so much respect.

I want to raise several issues briefly. The first is electric scooters. There is a Transport for London/Greater London Authority consultation on these illegal items. The Paris Mayor recently tightened regulations, not only because these scooters have been littering the streets of that great European city, as well as others which have licensed them—we see the same happening in London now, with more cycle hires available—but because in Paris they have killed five people and seriously injured more than 300, according to reports. We saw our own tragic first casualty recently in London.

The police, unsurprisingly, are not making this a priority. We need more clarity, and extending a licence to such scooters would be regrettable. The penalty for using e-scooters on land other than private land is a £300 fine and six points on a licence. For drivers who have recently passed their test, a six-point penalty means a driving ban, which means they have to pass their test again. That needs more publicity.

On leasehold, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), co-chair of the all-party group on leasehold reform, got a positive answer from the new Prime Minister earlier. We have a full programme of Government promises on ground rents, the right to manage, the ban on leasehold houses being sold, service charge and refurbishment cost protection, banning events fees and introducing commonhold. The previous Secretary of State engaged the Law Commission and the Competition and Markets Authority, and we await the Best report, which is due out at the end of this month. Hopefully, we will see the first legislation soon.

On connected matters, the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who opened the debate, covered cladding and sprinklers. On the Government’s £200 million, which they have made available to the private sector, questions are still being asked about how to apply for the money, whether the private sector will be able to access it, an update on progress with that, as well as on the failed non-ACM cladding which is being tested this summer by the Government, would be very welcome.

On ombudsman issues, recently I had an Adjournment debate on the accountability of housing associations. I raised the lack of clarity about the role of the local government and social care ombudsman and the housing ombudsman in holding housing associations to account. This week, I had a very good meeting with Mr Michael King, the chair and ombudsman at the local government and social care ombudsman organisation. I am grateful to him for clarifying the position for me.

Mr King advised me that the Government had introduced an ombudsman Bill in 2016, which would have merged some of the ombudsman services, but that it was a casualty of the 2016 referendum and the 2017 general election. Since then, Wales and Northern Ireland have gone down that route. Indeed, they have gone further and included the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman in the same service. I would be grateful if the Leader of the House’s office could advise me whether the Bill might reappear at some point to streamline and strengthen ombudsman services, which hold to account so many public services and servants in England on the public’s behalf.

In the past two weeks, we have seen the refreshed road safety statement, which is very welcome. However, it has initiated another two-year study on a graduated licensing scheme and targets to reduce the number of people killed or seriously injured on our roads, which inevitably means more delays in making progress on those issues.

On deaf issues, news on the British Sign Language GCSE has gone quiet, which I hope means that work is being undertaken. We are still awaiting an outcome on deaf access to NHS services, bursaries for teachers of the deaf and other issues.

We also await an outcome on better support from the Department for International Development for small charities in the UK that are doing such great work across the world.

Following the Prime Minister’s statement, I look forward to more support for my local authority, Tower Hamlets, and our local schools, which are both suffering from years of severe cuts, and to the extra police officers to address antisocial behaviour, although I am not hugely optimistic that we will get all that.

As a Labour MP, I want to say that I am embarrassed and ashamed at my party’s response to the antisemitism allegations against us. I do not think we will get past this until the Equality and Human Rights Commission inquiry reports.

Finally, we know that we are not going on holiday for six weeks—it is the summer recess. One colleague in this debate last year finished her speech by saying “Happy holidays,” which was not entirely helpful. I wish everybody associated with the Palace, including all colleagues, a decent break during the summer recess.

4.2 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I usually use this debate to talk about very local issues. Today I want to deviate a little, because many of my constituents have written to me about their concerns for people who live elsewhere in the world and their fear that our voice might be silenced or muted because of Brexit and our pursuit of trade deals.

My constituents have pointed out Trump’s obsession with walls and putting children in cages, and his insidious support for the damaging and highly dangerous great replacement conspiracy theory. They asked, “What did we do in response?” Well, we gave him a state visit.
There are concerns about other powerful countries too, like China. As we know, more than a million men, women and children are in detention camps, based on their ethnicity and their Muslim faith. Families have been torn apart by the state, children from their parents. Credible reports say that detainees are forced to swear oaths of allegiance, renounce their religion and learn Mandarin in place of their mother tongue. Some reports even talk of summary execution and the harvesting of organs.

Our Government have recognised that human rights abuses are happening today on a huge, almost unimaginable scale. Uyghur Muslims fear a genocide. Why have we not taken targeted steps? Frankly, we do not need more words. It is clearly a business. We could identify those who develop racist software to identify the targets. We could identify those who are building the camps. We could refuse them contracts with the UK, couldn’t we? We could speak up much more strongly about Hong Kong as well, couldn’t we? We could address the increasing fear of Hong Kongers that their free society is just slipping away. We could help—but we have not, and I fear that we will not because China might move away from free trade, and we need that free trade now as a substitute for what we are losing.

I fear that it is the same with Modi’s Government. On 17 June, when the new Indian Parliament was being sworn in, members of the ruling party chanted the Hindu nationalist slogan “Jai Sri Ram” whenever a Muslim representative stood up to take their oath. It was an attempt to intimidate and delegitimise those elected representatives based on their religion. Those words could simply be an expression of faith, but they have been twisted into something horrifying.

Since then, there have been repeated Islamophobic attacks, accompanied by that same chant. On 22 June, Tabrez Ansari was tied to a pole, beaten and abused by a crowd in the open. He cried and begged for mercy. After the crowd were done with Tabrez—after they had forced him to repeat their slogan and taken yet another step to erase his difference—the police took him into custody. Reportedly, he was refused medical help. His family members were threatened with similar beatings and not permitted even to see him until, four days later, he died of his injuries. There have been many further attacks. A Hindu video is being shared, with the lyric: “Whoever doesn’t say Jai Sri Ram, send him to the graveyard.”

Frankly, that is the language of genocide.

As hon. Members will know, I could go on. I wanted to talk about Bolsonaro’s Brazil, Saudi Arabia and our arms deals as well. To be entirely honest, it seems to me that FCO Ministers, many of whom I deeply respect, have raised human rights issues in terms just vague enough not to cause trouble. What is our role in this new world if we swallow our words and turn away when we see persecution escalating, risk to lives and liberty, and possible genocide on the horizon? How will this new Government show us that they are not cowards, and not permitted even to see him until, four days later, he died of his injuries. There have been many further attacks. A Hindu video is being shared, with the lyric: “Whoever doesn’t say Jai Sri Ram, send him to the graveyard.”

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4.7 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown). I was very disturbed to hear about the testimony that she mentioned, but equally I am pleased that she has voiced it in this House. I am sure that everyone heard it and was appalled by the details.

I rise to speak today because the House declared a climate emergency on 1 May. If anything, that emergency has become ever more evident over recent days. While we have been in this House, outside in our country the temperatures reached a record-breaking 39°. I pay tribute to all those emergency services who have been helping people to deal with the heatwave. They have been active in Paris as well, which has just itself reached a new record of 41°. In the Netherlands and Belgium, national records for temperature have already been broken this year.

In fact, over the last 19 years, five new records have been broken for summer temperature in Europe, going back to 1500. Think about that: the five hottest summers in Europe since 1500 have occurred just in the past 19 years. But my constituents tell me that what we have experienced here in Europe is as nothing compared with the experience of many of their families in the global south. Two years ago, people living in the Punjab had to put up with temperatures of 52°. Farmers in Jamaica have been experiencing drought after drought after drought, and children living in Bangladesh are becoming more malnourished as extreme weather event follows extreme weather event.

Just yesterday, three scientific studies were published that showed that the temperature changes we are currently experiencing are happening faster and more intensively than at any point over the past 2,000 years. What has been our response? Well, Parliament is about to adjourn. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) that we will still be working, but Parliament will not be sitting. In any case, since 1 May it has felt like business as usual.

I have talked to lots of children and young people in my constituency about the climate crisis. In fact, many of them have come to speak to me during mass lobbies on the topic in this place. I know how concerned many of them are about the crisis; in fact, many of them at local schools have been producing posters with their views about the environmental crisis. I find it heartbreaking to see their images of the climate breakdown—of what they think it will be like if we do not act—but I am inspired by their passion and determination to do something about it.

Those children and young people, and their parents, have been asking me to ask questions in this place on their behalf. Those questions include things like: why are we still building homes in this country that are not zero carbon? Why are we spending only 2% of our transport budget on cycling and walking? Why is part of our aid budget still going towards supporting fossil fuel-based technologies in the global south? Why have we seen feed-in tariffs abolished and a block on onshore wind? Why are we denying our country the benefits of the 400,000 extra jobs that would come from a green new deal?

When we return to Parliament, I hope it will not be to the chaos of an impending no-deal Brexit, but even more fundamentally it must not be a return to business as usual. When we come back at the beginning of September, it must be to a legislative programme that meets the aspirations of those children and young people...
and their parents, that faces up to the climate crisis, and that actually embodies the meaning of the term “emergency”: a situation that demands an immediate response.

4.11 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) on the issue of the climate emergency. A climate emergency is not a headline to hide behind; it is a call for action. After the hyperbole we heard earlier today, I fear the lack of detail and strategy to address the really important issues that face us as a nation at this time. In fact, I found the whole experience this morning chilling in respect of the direction our country is going in.

It is not about a performance, as Government Members highlighted, but about solving the real crises that we face in our country at this time. That is why I turn to the issue of jobs in my constituency. We are at a crossroads in York. Unless we get things right, the future generation in my constituency will not have the opportunities that past generations have had. We have been so fortunate that, throughout the decades and the centuries, York has been a place of good employment. We know from the evidence in Jorvik that back in the Viking days York was a centre of trade. Throughout the Anglo-Saxon years York was a real nucleus for the people who came to our city. We are about to do the biggest excavation in the country, that of Roman Eboracum, to look into the history of our city, knowing its importance back in those days. In the medieval period, York was, after London and Norwich, the third largest city, with trade again at its heart. The railway industry brought high-quality jobs to York. The chocolate industry employed 18,000 people at its peak and served the world.

Today, York is marked by so many insecure, low-paid jobs, particularly for women and for the women who work part time in our city. York has one of the lowest-waged employment offers for people, including in the hospitality and retail sector that dominates our city. I stand here today because I want to see good inward investment in our city. Shamefully, the local council and the Government are not calling in the decision on the York Central partnership, with the opportunity having been put on hold.

In the HS2 debate the other day, I heard of the opportunities that the project is bringing to my colleagues in Birmingham: 33,000 jobs at Curzon Street station alone; and 77,000 jobs at the Birmingham Interchange. York Central sits on the route of HS2, the east coast main line, the trans-Pennine route and cross-country routes. It will be a major transport infrastructure interchange in the north, and yet the planning is for only 6,500 jobs, most of which will be consolidating jobs that already exist in our city.

We have the biggest brownfield site development opportunity in the whole of Europe. It covers 400,000 square metres, only a fifth of which will be dedicated to an enterprise zone. This is about shutting off the opportunities for inward investment in the growth areas of our city, such as the biotech industry, the railway industry and digital railway for the future. There is also the digital, media and creative sectors, in which York University is a lead player. It is vital that we lift the aspirations of young people in our city so that they can see the opportunities that are there for them, instead of shutting off the inward investment that our city urgently and desperately needs.

Some 2,500 homes will be built on that brownfield site. To buy one of those homes will cost between 11 and 19 times somebody’s wage. For the people in my city, that is completely unaffordable, so we know that those homes will be bought by outside investors and by people who will use them as second homes because York is such a lovely place in which to live—I have already described its history. But York must be about the local people and about giving them the very opportunities that their predecessors have had in our city.

There is so much to attract people to our city, but unless we get the infrastructure right, make the right decisions on the economy and create jobs for local people, our city will remain out of kilter and one of the most inequitable cities in the United Kingdom. My plea to Government is to pause planning decisions and put the economic opportunities of our local communities at the heart of every planning decision, so that we can rebuild our country for the people that it is there to serve.

4.16 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): It is a true pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who spoke so passionately and knowledgeably about her constituency. In my contribution, I wish to highlight two incredibly important services both for my constituency and for the wider area.

The National School Breakfast Programme provides free breakfasts to 1,775 schools in our country, feeding 280,000 children each school day. I am lucky enough to have 10 schools in my constituency in the scheme: Bond; Lonesome; Liberty; St Marks; William Morris; St Peter and Paul’s; Cricket Green; St Thomas of Canterbury; Melrose and the SMART Centre. Some 1,530 children benefit from this scheme each day in Mitcham and Morden, but thousands of others also benefit. An independent study suggests that every child in a school on the scheme gets two months’ extra learning in reading and maths. Not only are the children fed, which helps them to concentrate, but their behaviour, their punctuality and their attendance improves. Mrs Kennedy, headteacher at St Marks Primary School, says: “We cannot imagine being without this initiative, having seen the impact it has on our pupils, their energy levels and consequently their ability to access morning lessons. We often have a number of pupils in our school who have no recourse to public funds as well as those who qualify for pupil premium and having something to eat in the morning has really made a difference. We’ve also seen a significant improvement in punctuality as well as overall attendance.” This scheme is paid for from the sugar tax. There is currently £123 million of sugar tax money at the Treasury waiting to be spent. This scheme ends in March 2020. Would it not make so much sense to allocate some of the money that is already there to extend this brilliant scheme?

Shooting Star Chase children’s hospice is a hospice for babies, children and young adults with life-limiting conditions that works throughout the county of Surrey.
and 15 London boroughs. A few weeks ago I received a letter suggesting that the hospice would have to halve the number of families in my constituency who received respite care. I put the letter away and woke up in the middle of the night thinking, “How? Surely this is an easy thing to raise money for.” There are brilliant local people and businesses in my constituency who raise money for this hospice, including Paul and Irene Strank at Paul Strank Roofing. Even Simon Cowell raises money for Shooting Star. However, it will still have to halve the number of families who get respite support. That is because demand has increased by 38% this year alone. Costs are also up due to good things such as Agenda for Change, so more money has to be spent on staff.

The hospice is having a problem fundraising. Businesses do not want to commit to funding due to Brexit, and personal giving is down. The hospice needs £11 million a year, with only £690,000—or 5%—coming from the NHS. Adult hospices get around 30% of their funding from the NHS. Shooting Star has been spending its reserves year on year, and this is crunchy year. It has had to deny 250 families access to respite care from November, and it has had to limit the children it can care for to those with a prognosis of 12 to 18 months; and that is happening right now.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for making an excellent speech. I had a meeting with the chief executive officer of Shooting Star within the last few days. The situation is urgent and important. If the Government cannot give the money, surely all the clinical commissioning groups in the area could give £100,000 or a couple of hundred thousand pounds to put this charity back where it belongs, serving the young children of our counties.

Siobhain McDonagh: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, although I am highlighting and he has met with Shooting Star, funding is an issue for all children’s hospices. The only way in which those 250 families can get the respite care they need from the hospice is by receiving £1 million from the £14 million that the NHS has identified for children’s hospices in 2023-24. I regret to say that these children will be long passed by that date.

This is not money that is going to be saved by the Government or the taxpayer if we do not give it to the hospice, because the next port of call for these 250 families will be the CCGs or our hard-pressed local authorities’ social services departments. These families need respite in order to care for their children, and they will get it from somewhere. The Government’s choice and our choice can be to use Shooting Star Chase to get great care at a subsidised cost, or it can be to put more pressure on more public services and spend more taxpayers’ money on poorer quality care.

4.23 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in this debate before the forthcoming adjournment or in any Adjournment debate, but that is just by the way. I thank Mr Speaker for setting time aside for this debate, which means that I can discuss an issue that is very close to my heart: the worth of the land and its value to society.

I live on a farm, and rent out acreage to neighbours and working farmers. I am proud of the land that I inherited from my father and will pass on to my sons and grandchildren. I am also an Ulster Scot and I am very fond of the Ulster Scots language, culture and history, so I want to quote four lines of an Ulster Scots poem entitled “On Slaimish”:

“What nicht-wantherin Orr dreamed yit, for a’
The bitter wakkenin o ninety-echt:
This lan that cried the dreamers bak, for
This is hame.”

No matter how far in the world we may go, or wherever our talents and abilities may take us, for those of us who hail from Ulster one thing will always remain: our hame—our home—is the land.

I have been a member of the Ulster Farmers’ Union for approximately 35 years, and I agree with its assessment of agriculture in Northern Ireland. It has said:

“Agriculture is one of Northern Ireland’s most important industries. As a whole, the agri-food industry turns over more than £4.5 billion every year and supports one in eight jobs in the UK, making it a cornerstone of Northern Ireland’s economy and farmers play a key role in this. Currently, there are over 25,000 farm businesses in Northern Ireland producing the wide variety of raw materials needed by processors and retailers to meet the demands of consumers. Farming in Northern Ireland is not just a job but it is a way of life and we are extremely proud of our farming structure. Rural communities here are extremely close knit and farmers and farming families are at the heart of these communities. When you compare Northern Ireland to the other UK regions, and in fact the rest Europe, we are definitely a region that punches above its weight when it comes to farming.”

For young farmers, farming is in their blood. While I greatly admire this, I have concern for their future, because the research is very clear. The Farm Safety Foundation suggests that 81% of young farmers believe that mental health issues are the biggest hidden problem facing farmers today. The foundation’s research also shows that a farmer takes his or her life every week across the United Kingdom. A 2012 UK study of psychological morbidity of farmers and their partners and spouses based on 784 face-to-face interviews at agricultural shows found a higher risk of psychiatric disorder compared with non-farmers. There have been other reports across the world. There were interviews with dairy farmers in New Zealand, and in 2015 a national survey of mental health in Canada told us that it is not just a Northern Ireland or a United Kingdom issue and problem but a global one. It is a lonely life, and it is certainly a calling, to be a farmer.

We should appreciate the industry that is the foundation of agrifood, with a turnover of some £4.5 billion in Northern Ireland alone, and the impact that farming has on the wider economy. For every £1 that a farmer puts into the economy, £7.40 is gained, so farming is clearly the engine room of the economy. About 75%—or 1 million hectares—of Northern Ireland’s countryside is farmed in some way. This industry is vital for the Northern Ireland economy, employing more than 3.5% of the total workforce—well above the UK average of 1.2%.

It is my belief that we must—please excuse the pun, Madam Deputy Speaker—plant our support firmly behind the farmers and the farming community. This truly is the lifeblood that runs through my constituency and, further, through the Province as a whole. It is also what helps to sustain the UK. We must be proud of our
land, provide support for those who tend our land, and ensure that we are good stewards of our land through sensible farming. I love seeing the patchwork of fields as I drive into work daily, and I see the fallow fields as a nod to the fact that there must be sensible farming as well. I love seeing the nests in the farmers' hedges flourishing as they encourage biodiversity and plant life. I stand as a proud Ulsterman in this Chamber—proud of my culture and heritage, proud of my belief system, and proud of the land that I so gratefully call “hame”.

It is ours in trust for the next generations, and we must be good stewards of it. The decisions in this place must impact on that stewardship. I trust that it will be wise stewardship from here right down to the very soil in my constituency.

I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and your fellow Deputy Speakers, for your kindness, patience and understanding for me in this House—

Mr Lord: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim Shannon: Yes, okay.

Mr Lord: I think the hon. Gentleman will find that it might buy him an extra minute. He is a great spokesman for the farmers of Northern Ireland and his constituency. We have enjoyed Westminster Hall debates together, including on this topic. Would he like to take this opportunity to thank the outgoing Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for all his fantastic work over the past couple of years and to wish our new Secretary of State well in that very important role for all our farming communities?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman for his intervention and for giving me that wee bit of extra time, but I am very conscious that I want to be fair to everybody else as well. Yes, I would endorse that. I thank the outgoing Minister for all his work and commitment and wish the new one coming in every opportunity as a Back Bencher to be active in this place.

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I thank the security staff, those in the Tea Room, and all those who are committed to making our jobs and lives here just that wee bit better. I greatly appreciate the opportunity as a Back Bencher to be active in this place. I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I give a big thank you to the people of Strangford for the privilege of being their MP and serving them energetically and consistently in this wonderful seat of democracy, the House of Commons.

4.28 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to lead from the Front Bench for the SNP on what some people call the debate on the summer Adjournment but others call the whinge-fest. It was led superbly by the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess). I was pleased that his campaign to make sure that this debate took place was a success. However, it is the first time I have heard him make a speech that did not mention his complaints about the rail service in Southend. Perhaps his campaigning over the years has been a success, because that was notably absent from his address to the House.

I see the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury, the hon. Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin), in his place. As he may recall, he responded to my maiden speech with his maiden speech in 2015. As he may recall, the responsibility of ending this debate, perhaps he could do so Alice Cooper-style, by declaring that school’s out for summer. If he does not, that responsibility should lie with you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I want to make a serious point. As a number of Members have said, for too many of our citizens across these islands, the summer period is not one of joy; it is one of poverty. The Work and Pensions Committee and the Education Committee are conducting a joint inquiry into some of the issues around that. It troubles me to hear that there are supermarkets and stores in the UK that bin school uniforms. This is a one-off cost for many people in our society, and it can be very expensive, because some schools are very selective about where school uniforms can be purchased. It is a concern that some stores are doing that. I will meet some stores in the next few weeks, to ensure that they provide a service to those who are very much in need. I hope that all Members will take that up in our recess.

I want to mention other issues that are the responsibility of the Department for Work and Pensions, the most alarming of which is the figures published by the Independent Age charity on the lack of take-up of pension credit. In Glasgow South West, £9.6 million a year is being lost by people who are entitled to and should claim pension credit. I will be organising some events in my constituency, but I ask those on the Front Bench to engage with the Department for Work and Pensions to see what they can do to ensure that those entitled to pension credit take it up.

A number of Members have raised their concerns about universal credit. I ask the new Government to look positively at the Universal Credit Sanctions (Zero Hours Contracts) Bill. It is incredible that someone on universal credit who gives up a zero-hours contract or decides that it is not for them can be sanctioned, whereas those on legacy benefits would not be. Zero-hours contract work does not suit a lot of people, and it is ridiculous that people can be sanctioned as a result of giving up a zero-hours contract job.

It is time that the Government address the major injustice that affects 1950s-born women in accessing their pensions. I hope that the new Government will look positively at this issue, which has been going on for far too long. I pay tribute to all the campaigners who are looking for pensions justice.

I recall that in last year’s summer Adjournment debate I referred to the blind hero who walked out on his female leader. It looks like he has been successful. However, I do not believe he will be too successful if he carries on the way he has in the last 24 hours. We had the “red wedding 2”, or the Cabinet reshuffle. We had the Trumpesque performance this afternoon. There were a lot of questions—129, I think—and no answers.

There are a lot of things that the new Prime Minister needs to sort out, and one of the first is the Home Office’s visitor visa situation, which, as the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) pointed out, is ludicrous and unjust. The fact that religious workers and clergymen who are trying to come to the UK are being denied a visitor visa is an absolute disgrace.
What is also a disgrace is Home Office contractor Serco in Glasgow trying to evict 300 asylum seekers. Why? Because it is losing the contract at the end of September. Serco thinks it is perfectly reasonable to make 300 asylum seekers homeless and leave the local authority to pick that up. It is a concern of mine that some Members of this House had dinner in this building with those from Serco at a time when 300 asylum seekers could be thrown out on to the streets. I hope the Government will look positively at the Asylum Seekers (Accommodation Eviction Procedures) Bill, which was launched this week, and I hope hon. Members will look positively at signing early-day motion 2636 in that regard.

There has been an absence in the Prime Minister’s statements in the last 24 hours about workers’ rights and employment rights. That was perhaps no surprise given the industrial action taking place in various Departments at the moment. I hope that he will instruct the new Secretaries of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, as well as Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, to address these industrial disputes, which have been going on too long. It is quite clear that the outsourcing companies really need to be hauled in and told to behave themselves. We have a dispute in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, where it is clear that people have to wait six weeks to be paid their wages—if they were on universal credit, they would be paid quicker. Why is the Department that is responsible for enforcing employment law allowing an agency to try to bust an industrial dispute? I hope the Lord Commissioner will take that up with those Departments.

I want to thank the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who is no longer in his place, for raising the issue of deaths in Scotland. It really is a shame that no urgent question was taken on this and that there was no Government statement. This is a very serious issue, and one that needs to be debated calmly and maturely. It is a pity that hon. Members have been denied such an opportunity.

I want to thank all the staff, who on many occasions take impertinent questions from me, and I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the other Deputy Speakers. I also want to pay tribute to a group that has not yet been mentioned, which is our constituency office staff. In my experience the constituency office staff right across these islands are excellent and professional, and they help each other out. I want to pay tribute to the Glasgow South West constituency office staff: Roza Salih, Dominique Ubas, Anthony McCue, Scott McFarlane, Mary Jane Douglas and Keith Gibb, and I wish a happy retirement to Dr Joe Murray. They have all done a fantastic job in the last year for Glasgow South West constituents.

Mr Lord: Will the hon. Gentleman join me in thanking our citizens advice bureaux for the work they do? I visited Citizens Advice Woking on Monday, and the staff and volunteers there do an absolutely amazing job, which is obviously supplemented by our own office and constituency office staff. As we go off on recess, most of our constituency staff and our citizens advice bureaux will carry on working hard on behalf of our constituents, and we owe them our thanks and support.

Chris Stephens: Yes, and in closing, I thank them too. I do joint surgeries with Citizens Advice, Money Matters and other organisations, and the hon. Gentleman is correct. Over the coming weekend they have a very important job and responsibility. I want to wish all right hon. and hon. Members a happy recess.

4.38 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to speak in the debate on matters to be raised before the summer Adjournment. I welcome the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury, the hon. Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin), to his new post and to his debut at the Dispatch Box. This is probably one of the nicest debates in which to have the pleasure of making his debut appearance at the Dispatch Box.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you were very clear that I certainly should not go above 10 minutes in my contribution. Given that there have been 25 speakers in this debate, I will not have enough time to do justice to the diversity of the issues that have been raised, so hon. Members will please forgive me for not taking interventions to allow time for the Minister to have his time at the Dispatch Box.

I thank the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) for his efforts in securing this debate and for being such a regular attendant at such debates. I thoroughly enjoy his contributions in them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick) was the first Member to rise to speak on my side of the House, and it was a pleasure to have a fellow Lancashire Member speaking in this debate. At the time, there was also a fellow Lancashire Member in the Chair—the right hon. Member for Chorley (Sir Lindsay Hoyle). I would like to take up the issues my hon. Friend the Member for Preston raised about crime in Lancashire. I know his local councillors are out—day in, day out—especially the newly elected Councillor Pavi Akhtar, who is committed to campaigning every day. In reality, Lancashire has lost 754 police officers since 2010—the seventh biggest loss in the country—and I hope that the recent announcement will mean that Lancashire gets a fair deal when we learn where the 20,000 new police officers will go.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) spoke about the emergency department in his constituency. He might be interested to know that I texted a family member who is one of his constituents, and they completely agreed with his comments on the matter, which have gone down well in his constituency. The hon. Gentleman also spoke about electric vehicle charging points, and I pay tribute to Lancaster City Council for its work on that issue. In the past two months it has opened five new electric vehicle charge points in its car parks, helping people to make that transition.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) spoke about pensions mis-selling, and called on the Government to do more to protect our constituents. The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) spoke about the criminalisation of people for being homeless, and I agree that no one should be criminalised for that. My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan) rattled through a lot of different issues in his short allocation of time, including the three
early-day motions that he has tabled. I agree with his analysis of early-day motion 2649, because if we are to declare a climate emergency, we must at the very least review whether Heathrow expansion is compatible with that. I share my hon. Friend’s concerns about the domination of the commercial radio market by Global and Bauer, and the loss of local radio, and I pay tribute to those who work for Beyond Radio and Radio Wave in my constituency. They keep my constituents informed about local issues, and ensure that not all our news is dominated by Liverpool, Manchester or London.

The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is no longer in her place, raised the important issue of abused women and the need to protect them from exploitation. She described some interesting proposals concerning important issues, and I know she has much support among Labour Members on such matters. My hon. Friend the Member for North Tynedale (Mary Glindon) noted that every day 80 people die from alcohol abuse, and I support her call for minimum unit pricing. The hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) raised various issues, including the baby bank in his constituency, and I wondered whether he saw the powerful Channel 4 documentary last autumn, which brought that issue to my attention. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) also mentioned baby banks, and it is a dire state of affairs if this country needs baby banks as well as food banks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) mentioned child trust funds and dormant accounts that hold money for young people in this country. I call on the Government to do more to help young people to access money that is rightfully theirs and could be truly life-changing. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) mentioned avoidable deaths due to epilepsy, although he did not mention an issue that I know he cares passionately about: sodium valproate and the effect it has on pregnancies. I pay tribute to his constituent, Emma Murphy, and my constituent, Janet Williams, who are tirelessly campaigning on that issue. I know that justice for them is not far away.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) spoke about the need for more Changing Places facilities, and I pay tribute to Lancashire County Councillor Lizzi Collinge who champions that issue in the red rose county. I know she will continue to campaign on that and many other issues in our local area.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) mentioned the 100th anniversary of the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund, and I hope that her raising that in the House will help other veterans to find that source of support, as well as inform hon. Members so that we can signpost our constituents towards that help.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) agreed with the hon. Member for Stirling about drugs deaths, and I support their call for a statement on that in the autumn. Indeed, it is in the spirit of these debates to find agreement across the House on many issues.

The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) mentioned the University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust, and the book published today by Peter Duffy, a whistleblower who was unfairly dismissed by the trust. I pay tribute to Peter’s work, and hope that the Health Secretary will take an interest in his case. I have previously written to the Secretary of State to ask him to meet Peter Duffy. So far that request has been declined, but I will continue to put on pressure, and perhaps those on the Treasury Bench will pass on that message to the Secretary of State.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East is a tireless campaigner. He will not be dropping the issue of the Caley, which must be saved. These are vital skills and jobs that should be at the heart of the future of railway engineering in Scotland. I know he will be raising that issue continuously.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) takes up injustices in his constituency and raises them in this place. I certainly agree that student intellectual property should be protected.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) is not just a champion of youth work, which he raised in this House yesterday, but, as he proved today, of schools in his constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) has campaigned since 2015 on the issue of taxis. As chair of the all-party group on taxis, he produced an excellent piece of work. I hope that legislation will be forthcoming from the Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) raised genuine concerns about e-scooters, exploitative leaseholds and cladding on high-rise buildings. I hope they have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) usually raises local issues in this debate, but her passion for social justice and human rights went far beyond the boundaries of West Ham today. I hope Foreign and Commonwealth Office Ministers heard her words.

My hon. Friends the Members for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell) raised the climate emergency. As temperatures have hit 39 degrees, knowing that we have caused great damage to the planet we live on is unavoidable. I call on the Government to take decisive action to meet the climate emergency—ban fracking and invest in renewables by supporting the solar industry and reinvigorating onshore wind, so that we play our role. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central also talked about communities being at the heart of planning decisions.

I think my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) touched all our hearts when she told us about the situation with her local children’s hospice. I would like to put on the record my admiration for the staff at both Brian House children’s hospice in Blackpool and Derian House in Chester and for the work they do. We know that children’s hospices need far more support and this is not an isolated incident.

As for the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I do not think any Adjournment debate in this place would feel truly complete without his contribution. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] I thank him for it.

I take this opportunity to thank all Members for taking part in this debate. I wish everyone a very good summer, including you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Please pass on my best wishes for the summer to your fellow Deputy Speakers and to Mr Speaker.
Our staff work very hard behind the scenes. I pay tribute to John Percival and Liam Budd, who work in my Westminster Office. They are the unsung heroes of this place and they are aptly represented by the Unite parliamentary staff branch, which is doing its best to ensure that they get a better deal. Constituency office staff are at the frontline of the work we do as Members of Parliament. I am sure the whole House will join me in paying tribute to the work they do to support our constituents. I would like to thank Darren Mason, Alison Tarpey-Black, Sam Harrison and Adam Slater in my constituency office.

I thank the Doorkeepers and the security staff. I wish them a very happy summer. I am sure they will be delighted—once we’ve gone, I am sure their jobs get much easier. I wish everyone a happy, healthy and peaceful summer. I know we will continue to work hard on behalf of all our constituents.

4.48 pm

The Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury (Jeremy Quin): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) and to reply from the Treasury Bench.

This afternoon’s debate took place at a time when the Westminster hothouse was even hotter than normal—over 39°C. Hon. Members will I am sure be keen to return to their communities to serve their constituents in cooler climes and, I hope, with cooler temperatures. Not all of us, however, can boast the sun, the sea and the splendid ice cream of which the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) is so justly proud.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) reminded us in her speech yesterday that our primary role in this place is to do the best to look after our constituents. I thought that point was encapsulated very well by the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), but it was apparent in all the passionate contributions made this afternoon by all the Members present. I am just sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, that my winding up cannot possibly do them all the justice they deserve.

I found out to my surprise the other day that some Members in our sister Parliament in Canberra sit for constituencies named after people rather than geography. If the same principle applied to our parliamentary procedures my vote would be—the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood alluded to this—for the evening Adjournment debate to be referred to as “the Strangford”, whereas my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) spoke with great passion about an issue in his constituency on which he is hugely engaged. He has put his developers firmly on notice.

Turning to my Sussex colleague, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), on 3 April this year, we celebrated the first anniversary of his Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 coming into force. He spoke again on homelessness, among other issues, and we all value the contribution that he has made on homelessness. I am sure, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the House will rise with a zing in its step this afternoon after the tremendous performance of the Prime Minister—a statement with which I wholeheartedly agree, but not every Opposition Member might.

Turning to Opposition Members, there were many great speeches on the other side of the House this afternoon. The hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), the chairman of the all-party group on charities and volunteering, said in a brilliant speech that she would be satisfied if, as a result of her contribution, just one person started helping the RAF Benevolent Fund. I am certain, having listened to her speech, that it will have been far more effective than that.

Turning to my Sussex colleague, the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), one of the highlights of the parliamentary year for me was listening to his Adjournment debate back in November, on World AIDS Day, when he spoke with such passion. He raised a point of great passion again today—his schools—and I would love to debate it with him. Now is not the moment, but I am certain that he will pursue that in his normal, assiduous way.

The hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) made a speech of two halves. I preferred the first half—the optimistic half—but he spoke with great passion throughout. I know—because I know him—that whatever his views on my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister,
[Jeremy Quin]

he will bear no ill will or ill harm to any Member of this place, but the hon. Gentleman made his point in his customary manner.

I had the privilege of briefly serving under the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) when he was a Minister in the Treasury. He had a reputation then as being a courteous, detailed and effective Minister. He is clearly deploying the same skills in this place on behalf of his constituent—a case that seems very strange and which I am sure he will continue to pursue.

The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) spoke movingly of those facing alcohol dependency issues and the importance of the alcohol charter.

The hon. Members for Keighley (John Grogan) and for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) expressed the passion of many—of all our constituents—on the issue of climate change. The hon. Lady, in particular, referred to the challenges being faced by those in the developing world because of climate change, which affects us all.

The hon. Members for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), and for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick), and indeed the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), in his summing up on behalf of the Scottish National party—I remember vividly replying to his maiden speech all those years ago—all spoke about or touched on universal credit. I am familiar with many of the issues that they raise, not least through the Horsham District food bank and Citizens Advice in my constituency. Universal credit is a better system than that which preceded it, but that does not mean that it cannot be improved. I urge all hon. Members to continue to raise, as I know they do, individual cases with the Department concerned.

The hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) forcefully called on the Government to look again at avoidable deaths from epilepsy, in the context of a constituent who had suffered a personal loss. I hope, as does he, that real good can come out of her campaign, and out of the tragedy to which he referred.

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) spoke with great knowledge—and pith, which was very welcome in this debate—on pension mis-selling. I am sorry that the knowledge is the result of a dreadful scam having been inflicted, it appears, on his constituents and members of the British Steel pension scheme. We all utterly condemn the scammers. I am sure that we will hear much more from him on this subject.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) made a compelling speech on Ukraine and Russia, and was supported in that by the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), who followed him, and who also raised concerns about the University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust that I am sure will have been heard by the relevant Department.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East spoke with passion about the imminent closure of the Caley railway works in his constituency. I wish him well in his discussions with the Scottish Minister with responsibility for transport, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will remain in close contact with my hon. Friends in Government.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), with whom it is a pleasure to serve on the all-party parliamentary group on credit unions, spoke effectively, as ever, on a range of issues regarding housing in Tower Hamlets—a subject that he always speaks on with great authority, and will continue to do so. The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) speaks well on behalf of her constituents; today she chose a broader theme and a global outlook, but spoke with equal passion, determination and force.

We heard a little bit of history from the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). She put her hopes for the future of the beautiful city that she represents in the context of its deep historical roots as Eboracum and Yorvik. She spoke passionately of York as a living, breathing, vibrant city, where planning works on behalf of all York’s citizens.

Many hon. Members will be very aware of the benefits to school students of a proper diet and breakfast. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) spoke convincingly and with great knowledge of what sounds like a tremendous scheme in her constituency, and with huge passion on the Shooting Star children’s hospice. As she pointed out, no Adjournment debate would be complete without a contribution from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Just for fun, and for our benefit, he contributed in both English and Ulster Scots, and we were grateful for it. He revelled in his passion for the land, and raised the acute issues faced by many of his constituents who work on it.

We were grateful for his contribution.

Many hon. Members raised the dreadful plight of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. Even while we are not sitting, she and her family will firmly remain in our thoughts, as the Foreign Office continues to work on their behalf. There were many valuable points raised that I regret I have not had time to address; I am sure that they will be spotted and picked up by the Department concerned. It remains for me to thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, your fellow Deputy Speakers, the Clerks, and all the officers of this House for all their work—all the officers who keep us informed, briefed, fed and watered, and, above all, safe.

My hon. Friend Member for Southend West referred to the importance of education. We will all have had teachers who helped guide us here. I think of one of my English teachers as I wish all hon. Members a brief “time for frightened peace to pant”, as we prepare for fresh-winded “accents of new broils” when this House resumes. Have a good summer.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. I thank everyone who has taken part in this debate. May I, on behalf of all the occupants of the Chair, wish all hon. Members a busy but peaceful recess—not a holiday. I also want, on behalf of us all, to thank everyone who works here in the Palace of Westminster. You work so hard to make our work easier, and we really appreciate everything that you do to support us. We hope that you all have peaceful and happy holidays.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.
PETITIONS

Open Countryside in Penkridge and Bloor Homes Appeal Decision

5 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I present this petition on behalf of residents of Penkridge and of Staffordshire more widely. It has been signed by 41 members of the community of Penkridge, but a similar online petition has the names of more than 1,100 residents, mainly from Penkridge but also from Staffordshire and further afield.

The petition states:
The petition of Residents of Penkridge and Staffordshire declares that we object to Bloor Homes planned development of 200 homes in Penkridge after the developer won their appeal against the South Staffordshire Council’s decision to refuse the development in July 2018; further that the people of Penkridge and Staffordshire do not wish this development to go ahead due to the following points: 1) Penkridge has met and exceeded housing targets for the current plan period, South Staffordshire exceed the requirement for a 5-year housing supply as they did when the planning application was rejected in July 2018; 2) Lyne Hill Meadow development of 400 homes is still being constructed, currently phase 3 of 5; 3) In 2018 the Site Allocation Document was signed off by the Planning Inspectorate, which confirmed following the Lyne Hill development there is no residual requirement for additional houses in Penkridge; 4) Construction would involve the needless destruction of Open Countryside, valuable agricultural land and wildlife habitat; 5) The village infrastructure does not have capacity for this increase; the high school is full for the year 19-20 and there is a 6-week waiting period for appointments at the Medical Centre; The development increases the flood risk on the main A449 road, which is also a diversion route for the M6 between J12 and J13.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State and inspector, to overturn this decision

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Better Air Quality

5.2 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I rise to present a petition concerning the dangerous levels of air pollution in London on behalf of the students and staff of Godwin Primary School in my constituency. I recently met a very impressive group of student representatives who had organised the petition, which has been signed by every single student in the school. They had all kinds of different and inventive ideas about what to do about air pollution, including cancelling the Silvertown tunnel, and they had some very exciting ideas on the science of what could be achieved. The one thing that I can safely say is that they were united in their anxiety about polluted air and in their absolute determination to do something about it.

The petition states:
The petition of Staff and pupils of Godwin Junior School, Forest Gate, declares that we are deeply concerned about the air quality in the area around our school and London in general; we are concerned about how air quality impacts on our rights to the best possible health and a safe, clean environment under Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; further that it is unacceptable to us that the number of children who suffer from breathing difficulties such as asthma and bronchitis is increasing as a result of poor air quality; further that it is unacceptable to us that 443 schools in London are in a location where the air quality levels are illegal; further that nearly 10,000 deaths a year can be attributed to air pollution; and further that we all have a right to the best possible health and a safe, clean environment to live, work and study in.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to dedicate more time and resources to finding longer term solutions to improving air quality.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
Spinal Muscular Atrophy

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

5.5 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): There is no fairness to fate, no right to good fortune: new life is a miracle, and great health is a blessing.

I do not normally speak from a text, as you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, having known me since we both entered the House in 1997, but the subject which I wish to address today is technical and medical, and is highly significant, and given that the Health Department is one of the few Departments in which I have not served as a Minister, I thought I had better stick to a script.

Spinal muscular atrophy is a genetically inherited neuromuscular condition which results in the irreversible damage of motor neurons and progressive muscle wasting. It is a complicated and often debilitating disease linked primarily to genetic mutilation in the SMN1—survival motor neuron—gene.

There are three types of SMA. The age of onset and severity of symptoms can vary considerably. Many sufferers will experience extensive disability, and without early intervention numerous lives are damaged and, indeed, cut tragically short.

I know all of this because of my young constituent, 12-year-old Rae White. But there is hope on the horizon for Rae and other sufferers, as the first dedicated treatment, Spinraza, offers hundreds the possibility of an improved quality of life. Clinical trials have already demonstrated the enormously exciting potential benefits of the drug, delivering meaningful improvements to the motor neuron function of patients.

While individuals with SMA have the SMN2 gene, they lack the SMN1 gene, leaving them unable to produce the full-length proteins that work effectively within the body. Spinraza has been developed to address the absence of this survival motor neuron protein. Its synthetic antisense oligonucleotide acts as an enabler, allowing the SMN2 gene to produce full-length protein, thereby alleviating the symptoms of SMA.

Thankfully, the administration of Spinraza is via an already established procedure known as intrathecal injection, an injection into the spinal canal. This procedure is always performed under the direction of a healthcare provider experienced in administering lumbar punctures, with patients sedated or under a general anaesthetic.

The promise of this drug and its potential benefits to those who suffer should not be underestimated. Families of children who have received the drug often report noticeable profound improvements from the very beginning of treatment. During the clinical trials, monitoring committees on rare occasions say it is no longer ethical to treat people with a placebo, and such was the case with this particular drug. It proved so effective in clinical trials on children with SMA type 1 that the trials were stopped early to enable all the children to access the drug as quickly as possible.

Positive signs have also been observed during trials for treatment of other types of SMA, resulting in significant improvements in motor function in children with SMA type 2 and type 3. In April 2019, a three-year study of 28 children aged between two and 15 showed remarkably improved outcomes compared with the natural progression of the condition if left untreated. In particular, a two-year-old child with SMA type 2 gained the ability to walk independently after receiving Spinraza, and two children with SMA type 3 who had lost the ability to walk before taking the drug regained it during the study. One can only imagine the value of the restoration of ability for those children and the joy for those who love them.

Moreover, a clinical trial is ongoing in pre-symptomatic infants with genetically diagnosed SMA who are considered likely to develop SMA type 1 or 2. As of July 2019, children treated with Spinraza continue to achieve motor milestones that are unprecedented in the history of the condition, including 100% of children sitting without support and 88% walking independently. Crucially, trials have shown that the earlier the patients start the treatment, the greater the benefit.

All this considered, it is with much sadness that we must reflect on the less than desirable state of play now. Not all those who suffer from SMA have been able to access this pioneering treatment. Indeed, there has been a great deal of confusion surrounding eligibility. My colleagues, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and the hon. Members for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) and for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), have raised touching testimonies from their own constituents who are facing similar challenges to those of Rae White. I was touched when young Rae’s mother Tanya came to meet me and offered the moving description of her elation at the original announcement by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence—NICE—and NHS England, promising that Spinraza would be made available to all.

Perhaps it would be helpful at this juncture if I said a word about how new medicines are approved. There are two stages to the approval process. First, the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency—MHRA—tests their quality, safety and efficacy. The quality is tested in respect of a medicine’s purity; the safety in respect of possible side effects; and the efficacy determines whether it does what it is supposed to do. This is a well-established 50-year process that is recognised as robust and reliable. Subsequently, in a much newer process, NICE examines in tightly populated clinical conditions the cost-effectiveness of making the drug available to a wider population of relevant sufferers. This is, in essence, a matter of health economics, with NICE measuring the capacity of the drug in question to add what are called “quality-adjusted life years”.

The problem with that process is that the formula is too crude to effectively distinguish, in what I might call human or social terms, between treating a 12-year-old girl like Rae or a 60-year-old man like me. In practice, efforts end with a balance being struck between efficacy and cost-effectiveness in the form of a managed access agreement. Indeed, in the case of Spinraza, such a managed access agreement was released, revealing that potential patients would have to fulfil a set of access criteria in order to get this life-changing treatment. As we can imagine, that caused panic and pain for those families who, having had their hopes raised, then had them dashed as they realised that many would not in fact be given access to the treatment.
Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is just so cruel. There was a party to celebrate the fact that my 18-year-old constituent Jake Ogborne would have access to Spinraza. There was no mention of eligibility criteria, but suddenly he was told that he would not be eligible because he had not been able to walk in the past 12 months. He lost his ability to walk about 18 months or two years ago. I raised this in Prime Minister’s questions. I got a response that basically told me what we already knew and just set out the rules on this. It is immensely cruel for an 18-year-old to be faced with a decision like that.

Sir John Hayes: Yes. The condition, as the hon. Lady suggests, is often degenerative. In cases such as the one she describes, which, as I mentioned, is not the first time she has raised it, a young person who would normally develop as we all did could be left with arrested development or, even worse, declining capabilities. Indeed, that has happened to my constituent too.

The hon. Lady will know that, following strong advocacy by families of SMA patients, Muscular Dystrophy UK, TreatSMA, Spinal Muscular Atrophy UK and many clinicians, NICE and NHS England made amendments to the managed access agreement. While amendments are far from unwelcome, the disappointing truth is that the new criteria will still exclude some SMA patients desperate for treatment in the way she and others have articulated.

The intensely difficult battle fought by SMA patients has highlighted deeper flaws in the system. Families report feeling that they have been pitted one against another as advocacy groups are forced to decide whether to push for wider accessibility, and as a consequence risk delaying treatment for those eligible, or, alternatively, to take what is on offer and exclude a minority of the SMA family.

Life can be intensely difficult. All our bodies are complicated and vulnerable, intricate and fragile. We are regularly reminded, are we not, that they can go wrong in a multitude of hard-to-understand ways. I have argued many times in this House that a society should be gauged by how it cares for, protects and promotes the interests of its most vulnerable members.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. I, too, have a young constituent, Sam McKie, who has SMA type 2. I hope the right hon. Gentleman agrees that the issue is that, whatever has happened so far, we need to know that NICE will look at the fact that the drug can halt further deterioration. As he says, we are all weak mortals, but if that deterioration is halted, people can have some quality of life, whatever type of SMA they have.

Sir John Hayes: Exactly. That is why, in the exciting conclusion to this speech, I shall make demanding suggestions. I think they are demanding because of the demands of those who need this drug, not because of any particular interest I might have in this matter beyond a passion to ensure that my constituent and others like her get what they need so desperately.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for introducing today’s debate. We have had many debates in the House on the procurement of drugs. I have been working with health economists at the University of York who are leading in this field. They very much recommend the model now being adopted by Canada around a national rebate scheme, which takes away some of the tension over cost that we seem to return to time and again. Is not that a way forward that the Government should at least explore?

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Lady had the great pleasure of shadowing me when I was at the Department for Transport, and I have had the greater pleasure of listening to her on so many subjects. She speaks with such knowledge, understanding and wisdom. Once again, she has shown all those things today.

The Government and the new Prime Minister must do as much as they can to ensure that those with rare diseases have every chance possible to live the very best lives they can. So, here is exactly what to do: first, as Spinraza has been shown to be both safe and effective, the NHS should provide the treatment for all those who would benefit from it; secondly, in addition to making Spinraza available for all, the Minister should set up a rare drugs fund, similar to the successful cancer fund, to ensure that those battling debilitating degenerative diseases are supported at every stage of their journey; and thirdly, I ask the Minister to implement an immediate review of the criteria used by NICE to determine access to new medicines.

We all want to do the right thing. I described earlier what I said was a crude approach. These things develop; they metamorphose. This is a chance to look again at how we can administer treatment to have the best effect on those in the greatest need. Hegel said:

“Life has a value only when it has something valuable as its object.”

Chamberlain said:

“In great deeds something abides.”

There is no better great deed, no more noble object, no more abiding purpose than the care for those in the greatest need. I ask this Minister to make her abiding object a war on want, a campaign against suffering, a crusade for those in pain—Madam Deputy Speaker, nothing less will do.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): What a pleasure it is to speak in the final parliamentary debate of what has been an historic and tumultuous term for all of us. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) on securing the debate on such a timely day, because we have had news on Spinraza in the last 24 hours. He outlined very movingly the symptoms of spinal muscular atrophy, which has been raised before in this House. The hon. Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) are particular champions for sufferers.

SMA is a terrible disease that can have a terrible impact on the children who suffer from it, their families and the wider community. We in the Department know how important it is for them to be able to access effective treatment. It is a rare disease. It affects about
100 babies born each year. It is estimated that it affects between 1,200 and 2,500 children and adults in the UK. Until recently, there were no licensed treatments for it, so the condition has been managed using nutritional support, physiotherapy and social care.

Spinraza, as my right hon. Friend outlined, has been licensed across Europe for the treatment of SMA since 2017 and is very effective. However, it is extremely expensive and has been undergoing assessment by NICE to determine whether it would be an effective use of NHS resources. I say to him that QALYs do take account of wider costs—not just physical costs but social care costs. As far as I am aware, there is currently no difference in the quantitative evidence. He gave the examples of a man in his mid-years—at 60—and a child.

I will go on to talk more broadly about the NICE process, but I am really pleased that only yesterday, NICE published its final guidance, meaning that this debate is very timely. The guidance recommends the use of Spinraza for many patients with SMA through a managed access agreement, which has been negotiated between NICE, NHS England and the manufacturer, Biogen. This makes Spinraza available to the NHS at a discounted price. Importantly, it also sets out arrangements for collecting evidence on the long-term impact of Spinraza, because at the moment the evidence is quite immature. The managed access agreement is one of the most comprehensive deals in the entire world and it brings Spinraza to one of the widest cohorts of eligible patients in any country. It was signed and supported by Spinal Muscular Atrophy UK, Muscular Dystrophy UK and TreatSMA. I put on the record my thanks and my tribute to all those organisations for the support they have given patients and families with the illness. That very welcome development has involved hard work and flexibility from all parties to reach this point; if only all parties in all the debates I have to speak in on this matter were as flexible.

Sir John Hayes: The Minister makes a good point about the managed access agreement and the amendments to it that she described. But the real issue here is whether Spinraza would benefit every single sufferer. If it would, it should be universally available.

Seema Kennedy: I know that there is an issue with some people suffering from SMA type 3, but I am not the person who would make the decision on whether Spinraza was effective or not; that is why NICE is there.

Children with the most severe form of SMA type 1 are already benefiting from treatment with Spinraza. Following yesterday’s announcement, eligible patients with types 2 and 3 will begin treatment as soon as possible within the next three months.

NICE has concluded that there is not sufficient evidence at this stage for the managed access agreement to cover some patients with SMA type 3 or any patients with type 4; that is why we are still carrying on collecting evidence. I know how dreadfully painful that is for those not able to access Spinraza. The majority of patients will be eligible under the managed access agreement.

The parties to the agreement have agreed to keep the eligibility criteria for treatment under review during the five-year term of the agreement, so those criteria may be further extended in future if more evidence of benefit emerges over time. NHS England and I have acknowledged that the inclusion criteria associated with the managed access agreement could have been more clearly communicated when it was announced.

I turn to the NICE process altogether. This is an important system. It makes independent, authoritative, evidence-based decisions, which is essential so that taxpayers can be assured that the price we pay for new medicines reflects the value that they bring. It also helps ensure rapid access to effective new treatments for NHS patients. It has been going for 20 years and is internationally respected. There are both established and new pharmaceutical companies developing medicines for rare diseases, which takes an awfully long time, based here in the UK, and medicines can be brought to the market through the NHS very quickly. The Department is keen to press on with that.

We have a UK rare diseases strategy, which was set out in the NHS long-term plan. Genomics is a particularly important area, in which we want to innovate so that we have more comprehensive and precise diagnoses and allow patients to access the right drugs. We are committed to that. The NICE process has recommended more than 80% of the medicines appraised and 75% of medicines for rare diseases for some or all of the eligible patient population, but of course the processes must evolve. They have to keep going, taking into consideration developments in science, healthcare and the life sciences sector. That is why NICE keeps its methods and processes updated through periodic review, which includes extensive engagement with stakeholders, including patient representatives, drug manufacturers and clinicians.

Mary Glindon: Has the Department given any consideration to the MAP BioPharma report released earlier this year, which looked at how the appraisal process could make a fairer playing field for rare diseases?

Seema Kennedy: Yes, the Department has looked at that report. NICE recently initiated a review, and I assure Members—as I did when I answered the urgent question on Tuesday—that it will be wide-ranging and carried out with extensive engagement with stakeholders. I shall be keeping a close eye on it if I remain in this job—and even if I do not.

This has been an important debate. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings, who always speaks so passionately on behalf of people who are sick and on behalf of the most vulnerable—those children who have no voice for themselves. I reassure Members that access to effective new treatments will always be a priority for the Government.

I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your service to us in the Chair, and wish all right hon. and hon. Members and all who work here in the Palace of Westminster a very reviving recess.

Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm

House adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 8 July 2019

Dangerous Driving

4.30 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 236952 relating to dangerous driving.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mrs Moon. The petition calls for life sentences for causing death by dangerous driving.

To lose a child is the worst thing that most of us could imagine. To lose a child at the age of only four, mown down by a speeding driver, is something we do not even wish to imagine. Yet that is what happened to Mr and Mrs Youens, who started the petition. To listen to their story is to step into a world of horror. To hear about parents called to a hospital knowing that something must be dreadfully wrong; to see their child grievously injured; to have to follow the ambulance transferring her to Alder Hey, unable to go into that ambulance because the doctors were still working to keep her alive; and to hear their story of lying with their daughter until she died is something I do not have the words to describe. I cannot even pretend to plumb the depths of their grief, but I do congratulate them on their courage and tenacity in wanting something good to come out of that grief. They began that process when they allowed their relatives taken away so swiftly. Does she agree that families have told me this afternoon of seeing people cheer in court because their sentence was so light and of people who did not go to jail at all. That matters for confidence in our justice system.

It is a long time since I practised law, and I know, from being around the courts, it is very difficult to make judgments on cases unless you have heard all the evidence, but I believe that in the most serious cases we ought to have life sentences available. As Mr Youens said to me, in the wrong hands a car is a lethal weapon.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a passionate and moving speech, and I am pleased to see so many families here. She, like me, will have spent far too many hours in grieving families’ living rooms talking about these issues and their relatives taken away so swiftly. Does she agree that people who hire high-performance vehicles should be held liable if those vehicles that they give to others are then used in criminal acts of murder on our streets?

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We need to do many things to reform the law. We have had numerous petitions on increasing sentences for death by dangerous driving, and on imposing lifetime bans for people convicted of dangerous driving.

I had a letter from Amy O’Connor, whose brother, Andy, was killed on his way to the gym one morning. It took 15 days to find the van and the perpetrator because the van had been hidden. By that time, it was impossible to do drug or alcohol tests, and the only thing the driver could be charged with—she understands why—was leaving the scene of an accident. She very reasonably asks why do we not increase the sentence for people leaving the scene of an accident when they have caused death or serious injury.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her speech. Although we need a change in the law to make life sentences available for death by dangerous driving, I cannot understand why, in the worst cases of death by dangerous driving, the Crown Prosecution Service does not bring a charge of manslaughter, thereby giving the court the option of a life sentence for the worst types of offending.
Helen Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point on something that I will come to later. I understand why it is difficult for people to understand the law in this area, because we often punish the type of driving rather than the outcome. We used to have three offences—dangerous driving, careless driving and reckless driving—but the offence of dangerous driving as it was then was abolished under the Criminal Law Act 1977 because it was felt there was not sufficient distinction between dangerous driving and reckless driving. However, soon after, it appeared to people that the law was not punishing the most serious cases effectively. In fact, a review of the law by Dr Peter North in 1988 showed that many people thought that the law was not dealing with the most serious cases properly. Also, recklessness is obviously very difficult to prove, as it is subjective.

At the time, the Government were focused on dealing with drink-driving, to which I will return, because I think we can learn some lessons from it. The offence of causing death by dangerous driving was not introduced until the Road Traffic Act 1991. Even then, it was clear to many people that the law was still not being used effectively. There were widespread complaints that the Crown Prosecution Service was often charging people with the lesser offence of careless driving, because it felt that it was more likely to secure a conviction.

Attempts were made to address that, with advice to Crown prosecutors in 2007, and revised guidance in 2013 that set out some of the constituents of dangerous driving, such as excessive speed, racing, aggressive driving, ignoring traffic signs or lights, and failing to have regard for vulnerable pedestrians. Most of those elements were present in Violet-Grace’s case. There were also attempts to deal with people’s fears through changes to advice from the Sentencing Advisory Panel.

It is also fair to say that Governments of all colours tried to fill in the gaps in the law so that it operated properly. In the Road Safety Act 2006, the Labour Government introduced the offence of causing death by careless driving, and causing death by driving while unlicensed, disqualified or uninsured. In the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, the coalition Government introduced the offence of causing serious injury by careless driving. In the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015, the offence of causing serious injury when driving while disqualified was introduced, punishable by four years’ imprisonment and a fine. Causing serious injury through careless driving was punishable by a sentence of up to five years’ imprisonment.

All those measures were welcomed by road safety campaigners and had widespread support across the House, but they still did not deal with people’s fears that the worst offences were neither being dealt with nor sentenced appropriately, even though, in 2003, the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving had been increased from 10 years to 14 years. That matters because if the law is to work effectively people have to have confidence in it. It has to do three things: protect the innocent, punish the guilty and deter further offences. There was a widespread belief that that was not happening.

That belief was why, after a consultation, the current Government announced in October 2017 that they would increase the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving from 14 years to life. At the time, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), who was then a Justice Minister, said that the decision had been taken to reflect “the seriousness of the worst cases, the anguish of the victims’ families, and maximum penalties for other serious offences such as manslaughter”.

He said that the change would be introduced when parliamentary time allowed. The same thing was said in answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), who has also campaigned on this issue.

I must ask the Minister, why the delay? Everyone in Parliament knows that when we are not debating Brexit we have very little business. The proposed change could be dealt with swiftly, almost in a one-clause Bill. It would receive widespread support across the House and the support of the general public. I know that the Government want to deal with other issues, but why wait for a big Bill when we could get on and do this now? Surely we do not need to wait for someone else—God forbid, another child—to be killed before we act.

I would go further. In the Violet-Grace case, the car was stolen, which was clear evidence of criminal intent, and it had false numberplates, went through two red lights and was doing 83 mph. The driver had previous criminal convictions for burglary and failing to comply with a court order. He should have been charged with manslaughter—something the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) mentioned. This was a criminal act by a known criminal, with a complete disregard for other people’s lives. However, that is not what the petition asks for; it asks simply for life sentences to be made available for the offence.

The petition also asks for a minimum tariff of 15 years, which I think is a little more problematic. Generally, our law does not set minimum sentences; it sets maximum sentences and leaves it to the trial judge, who has heard all the evidence, to set the tariff. Clearly, if we went down that road there would have to be changes to the sentencing guidelines to reflect that. My fear about setting a minimum tariff is that it might have the opposite effect to what is intended: it might make juries more reluctant to convict in some cases, and lead to the situation that we have seen before of people being charged with careless driving instead of dangerous driving.

The same, or at least a similar, problem comes with calling for consecutive sentences. Normally in our law, sentences are served concurrently for convictions arising from the same incident, and consecutively if they arise from different incidents. I understand entirely why families want consecutive sentencing for offences when someone has been killed and someone else has been seriously injured, but my fear is that the tariffs set would be lower. Therefore, those proposing the change would not necessarily achieve what they want. However, that could be looked at and considered.

It is clear that we should get on with increasing the maximum sentence, but that by itself is not enough. I referred to how we tackled drink-driving in this country. We did two things: we not only brought in the breathalyser and ensured that serious sentences were available, but did a public education campaign that, in the end, changed people’s attitudes. It used to be quite socially acceptable to knock back a load of pints and get behind the wheel of a car. It no longer is. I am not saying that that does not happen, but it is no longer socially acceptable.

We need to do those two things. Mr and Mrs Youens are already doing their part by speaking at speed awareness courses to alert drivers to the damage that they can do.
We need to do our part as politicians and introduce a proper public education campaign, because the aim in the end is surely not to have lots of people serving life sentences; it is to deter them from committing the offence in the first place and to save people’s lives. Will the Government please now get on with that?

I know that the Government are looking to include other provisions in a road safety Bill, dealing with such things as cycling. Those measures are worthy in themselves, but they are delaying action on something that many of us believe needs action now. The Government would have the support of the public and widespread support among all parties in the House, and such action would rebuild confidence in the law and recognise the campaigning of bereaved families. Most importantly, it might save lives—and surely saving even one life makes this worth doing.

4.49 pm

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on an excellent speech; she opened the debate brilliantly. She has done great justice to all those who have travelled a long way to hear the debate in Parliament. It is also a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon.

It is unfortunate that I have been called so early in the debate, because I will talk about something that is slightly different, although important to my constituents. My constituents Tom and Jackie Luxon were involved in a car crash with their then two-year-old daughter. The force of the impact was so great that the Isofix that the two-year-old was travelling in broke, and she sustained life-changing injuries that initially caused paralysis; amazingly, in the two years since, she has recovered to some degree. There is evidence that the person who hit the Luxons that day had been driving dangerously for 16 miles before the collision.

The incident was brought to my attention because Jackie was 26 weeks pregnant at the time and her baby, Grace, was stillborn as a consequence. We are debating whether there should be life sentences when dangerous driving is the cause of death of someone who is alive, but Grace was 26 weeks in gestation at the time of the impact. Obviously, she was killed as a direct consequence of the impact, but the man responsible received three years and seven months in prison. If Grace had been delivered when she was taken to hospital with her mother and had taken just one breath, the situation that we are debating would have applied and we would have been talking about whether that man should have been liable for a life sentence—or, as is the current position, something less satisfactory. Grace did not take a breath, however, so three years and seven months is all that could be served on that man for killing her.

PC Owen Davies, the investigating officer for Avon and Somerset police, wrote to me in despair. I hope he does not get in trouble for that with his chief constable, because he did exactly what a police officer should do—showed how much he cares. He said that he and the Crown Prosecution Service “looked into charging the driver with death by dangerous driving but we hit a brick wall when we discovered that the Road Traffic Act 1988 does not recognise a healthy 26-week-old unborn baby as a person. Instead we had to charge him with causing serious injury by dangerous driving (s2)”—for the mother and the daughter—“with nothing able to be charged for the death of the baby.”

A couple of weeks ago, I asked about the issue at Prime Minister’s questions, and the Prime Minister gave a considered answer. The key thrust of her answer related to the danger that any such discussion about the rights of unborn children could have unintended consequences. That is as far as her answer went; she was obviously talking about abortion law. I agree with her that the impact could be challenging, but there is precedent.

It is great to see the Minister in his place. As such a distinguished practitioner of the law, he will see that there is an opportunity to get it right. The Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929 says that a foetus is viable at the age of 24 weeks. The Act’s wording explicitly sets out clear exemptions, precisely so there are no unintended consequences of that definition. It is also worth noting that a child who was stillborn as a consequence of the awful Grenfell Tower tragedy was officially recorded as a victim. There is precedent, therefore, and there are examples in law where it is possible to recognise the rights of an unborn child.

I beg the Minister to consider that when he considers the wider merits of the case that is made in this debate, which is hugely important. It should be possible and the norm to give life sentences for dangerous driving, because cars can be weapons in the wrong people’s hands. The Luxons’ child was denied to them at 26 weeks’ gestation and the punishment for the person responsible was just three years and seven months. I urge the Minister to look beyond what we do to punish people who kill the living, and consider what we should do to punish people who cause babies to be stillborn as a consequence of such collisions.

4.54 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I compliment my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for her excellent introduction and the work that she has obviously put into the debate. I pay tribute to other hon. Members who have contributed.

I praise the three people who have made the debate happen: Rebecca and Glenn, who are present in the Chamber, and Violet-Grace, whose tragic and senseless death is the reason for it. I praise everyone who has signed the petition, and I praise the St Helens Star and the whole St. Helen’s community for supporting Rebecca and Glenn’s tireless work to get their e-petition signed, to get the debate and to prevent something similar from happening in future.

Rebecca and Glenn are asking for the law to be changed and for a sentence that fits the crime: “Life sentences for Death by Dangerous Driving”, as the petition states. That will hopefully deter others from reckless driving, so that what happened to Violet-Grace does not happen to another child—or, if it does, so that those responsible receive a sentence that fits the crime they have committed and that gives them the time necessary to reflect, to be rehabilitated, and to have proper regard for, consideration of and understanding of their actions.

The law must be improved for victims and survivors. In the case that we are discussing, the defendant’s barrister objected to the parents reading out their full impact statement and argued that the defendants would...
find it too upsetting. The judge accepted that, so the CPS barrister gave the parents a copy of the victim impact statement with the parts that they could not read out in open court highlighted. The whole purpose of the victim impact statement is the impact on the victims and the survivors, not the defendant. Guidance should be given to the judiciary that the overriding consideration is for the victim and their family, not whether the impact statement may upset the defendant.

We are asking for a sentence that fits the crime. Violet-Grace was a beautiful, angelic-looking four-year-old child. Some hon. Members may find the following upsetting—my family have not been able to say it or hear it. On Friday 24 March, she was simply walking home from pre-school and calling on her aunty and her four-year-old cousin with her nan. Her nan had lifted her up to carry her safely across the road, but had not put a foot on the road when she was struck by a stolen vehicle, which had been recklessly driven at 83 miles per hour in a 30-mile zone before it collided and mounted the pavement.

The stolen car that struck them was fitted with false numberplates and had a cloned key. The driver had no licence or insurance. The Independent Police Complaints Commission later reported that there had been complaints about the car being driven dangerously since noon that day. The driver and his passenger then fled the scene, running over Violet-Grace, who had been thrown 50 yards away. The passenger ran back to the car, stepping over the child again, to retrieve a bag that he needed. The whole incident was witnessed by her four-year-old cousin.

A fireman working in the area heard the noise and saw two young men running at speed. He ran to the main road, found the scene and Violet-Grace, and worked with a local dentist to resuscitate her. The driver fled the country and travelled to Amsterdam to “clear his head.”

Glenn Youen received a phone call at work to tell him to get to Whiston Hospital urgently. Rebecca, who was working in Warrington Hospital, received a similar call. She set off driving—sobbing—and spotted a parked police car. She got out, banged on the window and pleaded for help, so the police took her under blue light to Whiston Hospital. Violet-Grace’s injuries were horrific, and it was essential to move her to Alder Hey Children’s Hospital. Rebecca and Glenn were told that she could not survive her injuries. They knew her as a loving, caring child, always wanting to help others. They courageously decided to donate her organs to help to save other young children’s lives. They say that that is what Violet-Grace would have wanted.

It was suggested that Rebecca get into bed with Violet-Grace, but she was reluctant to do so with all the tubes and equipment around her. She was persuaded to do so. She prayed and pleaded, “Please breathe, please breathe.”

Violet-Grace passed away with the local priest, Father Tom Neylon, saying prayers around her. He checked the time: it was 11.58 pm on 25 March. He said, “Ah, today is the day that the angel Gabriel came down to tell Mary she is to have a baby called Jesus.” The family wept. Violet-Grace was the angel Gabriel in her school’s nativity play. She was so pleased, and she used to dance around singing, “I’m the boss of the angels, I’m the boss of the angels.” Her kidney and pancreas were donated to save the lives of two other young children.

Nan, a nurse who trained at Great Ormond Street Hospital, suffered numerous injuries and was in a critical condition. It was a miracle that she survived, but she had life-changing injuries. Grandad, a university lecturer, has had to retire to take care of her—all that while the driver was in Amsterdam clearing his head.

Earlier, I said that all we are asking for is a sentence that fits the crime that has been committed. The two men responsible for Violet-Grace’s death will serve less time in prison than she was alive—less than four and a half years. In fact, by pleading guilty, and with good behaviour, the driver might be out even sooner. I ask everyone here today, is that truly a sentence that fits the crime that was committed? I believe that most, if not all, of us would say no. Clearly, the 164,632 people who signed the petition would agree.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for her work on this issue. I reiterate what she says about the Youen family. As well as our sympathy and solidarity, and the outpouring of love for the family from our community in Warrington, Wigan and across Merseyside and the whole north-west, there is a deep sense of anger about how they have been treated and a determination to make sure no other family is ever treated like that.

Ms Rimmer: I thank my hon. Friend for saying that.

The current laws on sentencing for dangerous driving are simply not good enough. We need to equip our judges with sentencing guidelines that enable them to provide that key tenet of our judicial system: justice. The Youens actually praised the judge and said his hands were tied. I am sure some will say, “What constitutes dangerous driving? What if I sneeze and lose control of my vehicle? Will I now face those increased sentences?” My simple answer is no. We are talking about giving judges the option through Sentencing Council guidelines to issue a higher sentence where they deem it to be just. A judge will consider all the evidence provided to them and pass a sentence appropriate to the crime committed, whether it be the minimum or the maximum sentence in the guidelines, as with any other crime. I and many others are arguing that the maximum sentence that a judge can issue for dangerous driving is far too low.

For gross negligence manslaughter, judges have the option to issue life as the maximum sentence, with a range of sentencing options below it—one to 18 years. I do not see why dangerous driving should have a lower maximum sentence than gross negligence manslaughter. Both involve a disregard for the lives of others, and as we see too often, both can lead to the death of innocent people. An individual’s direct, reckless and callous actions can lead to the death of another. Stealing a car and driving at 30 mph in a 30 mph zone can cause life-changing injuries, and the suffering and death of an innocent four-year-old child. How can we not give our judges the option to deliver a sentence at least on a par with gross negligence manslaughter for dangerous driving?

Another issue that I wish to raise on behalf of Rebecca and Glenn, and that I believe falls within the scope of this debate, is concurrent sentencing. Rebecca, Glenn and many others think it is unacceptable that criminals...
can serve two sentences at the same time. They describe it as “buy one, get one free”. The crux of this issue is that the current legal system does not adequately explain to victims what is happening, and thus it does not appear to be delivering the justice it is supposed to deliver.

**Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab): I just cannot imagine the pain that Violet-Grace’s parents feel. As my hon. Friend indicated, two years ago the Government promised to introduce life sentences for death by dangerous driving and create a new offence of causing serious injury by careless driving. Many families across this country—including my constituent Mr Addy from Burscough, whose daughter was mown down in 2016 by a driver who received a fine of £500 and no jail sentence—are waiting for that promise to become law. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need not only appropriate punishment but effective deterrents for dangerous and careless driving, excessive speeding and reckless joyriding? We need it now; everyone has waited long enough.

**Ms Rimmer:** I accept what my hon. Friend says; people are feeling that.

I call on the Minister to explain to my constituents why concurrent sentences are used, and to investigate how our judicial system explains its practices to victims. I and others are not calling for a knee-jerk change to the law. We are arguing not for punishment for the sake of punishment, but merely for a sentence that fits the crime that has been committed. We are under no illusions about the impact that the change would have on preventing dangerous driving. Changing the sentencing for dangerous driving may only deter a few people from driving dangerously, but those few people changing their behaviour could save lives like Violet-Grace’s. If it saves more lives, surely it is worth it. It will also send a clear message to those who might consider driving dangerously that we as a society see it as morally abhorrent.

Some may not change their behaviour and may cause death by dangerous driving, but by changing the sentencing guidelines we will finally deliver justice for families such as the Youens and others who are affected by such recklessness. It cannot be acceptable that individuals such as those who struck down Violet-Grace and tore open the Youen family can serve sentences shorter than the time she was alive. They have sentenced Rebecca, Glenn and Violet-Grace’s little brother Oliver to a life of grief, and denied them the joys of watching her grow up and experiencing the joyous occasions and events that a maturing daughter gives to a family. That loss can never be repaid in this life.

In October 2017, the Government pledged to increase sentencing for death by dangerous driving to life, but we have not seen any meaningful movement on that issue in nearly two years. I therefore call on the Minister to set his civil servants to the task of getting the laws on dangerous driving changed. That gap in our legislation and our justice system must be filled sooner, rather than later.

I understand that issues such as Brexit put a strain on Departments and Parliament, but we must not allow this vital issue to be lost in the miasma of current politics. Rebecca and Glenn want the change in the law to be made properly and as quickly as possible. The Government have a duty to get it done. The longer we leave it, the longer our judicial system will fail to deliver the justice that the Youens and the other families we met today deserve. Although we can never heal the wound that has been opened, we must improve justice for victims and survivors and show that we care for them.

5.9 pm

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairwomanship, Mrs Moon.

First, I want to express my heartfelt sympathy to the family of Violet-Grace—and, indeed, to all the families with us today. No parent should have to endure what they have endured. It is to their credit that they created this very successful petition to try to get some justice for families who have lost loved ones to death by dangerous driving and for those who have endured serious and life-changing injuries.

Sadly, Violet-Grace’s story and the bereaved family’s pain and sense of injustice are all too familiar to me. In 2014, my constituent Joseph Brown-Lartey was killed by a dangerous driver. Joseph was just 25 years old, with a promising career opening up ahead of him, yet his plans and his life were destroyed by an uninsured, unlicensed 18-year-old named Addil Haroon, who chose to drive a hired high-powered car at 80 mph in a 30 mph zone, ran a red light and smashed into Joseph’s car. The impact was so great that Joseph’s car was split in two and, tragically, Joseph was killed outright. Police officers who attended the scene said it was the worst crash they had ever seen on an urban street.

Addil Haroon was convicted of causing death by dangerous driving but was given a jail sentence of just six years, of which he will serve just three in custody; he will be released on licence after serving half his sentence. Joseph’s parents, Dawn and Ian Brown-Lartey, contacted me for help after that derisory sentence was given. I wrote to the Attorney General asking for the sentence to be reconsidered in view of the gravity and tragic consequences of the crime. The reply I received was that the judge had acted within sentencing guidelines, and that the sentence had not been “unduly lenient” and would not be reconsidered. As we heard, the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving is 14 years, yet few convictions result in a sentence that long. In 2017, the average sentence was just four years and nine months.

Joseph’s parents, with the help of the road safety charity Brake and campaigning journalist Michelle Livesey, launched a petition and a campaign called “Justice for Joseph”, calling for tougher sentences for those who cause death and serious injury by dangerous driving. The petition gathered 20,000 signatures and was handed into Downing Street with support from me and the then police and crime commissioner for Greater Manchester, who is now my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd).

Brake then launched another campaign, “Roads to Justice”. For the launch of that campaign, Joseph’s parents allowed the wreckage of his car to be displayed outside Parliament. Hon. Members may recall seeing the shocking sight of a wrecked Audi split clean in two on their journey into work that day. That wreckage is now used by Greater Manchester police as part of its road safety campaigning and teaching, having been kindly donated by Joseph’s family in the hope that it would serve as a lesson to other drivers.
In response to that pressure—sadly, many other MPs have had similar tragedies in their constituencies—the Government held a consultation on sentencing for causing death and serious injury by dangerous driving. They received around 9,000 responses. It took many months to process them all, but everyone involved in the campaign was delighted when the Ministry of Justice announced in October 2017 that, as a result of the consultation, the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving would be extended from 14 years to life.

Joseph’s parents felt that all their campaigning had paid off and, although nothing could bring Joseph back or bring justice in his case, at least another family bereaved in such terrible circumstances would not suffer the heartache of seeing their loved one’s killer receive a derisory sentence. Yet what has happened since then? Although I and other MPs have asked numerous questions in the House, the Government’s constant refrain has been that they will bring legislation to the House “when parliamentary time allows”. This Government have presided over hours of parliamentary inaction, with sessions closing early and the business of the day being wound up mid-afternoon on numerous occasions. There has been ample parliamentary time to bring legislation forward, yet nothing has happened. The change was promised in October 2017. Twenty-one months on, nothing has changed.

The tragedy is that we are still seeing deaths, such as that of poor Violet-Grace, as some drivers simply do not get the message that, in the wrong hands, a car is a lethal weapon. I strongly believe that longer sentences would reinforce that message. At the moment, some drivers have an extremely careless approach and drive in an extremely reckless manner because they know that if they cause an accident that kills or maims they will serve only a relatively short sentence. That has to change. Families such as the Brown-Lartey’s in my constituency and the Youens in the constituency of my hon. Friend for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) need to see justice being done.

If I have one question for the Minister, it is this: when is the maximum sentence of life for causing death by dangerous driving, which the Government announced 21 months ago, going to be brought to Parliament? The response, “When parliamentary time allows,” is simply not good enough. These families need to see justice—for Joseph, for Violet-Grace and for all the other victims killed or maimed on our roads by the scourge of dangerous driving. It is time that the punishment fitted the crime.

5.16 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for opening the debate so eloquently on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

I begin by paying tribute to the family of Violet-Grace, who, tragically, was killed by a dangerous driver in March 2017 aged just four. Her mother and father, Rebecca and Glenn, started this petition when the driver, who mounted the pavement in a stolen car before fleeing the scene and subsequently the country, was sentenced to a derisory nine years and four months in prison.
In October 2017, the Government announced proposals to increase the maximum penalty for causing death by dangerous driving from 14 years’ imprisonment to life; increase the maximum penalty for causing death by careless driving under the influence of drink or drugs from 14 years’ imprisonment to life; and create a new offence of causing serious injury by careless driving. It is now 2019 and we are still waiting for those changes to be implemented. The Government constantly tell us, “We will bring forward proposals for reform of the law as soon as parliamentary time allows.” When will that be? These proposals are necessary to improve safety on our roads, act as a deterrent to would-be offenders and restore fairness in our justice system. Moreover, they enjoy wide cross-party support and are therefore relatively straightforward to implement. There is simply no excuse for the continued delay.

Let us be clear: while the Government dither, families such as the Platt-May family from Coventry continue to see the killers of their loved ones receive paltry prison sentences, which simply adds to their grief and sense of injustice. Two-year-old Caspar and six-year-old Corey Platt-May were two lovely little boys who lived in my constituency, only yards from where I was brought up to enjoy the pleasure of playing cricket with them. They were killed in a horrific hit-and-run incident at the hands of a driver who had no licence or insurance, was doing more than 60 mph in a built-up residential area and was high on cocaine at the time. The driver was given a meagre nine-year jail term, which was increased to 10.5 years on appeal, while the Platt-May family were sentenced to a lifetime of grief at the loss of Corey and Casper. They suffered the double injustice of seeing the perpetrator receive a prison sentence of just a few years.

Casper’s mother, Louise, said:

“what our family has had to go through, and will continue to experience for the rest of our lives, highlights the need for the toughest possible sentences to be handed out to drivers who ruin lives. We call on the Government to honour Corey and Casper’s legacy by ensuring its proposals for tougher sentences for drivers who kill are made law as soon as practically possible.”

It is time for the Government to heed that call, honour Corey and Casper’s legacy and introduce legislation immediately so that drivers who kill are jailed appropriately.

While it is true that no sentence can alleviate the anguish caused by the loss of a loved one in such horrendous circumstances, a lenient sentence can and does add to a family’s pain. Families are being ripped apart through tragedy, and although nothing can bring their loved ones back, an appropriate prison sentence, which more closely reflects the severity and impact of the crime, keeps the killer off the roads and prevents them from causing similar misery to another family, will surely bring them a semblance of comfort.

It is in the Government’s gift to provide that comfort to these grieving families, to make our roads safer and to put in place a law that is both a proper deterrent and a punishment. I urge the Minister to act without further delay.

5.25 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you presiding, Mrs Moon. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I pay tribute to the petitioners. I thank Brake and the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety for their briefings, and I thank the Petitions Committee for facilitating the debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) for her excellent introductory speech, and I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East.

Apart from the specifics in the briefings, which I will come to, my concern is that government generally, this Government in particular and society do not attach enough seriousness to road deaths—let alone those caused by dangerous driving, which cause even more pain. If there were 1,500 deaths a year in aviation or on trains, there would be a demand for a public inquiry, and with the number of road deaths stagnating in recent years, we need to address this issue much more seriously. The Government’s refusal in 2010 to set a target for casualty reductions, abandoning a 30-year consensus of all Governments since the Thatcher Administration, is indicative of the coalition and now this Conservative Government’s relaxed approach. We had seen a gradual reduction in road deaths over the decades, but since 2010 that has stalled.

Our general attitude to road deaths is far too complacent, and it sends all the wrong signals. It creates a climate of “roads deaths happen”. When they are committed as part of another crime, they are not condemned as heavily as they ought to be. It is almost as if these deaths—murders—are obscured by all the deaths happening on our roads. Road crashes are the cause of more deaths among young people than anything else. The Government proposed a Green Paper for graduated licences for new—mostly young—drivers to impress upon them how serious a step it is to get behind the wheel of a vehicle. The Green Paper disappeared.

We do not create the appropriate attitude in our new drivers: that, as many colleagues have said, they are in charge of a lethal weapon and, if they use it to cause harm or death to others, there are serious consequences. Just as we do not approach this issue appropriately from an educational or training point of view, nor do we do so from a legal one. We need to approach driving much more seriously.

I am not generally in favour of mandatory sentences because the bench and judges should have discretion, but if my family—my child or my grandchild—were the victim of one of the atrocious crimes we have heard about, I would want the full extent of the law used against the criminals who perpetrated that crime. I would want the penalty under the law to be appropriate, as so many colleagues have said. The law is lacking, to say the least, and the Government know that. They have promised change for years. The question to the Minister, who is held in high regard across the House as a man of integrity, is: when will it happen?

I turn to the briefings, and the one by Brake in particular. Brake says:

“Deaths and serious injuries on our roads cause terrible suffering every day. This suffering is often compounded by a flawed legal framework which lets serious offenders get away with pitiful penalties and allows dangerous drivers back on our roads. We are calling on the Government to finally implement the tougher sentences for killer drivers it announced in…2017.”

Two of its demands are: to bring forward legislation that implements maximum sentences; and to simplify and improve legal definitions of unsafe driving behaviour and specifically the use of “dangerous” and “careless”.

Brake continues:
Jim Fitzpatrick: It cannot be right that the average prison sentence for a driver who has killed someone through dangerous or illegal driving is four years. When we consider that the minimum sentence for domestic burglary with no additional charges of bodily harm is three years.

It is a very powerful point. Brake also echoes a point made by my hon. Friends:

“In 2014, the then Secretary of State for Justice...promised a full review of all road traffic offences, yet this promise remains unfulfilled.”

Why is that?

Brake also mentions the 2016 consultation:

“Brake does not, however, agree with the Government’s contentions in their response that ‘There is a risk that juries may be less willing to convict...Juries would be able to receive clear direction that a range of penalties would be available in sentencing, with precedent shown, negating this as an issue.”

Brake discussed the important issue of careless and dangerous driving, and called for the legal definition of unsafe driving to be simplified and improved. It wrote:

“The maximum sentence for causing death by careless driving is only five years, compared to 14 for causing death by dangerous driving.”

Brake discussed the contrast between the two sentences and found that

“since it was introduced in 2008...in the first few years after the new charge was introduced, the number of ‘death by dangerous driving’ convictions dropped off as the number of deaths by careless driving convictions increased. In 2007...there were 233 death by dangerous driving convictions, this then fell to 114 in 2011, when there were 235 death by careless driving convictions.”

The question is whether one rate of conviction is coming down while the other is going up, resulting in lower penalties for people found guilty of a less serious offence. Brake thinks there is a relationship between the two rates of conviction, so perhaps the Minister could comment on that.

Brake has also stated:

“Additionally, the use of the term ‘careless’ in cases where driving has resulted in death and serious injury undermines and trivialises the gravitas of the offence and its impact on victims and their families.”

The Minister knows that language is critical, and that “careless” just does not convey the seriousness of the crime. I agree.

The issue of dangerous driving is hugely important to the safety and wellbeing of all our constituents. The Government have been making the right noises and the right promises. So many deaths are caused by human actions: speeding, not wearing a seatbelt, the use of drink and drugs, or using a mobile phone—all deliberate human actions. Such actions are perhaps not criminal or serious enough for people to be charged with the most serious offence, but road deaths are caused by human beings who make decisions and do not care about the rest of us. Those people need to be brought to book.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Not for the first time in Westminster Hall, I agree with everything the hon. Gentleman has said. Clearly, we must bring forward changes to the sentencing guidelines. I have listened to some incredible contributions. I wonder whether he is aware of the Don’t Motor On Meds campaign, which has not been mentioned during the debate. It focuses on the role that prescription medication can have in dangerous driving—it can often create unwittingly lethal drivers. Yes, the Government could change the sentencing guidelines, but the pharmaceutical industry could act quickly—now—to label medication much more clearly as “not safe to drive with”. Many of the charities are very good at doing that, but many of the pharmaceutical companies bury it in the small print. We are all about prevention, as well as the right punishment when tragic events happen.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Gentleman makes an appropriate point. Individual drivers have personal responsibility: when they get medication, they need to ensure that it does not impair their judgment and that they are not a risk to others on the road. Pharmaceutical companies have a role in that, because they should be printing large warning labels on medication to say: “Do you know this means you are not fit to drive?” GPs have a responsibility to report to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency drivers who are not fit to drive—be it for eyesight, mental health issues or other problems that individuals have—and individuals also have responsibility. Right across the piece, we all need to recognise that there are problems.

I have recently been looking at the issue of more frequent testing for the over-70s, because there have been some publicised cases of older drivers driving up motorways the wrong way and causing death. The evidence from other countries suggests that if mandatory testing is introduced for all over-70s or over-75s and they pass, they think they can go back to driving like they did when they were 45 or 50. It actually has a counter-effect, and it is therefore not always easy to identify simple solutions. There are no simple solutions to this.

We are driving vehicles that can kill people and the responsibility lies with us, as well as with other people and other family members to ensure that we are safe when we get behind the wheel. That is not what we are talking about today; we are talking about criminals who deliberately do things that they ought not to be doing and who cause death and destruction, and grief and bereavement, to decent families across the country. I do not point the finger at the Conservative Government, because dangerous driving has affected all parties and Governments. As a Parliament, we need to ensure that we have the right penalty to fit the crime. If we do not, people outside will feel that they are not being well represented and will be forced to take action themselves.

I believe that we need to approach driving differently—educationally and culturally. Great progress has been made on improving the practical and theoretical driving tests in recent years, but there is more to be done. We must remember that we have among the safest roads in the world—we are usually in the top three countries for safe roads, but we are still killing 1,500 people a year. Dangerous, criminal drivers are hidden among all that, and they should be taken out and identified so that they act as a deterrent to other people who commit the same crimes.

As hon. Members have said, the punishment does not always match the crime at the moment. The petitioners are waiting to hear what the Government intend to do.
Like other hon. Members, I have high regard for the Minister; I look forward to his response, which I hope will give us all some reassurance.

5:37 pm

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, and to follow the incredibly powerful speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). I extend my sympathies to the families here today.

The tragic case of Violet-Grace, like the others we have heard about, starkly illustrates the devastating results that can occur when people recklessly ignore the rules of the road and drive dangerously. That is a reminder of just how important it is to get the law right—but in this context, it is increasingly clear that that is simply no longer the case. The sheer number of members of the public who have thrown their weight behind this campaign shows the strong desire for a law that fits the crime in instances of death by dangerous driving. Sadly, that feeling is known to many of my constituents—in Barnsley East, we have shared in our own tragedy.

According to Library figures, there were 293 traffic accident casualties in my constituency in 2017. Of those, 62 were serious and four fatal. The following year, Brierley’s Jacqueline Wileman was hit and killed by an HGV lorry that had been stolen by four men, who joyrode the vehicle around Barnsley for two days. They damaged cars, injured pedestrians and nearly killed a man, stopping only when they crashed into a house while travelling at a speed at least twice the limit. Sadly, that was not before they hit and killed Jackie on her daily walk through the village. All four men had criminal records, with nearly 100 convictions between them—some were for driving offences, including one for death by dangerous driving. One man pleaded guilty and the other three were also convicted, but with plea deductions and time on licence, all will serve between five and just over six years. That is a huge blow to an already grieving family—Jackie’s life was taken, and their lives have been torn apart since that day.

It goes without saying that Jackie’s family have wondered whether one of those involved would have been free to acquire this second sentence if he had been given a longer and more appropriate sentence for his first conviction for death by dangerous driving. The turmoils that they have gone through is indescribable, and what’s more, the judge who sentenced those responsible agrees. His hands were tied by the 14-year maximum sentence for death by dangerous driving, and he admitted that the increase was unfortunately a matter for Parliament, not for him.

So what are we waiting for? Expert judges, the public—demonstrated by the petition’s support—and MPs across the House all support an increase in the maximum sentence for death by dangerous driving. More importantly, so do the Government, who have the power to increase the maximum sentence. The Minister is aware of the importance of that, having met Jackie’s family and me just a few weeks ago.

I implore the Government not to ignore the cases of Jacqueline Wileman, Violet-Grace, and others tragically killed by dangerous driving. Increase the sentence now, provide a genuine incentive to avoid driving dangerously, and give judges the ability to take those who do so off our streets. We in this House must do everything that we can to ensure that nobody else has to suffer like the families we have spoken of today.

5:40 pm

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I am sorry to have missed the first two minutes, but I was otherwise engaged. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who spoke movingly about the seriousness of this issue, and thank all hon. Friends and hon. Members who have contributed.

I want to look at two issues, starting with numbers, which we have not really talked about. These numbers are a bit dated—I hope the Minister accepts that they will be greater now—but between 2016 and 2017, approximately 90,000 people were banned from driving in this country. That is from a driving population of 33 million, so I estimate that to be 0.002% of the driving population.

To be banned, a driver has to receive 12 points or be convicted of a serious driving offence. My figures state that around 11,000 people are driving with more than 12 points because they have been let off for one reason or another. That is not necessarily part of the Minister’s brief, but it is interesting that people are let off so easily. Anyone who pleads that a conviction will have an injurious effect on their employment can get away with numerous points above 12—that needs to be looked at.

Over the last four years, some 300 people have been caught driving while disqualified in the county of Gloucestershire, while that figure was said to be 38,000 nationally—those figures come from a freedom of information request, so I suppose that they are right. Considerable numbers of people with a ban chance it when they should not be driving. In my view, driving is a privilege, not a right, but those people flagrantly disregard their bans. They go to court again and, presumably, some further action is taken against them.

An awful lot of people drive while disqualified or take huge risks because they are not suitable to be driving for whatever reason. I will not go into the age issue mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), but because of the deficiencies that come with age—that is what happens when we get older—some people should perhaps decide not to drive at all.

We have a huge cultural problem in that very few people are banned, and even when they are, they take risks for whatever reason. We have to change that culture in the same way that we did with drink and drug driving. We have to nail people for those crimes because they are not just risking their own life and limb, but other people’s, too.

My second point is on road safety. I have done a lot of work with my local road safety group, and I am indebted to a gentleman called Charles Pedrick, whom I have mentioned before. He spends hours and hours of his time on local road safety issues, to the extent that he visits parish councils and local road safety groups, a number of which have taken the opportunity to install automatic number plate recognition cameras or use handheld devices.
Those groups found that most people drive reasonably safely and, although they may speed slightly, they are largely within safety parameters. A minority, however, drive exceedingly dangerously—not just occasionally, but regularly. Those people get caught out by the ANPR staff, but there is little that the volunteers can do, and because the activities are voluntary, not even the police can do much.

In my area, the police now go around, knock on the door and say, “We have got you n times. If you carry on in this way, you will cause a serious accident.” Normally, that has the desired effect and people say, “Sorry, I shouldn’t have been doing that. I have learned my lesson.” Sadly, a minority of people flagrantly break the law and do not care at all because they think that they can get away with it. I know that this is not the Minister’s direct responsibility—he will have to talk to the Home Office and elements of law enforcement—but it would be helpful if those voluntary groups were given some traction to stop dangerous drivers.

Unless we stop dangerous drivers at source, they will continue to drive dangerously. It is important that the people who give up their time to monitor those who speed have the satisfaction of something coming of their work. The dangerous drivers will be the ones who kill others, because they do not care. Unless we stop them, the inevitable consequence is that they will kill.

I hear the heartrending stories and I sympathise. We have to stop the dangerous drivers at source. They should lose their licences and go through due process, and until they have learned to drive responsibly, they should not get their licences back. The people who track the dangerous drivers should have the satisfaction that something is being done about the issue. They are frustrated that the police only knock on the door and that is as far as it goes, and that they cannot prosecute because their activities are voluntary.

We know who the dangerous drivers are and we should be doing something about them. I hope that the Minister hears my plea and will get some activity going so that people who drive dangerously cannot get away with it. I hope he has a good response to my plea.

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We know who the dangerous drivers are and we should be doing something about them. I hope that the Minister hears my plea and will get some activity going to make the ANPR information shareable and usable, so that people who drive dangerously cannot get away with it. I hope he has a good response to my plea.

5.48 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the petitioners and the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helén Jones), who introduced the debate. She said that talking about the issue was to step into a world of horror, and she underlined that when she spoke about the heartbreak of families such as that of Violet-Grace. Like the hon. Lady and others, my sympathies go to the families and others who have been similarly affected by such criminality—that is what it is.

The hon. Lady described the selflessness of the organ donation following that incident. That is in stark contrast to the incredible speed, criminality and heartless cowardice of those who perpetrated such a heinous crime.

The hon. Lady went on to talk about the failures of the justice system, which, rightly, has always been different in Scotland, so I will not talk too much about those ins and outs. Regulations are of course set by the UK Government, but the law is different. Comparisons must be made with wherever people drive, however, and lessons must be drawn from the accidents and criminal acts that occur when someone is behind the wheel. Actions should always be taken as a result to make our roads safer.

The hon. Lady talked about the need to deter further offences. She mentioned education campaigns and drink-drive actions, which I will talk about in a minute or two, after I recap the words of hon. Members, first those of the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer). She talked about Rebecca, Glenn and Violet, and all the people who signed the petition. She talked about the balance of the impact on victims versus that on the defendants, giving more details of the terrible events surrounding the incident involving Violet-Grace. She talked about the understandable rise in anger in the communities, and other hon. Members spoke about how their constituents were similarly affected.

The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) told us about the terrible case of Joseph, whose car was put on display outside Parliament for everyone to see. That was a particularly heartbreaking sight to witness. If every vehicle involved in something like that was put outside, we would not be able to contemplate the carnage caused by drivers being irresponsible or—as others have said, and will say many times in future—carrying out criminal acts behind the wheel.

The hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) discussed some serious and troubling crime involving drug use on the roads, and recounted the story of poor little Corey and Caspar. This has been a difficult debate to listen to, hearing about all the personal tragedy involved and thinking about all the issues that go on to wash into families and communities, as well as the devastating impacts on people’s lives outwith the initial incident, but going on, perhaps even for generations afterwards. She talked about how those boys were mown down when they had barely even started their lives.

The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) talked about previous convictions hardly being acknowledged in another tragic case, and the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) discussed van drivers disregarding the law. He discussed the need to change the culture and the minority of people who regularly drive dangerously. Some can be educated, but a shameful minority just ignore that. He also mentioned the help needed for voluntary groups.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) made a powerful contribution, as has been said. He talked right about the need for greater seriousness on road deaths and about the targets required by the UK Government for casualty reduction. He went on to what I will talk about now, which is education, training and of course the law, as well as the cultural change required.

When the hon. Member for Warrington North began the debate, she said that there was no need to delay action. Indeed, there is no need to delay. Things can be done, and they do not have to wait for other bits and pieces to fall into place or for other issues to be dealt with. In Scotland, action has been taken on some of the issues that the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse was talking about. Through Scotland’s road safety
framework to 2020, the Scottish Government are committed to achieving safer road travel. The framework sets out Scotland’s first ever national casualty reduction targets. Will the Minister let us know whether he intends to follow that lead in this instance?

The SNP Scottish Government have taken a wide range of actions to reduce road accidents in Scotland, including cutting the blood alcohol limit and introducing drug-driving limits in 2019. I will give more detail on that in a moment. Action has resulted in the number of people killed or injured on Scotland’s roads reaching the lowest level since records began.

In Scotland, by nature of our geography, road safety is an everyday issue. Most of us use the roads every day as drivers, passengers, cyclists or pedestrians, and for many it is the main way of getting to their jobs—for some, it is doing those jobs. The Scottish Government and the road safety partners are committed to the outcome of safer road travel in Scotland for everyone. To that end, the Scottish Government produced a framework for improving road safety for the next decade. The framework describes for Scotland the road safety vision, aims and commitments, including those targets for road death reductions that I mentioned.

The Scottish Government will also seek to establish a “Drive for Life” culture, which will seek to influence young people’s attitudes to road safety and future driving behaviour before they get behind the wheel. They will conduct a public debate on young driver issues, including graduated licences and additional training, and encourage and support the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents Scotland with the formation of the Scottish Occupational Road Safety Alliance in order to raise employers’ awareness of the need to have a policy for managing occupational road risk. They will also investigate ways to promote and facilitate initiatives relating to further training for older drivers, including consideration of incentives for that.

The hon. Member for Warrington North, when discussing those shocking and desperate acts, also talked about the need to reduce accidents. Specifically, it is important to reflect on the legal blood alcohol limit in Scotland, which has been reduced from 80 mg to 50 mg per 100 ml, lower than the rest of the UK. Incidentally, England, Wales and Northern Ireland still have the 80 mg limit, which is the joint highest in Europe. In Scotland, making that change saw a reduction of 7.6% in drink-driving in 2015 compared with the previous year.

At that time, Transport Minister Humza Yousaf also announced plans for a cycling taskforce, the main aim of which will be to drive forward ambitious cycling infrastructure such as segregated cycle paths. Although dangerous driving is rightly the focus of this debate, we must not forget that other road users are in danger on the road not only from dangerous drivers, but from other irresponsible driving behaviour.

The SNP MSP Gillian Martin introduced a Member’s Bill in the Scottish Parliament to require seat belts to be fitted in all dedicated home-to-school transport in Scotland. The Bill received Royal Assent in December 2017. Furthermore, in 2019, the Scottish Government introduced drug-driving offences and, by the end of this financial year, we will have spent more than £8.2 billion on Scotland’s motorways and trunk road network to improve road safety, including the M8 missing link, the Queensferry crossing and—this one is important in my constituency—average speed cameras on the A9. If the Minister is looking for an example of something that has changed driver behaviour dramatically, those average speed cameras are now welcomed by the community, which saw the difference they made in adjusting the behaviour both of locals using the road regularly and of visitors.

There has been excellent progress, but there is always more to do. We are not content that rates are at the lowest since records began; we have to do more to maintain that improvement. The Scottish Government have been working with the Welsh Assembly on the casualty reduction targets. Official figures revealed that we have had a drop, but we intend to continue the improvement work.

I hope that the Minister will answer the questions about the legal issues that have been raised by hon. colleagues. He will take notice of the passion of the petitioners, the heartache of the families and the pleas of hon. Members in this Chamber and from all parts of Parliament who want action to prevent further road deaths and to tackle those who deliberately flout the law, affecting people’s lives in many ways.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak, Mrs Moon. I look forward to hearing about the action that will be taken, and whether the Minister will take into account the lessons that may be learned from Scotland.

5.59 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I thank all hon. Members across the House who have spoken in this important debate and made some powerful points. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) did justice to this debate by setting a substantial tone for what I hope will be a serious but productive conversation.

I pay tribute to the petitioners—the parents, friends and family of Violet-Grace—for the strength and courage that they have shown in what must be the most difficult period. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) set out those circumstances in her emotional speech, which no one could help but be moved by. Hon. Members from across the House went through some truly horrific and tragic personal cases that they have had to deal with. I look to my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), as we in Bradford are no different—some truly tragic cases have come to us.

I pay tribute to road safety campaigners such as Brake, which my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) referred to. I pay tribute to the campaign run by the Telegraph and Argus in my district and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South. It has led calls locally not just for much stronger sentences for dangerous drivers and those causing death by dangerous driving, but for increasing resources for the police, to enable them to crack down on dangerous driving—I will substantiate that point a little later.

Those who drive dangerously and sit behind the wheel while under the influence of drink or drugs do so with no thought for the consequences of their actions. They care little for the lifetime of grief and misery that they can end up causing the friends and families of those they kill with their reckless actions. While they...
never set out with the intention to kill, they conduct themselves behind the wheel in a way that makes it a very real possibility. Despite the life-shattering consequences of death as a result of dangerous driving or careless driving under the influence, the sentence that such an offence attracts, in reality, is far from what the public expect or want. As we have heard, in many cases those who have killed through dangerous driving receive a custodial sentence of just a few years.

The offences of causing death by dangerous driving and causing death by careless driving while under the influence of drink or drugs should be treated with the severity that they deserve, to match the consequences of those actions. However, we must be careful not to tie the hands of the judiciary too tightly, as we must respect its independence and ability to view and judge cases based on the evidence and facts that are brought before it. We must give it the power and flexibility that it needs to pass sentences that fit the crime of which the defendants are convicted.

Because of the backlash, referred to by some hon. Members, over short sentences imposed for such serious crimes, in 2014 the Government rightly stated their intention to launch a consultation on the matter. Many hon. Members have gone through the chronology, but I will look at the pertinent points. It took a further two years for the consultation to be published, and a further year for the Government to publish their response to the findings of the consultation, despite the fact that within days it had become one of the consultations most widely responded to that the Ministry of Justice had ever issued.

Despite being four years on from the Government’s statement of their desire to increase the maximum sentence available to judges, we are still no closer to the legislation that would bring such a desire into effect, as many hon. Members have said. Now we hear that they will bring forward legislation when parliamentary time can be found; they have stated as much to many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who is not in this debate.

The Government have used that excuse for the past two years, but the point has been made that time has been abundant for them to bring forward that legislation, and they have refused to do so. Perhaps the Minister will explain why they have left the words and promises they gave to victims’ friends and family to ring hollow. We want those drivers never to be able to take another road, because of a near-certain chance of being caught. Evidence shows that increased levels of road policing can reduce traffic violations and road casualties. We all know that prevention is better than the cure; we do not want to be in a position of sentencing those found guilty of causing death by dangerous driving, because by then it is too late—the irreversible damage has been done and another life has been needlessly lost. Instead, we want those who would otherwise drive dangerously to be deterred from ever setting out on the road, because of a near-certain chance of being caught. We want those drivers to never to be able to take another life.

In addition to putting police back on our streets and our roads, we need to look at cases of dangerous driving where, thankfully, there is no death or injury, to look at what is driving people to make such foolish decisions behind the wheel. Such offences may rightly warrant a custodial sentence depending on their severity, but they certainly warrant much greater rehabilitative efforts to make sure that the next time a dangerous driver gets behind the wheel, they do not repeat their mistakes, drive dangerously and end up killing someone.

Those killed by dangerous drivers or careless drivers under the influence of drink or drugs deserve real justice. Their friends and family deserve to see punishment for those whose reckless and dangerous behaviour has left huge holes in their lives.

6.9 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, but a greater pleasure to thank the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for opening the debate with a sensitive and sensible speech. She used her experience in the law to helpfully give us a pen-portrait of the evolution of driving legislation in England and Wales. She was right to draw the House’s attention to the way the law has evolved in this area.

When we take the steering wheel of a car or a vehicle, it means that we assume a responsibility to any passengers in the vehicle, to other vehicle users, to pedestrians and to wider society. Driving law rightly criminalises what we would regard as unacceptable behaviour. It also rightly draws distinctions between types of behaviour. I readily accept that the law gets into difficulty where we have a combination of extreme culpability and blameworthiness in the manner of driving, and the extreme level of harm that can be caused by that degree of bad driving. We now call it dangerous driving; the hon. Member for Warrington North referred to it as reckless driving, as it was known prior to the 1991 reform. I have grappled with that difficulty—not just as a Member of Parliament, serving my constituents, but as a professional and a member of the criminal Bar, having been called upon to prosecute these cases, as well as in my latter incarnation as Her Majesty’s Solicitor General.

Before coming on to those examples, I add my own tribute to the families of the victims of these horrendous crimes who have come here today, have supported petitions calling for reform and have, with extraordinary dignity,
exemplified all that is good in our society and positive in our world, despite the horrendous experiences they have gone through.

The offence of causing death by dangerous driving is a particularly unusual, sensitive and difficult scenario because all of us, in this room or outside, could suddenly find ourselves in the same situation as the families here today and the thousands of others who are not here but share the same experiences. Suddenly, without any warning, they are drawn into an entirely different world: a world of police and criminal justice, of procedure, of court proceedings that they never expected they would become involved with in a month of Sundays. That can only add to the sense of loss, grief and suffering that the families endure, and continue to endure—often for many years after the incident itself. It is a set of circumstances that all of us struggle to put into words and to come to terms with fully. I still struggle now, even though it is probably a quarter of a century since my first direct contact with a family who have suffered in this way.

Frankly, there is nothing that a court or this House can do to right the wrong that has been done to such families. Having said that, merely acknowledging that is never going to be enough. That is why we, as parliamentarians and legislators, must do all we can not just to mitigate the circumstances or to try to create a degree of justice, but to send a wider message to society that the system supports those who suffer, works in their interest and at least tries to deliver the highest degree of justice.

I was struck by the conversations I had this afternoon. I am grateful to the hon. Members for Warrington North and for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) for allowing me to come and meet the families. It was extremely useful and informative, and I felt the better for having heard what they had to say. I pay warm, meaningful and deep tribute to them.

To directly answer the question put by the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), I should say that the Government have not changed their view about the need to reform the law of causing death by dangerous driving. It is our settled intention to increase the minimum term. The Court of Appeal did not accept my submissions. Therefore we are back in proceedings that they never expected they would become involved with in a month of Sundays. That can only add to the sense of loss, grief and suffering that the families endure, and continue to endure—often for many years after the incident itself. It is a set of circumstances that all of us struggle to put into words and to come to terms with fully. I still struggle now, even though it is probably a quarter of a century since my first direct contact with a family who have suffered in this way.

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I was struck by the conversations I had this afternoon. I am grateful to the hon. Members for Warrington North and for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) for allowing me to come and meet the families. It was extremely useful and informative, and I felt the better for having heard what they had to say. I pay warm, meaningful and deep tribute to them.

To directly answer the question put by the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), I should say that the Government have not changed their view about the need to reform the law of causing death by dangerous driving. It is our settled intention to increase the minimum term. The Court of Appeal did not accept my submissions. Therefore we are back in proceedings that they never expected they would become involved with in a month of Sundays. That can only add to the sense of loss, grief and suffering that the families endure, and continue to endure—often for many years after the incident itself. It is a set of circumstances that all of us struggle to put into words and to come to terms with fully. I still struggle now, even though it is probably a quarter of a century since my first direct contact with a family who have suffered in this way.

I was struck by the conversations I had this afternoon. I am grateful to the hon. Members for Warrington North and for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) for allowing me to come and meet the families. It was extremely useful and informative, and I felt the better for having heard what they had to say. I pay warm, meaningful and deep tribute to them.
I want to deal with each, in turn, of the excellent contributions that we have heard today.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I wanted to intervene before the Minister moves away from his general points. I pay due regard to his expertise as a former Solicitor General, to his explanations about complicated interpretation and definitions, and to what he said about the Court of Appeal not accepting what the Government were trying to do. However, given that he accepts that there would be unanimous support for Government legislation on this issue, can he give an indication of how long it will be before the Government come forward with proposals for legislative scrutiny?

Robert Buckland: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a date. That is a matter of bitter regret to me, but today’s debate will be used as an important platform to indicate the degree of concern, impatience and anger that people now feel about the delay. It certainly reinforces me in my determination to get the matter sorted out. As I have already mentioned, my ministerial and professional experience has led me to the firm conclusion that to deal with the full criminality of the gravest crimes under the definition in question, judges need that space—the ability to use their discretion.

Before I deal with individual speeches, it would be right for me to dwell for a moment on the important submissions that hon. Members have made to me, the accounts that family members have given me of their experience of the system, and my concern on hearing about aspects of the use of the victim personal statement. It would be invidious for me to intrude on proceedings where I have not read all the evidence, or seen the transcript, but I would be concerned if the reason for the editing of a victim personal statement was that somehow it would upset an offender. That seems a wholly irrelevant and inadequate explanation to give to anyone, legally qualified or not.

Surely what should drive proceedings is relevance. Having read hundreds of victim personal statements, lawyers and court practitioners are well able to distinguish when an opinion given in the statement might take matters no further; but a real sense of the effect on a victim comes through a well written and well prepared VPS. Since the introduction of the system, police officers have become better and better at drawing out from a victim or their family the sense of loss and bereavement—the whole effect of the crime on their lives and the lives of their loved ones. Those documents are important and must form a key part of the decision making in sentencing.

I was heartened to hear some families’ praise for the way individual judges dealt with each case with sensitivity, care and precision. We are fortunate that almost universally we are well served by our judiciary, who find such cases particularly difficult. I have spoken to many of them, and they feel at the end of a case a sense of inadequacy about what cannot be undone, and what cannot be restored to the families and loved ones of those who have died.

I thank the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston, who made a significant contribution to the debate, not just for her speech, but for her persistence in working with my predecessor, and with me, to ensure that her constituents’ point of view and cause are heard. Her contribution today was particularly important in that respect, and I thank her for it. She asked several questions—in particular about manslaughter. She is absolutely right to talk about the existence of that offence, which has long been part of our criminal law and remains an available option for prosecutors in certain circumstances. Those circumstances would involve cases of the highest gravity. Case law is clear that manslaughter would be charged where the facts disclosed a very high risk of death to another person—a type of offending at the very high end of culpability.

That is why the offence of causing death by dangerous driving has been a very important addition to the criminal law. It has made the test somewhat more straightforward, as opposed to that used in manslaughter. I can therefore see huge merit in marrying up the sentence level—a maximum of life imprisonment—with the advantages provided by using the test for causing death by dangerous driving. Those sorts of offences should not become some sort of legal minefield or maze. They are difficult enough for everybody involved without adding those extra complications. That is why, although the offence of manslaughter is, of course, available and is used, we must understand that it is hedged around with particular tests that mean that it is not always the most straightforward case to prosecute.

I was asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) about a particularly harrowing case involving his constituents, to whom I pay tribute and who, as we heard from him, have been through unimaginable pain. He asked about the terribly distressing circumstances involving the death of a child yet to be born. He asked me to consider what can be done to reflect the loss of such a child in traumatic circumstances. He rightly anticipated the argument that I would put to him, that there is a danger in changing the law relating to the position of unborn children. Consequences for the autonomy of mothers and the ability to take otherwise lawful action must be considered carefully before attempting to change the law.

However, that is a matter that I would be happy to discuss further with my hon. Friend; it seems to me that the real issue is how to take into account the full harm and the full sense of the impact upon a family in those circumstances. We come back to the matter of harm; paragraph 3 of the current sentencing guidelines, which are now some 11 years old, says of causing death by driving:

“Because the principal harm done by these offences...is an element of the offence, the factor that primarily determines the starting point for sentence is the culpability of the offender.”

That gives us a clear indication of where the law starts from on these matters.

James Heappey: I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend the Minister of State for his reply, and I welcome the opportunity to meet him to discuss this further. I simply reflect on the fact that, whatever the sentencing guidelines may say now, three years and seven months for life-changing injuries to mother and daughter, and for the loss altogether of a 26-week-old baby as yet unborn, suggests to me that the current guidance is nowhere near adequate, or does not apply well enough in those sorts of situations.
Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend makes an important point; I am perhaps illustrating in my response the struggle, the tension and the difficulty that exist here in fully reflecting the harm and the loss caused as a result of that particular course of driving. That is why I am firm in my conclusion and the Government’s conclusion that to deal with those very serious offences, which come to the top in terms of not only culpability, but harm, judges need more headroom.

I have already thanked the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) for her important contribution. She quite rightly talked about a case involving her constituent and his family. I thank her for drawing to our attention a powerful example of how the current law is not providing the degree of justice that so many families look to the system to provide. I look forward to working with her on this issue in the months ahead.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) made an important and interesting contribution to the debate, talking about the position on road safety. He rightly reminded us that there is no room for complacency on this issue and that, while this country is among the safest in the world when it comes to road traffic incidents, there are still far too many incidents that are simply avoidable.

It is important to note that, although the hon. Gentleman says they have plateaued, road deaths have continued to fall over the past 12 years—the reduction in fatalities was some 39% in the years since 2007—but I accept that that is almost always as a result of other initiatives that have been taken, rather than better driver awareness. We have safer infrastructure measures; we have new vehicle technologies; we have better hazard perception testing; we have better trauma care, where lives are often saved that would not have been some years ago; and, yes, we have a sense of shifting social attitudes, which I am glad of—we all welcome it.

Hon. Members have referred to the fact that when it comes to drink-driving, what would have been acceptable a generation ago is no longer acceptable at all within society. That is all welcome, but we still experienced more than 26,000 deaths or serious injuries on our roads in 2017, of which 48 were young children. Too many of those incidents involved criminal behaviour, whether dangerous or careless driving, or failing to stop at the scene, and every avoidable death is one too many.

It is hard to see how the criminal justice system can ever adequately compensate for the loss and grief felt by families in these dreadful circumstances. Since 2012, however, we have seen a greater proportion of drivers who have caused fatalities through careless or dangerous driving being sentenced to immediate custody; it increased from 53% in 2012 to 60% last year. We have also seen an increase in the average length of custodial sentence for those offences.

Clearly, the courts are in some measure reflecting societal attitudes and the change in attitude that we have seen toward those serious driving offences. That is reflected by the number of people who signed the petition that prompted today’s important debate and the fact that, as we have heard, the consultation that took place was one of the most significant undertaken in recent years, because the number of responses was considerable.

As a result, not only was this proposal put forward, but two other key proposals were accepted. The first was to increase the maximum penalty for causing death by careless driving while under the influence of drink or drugs from 14 years to life imprisonment, and the other was to provide a stronger response to offences of careless driving resulting in serious injury. We propose to deal with that by introducing a new offence of causing serious injury by careless driving. It will sit alongside the existing offence of causing serious injury by dangerous driving, which was introduced in 2012.

I confess to a sense of frustration at the incremental nature of the way we deal with driving offences. If I were able to wave the proverbial magic wand, I would like to see a thoroughgoing codification of the law to make it readily and easily understandable, but I recognise that I cannot do that and that time is not on our side. Therefore, the incremental approach is the best way forward if we are to achieve real change for society, and for the families and victims who have been affected.

I was talking about the contribution of the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, and I was particularly interested in his discussion of Brake’s helpful and important work in this field. I have probably partially answered his question about a review. Tempting though it is to use that as a cloak for inaction, that would not be good enough. I bear in mind what he says about the sentencing gap caused by the gradation between careless and dangerous driving. I do not have an easy answer about that.

Returning to what the hon. Member for Warrington North said, I do not advocate introducing an offence of reckless driving—a subjective test offence, which might better reflect the gradation in individual driving standards, but which could make the test more difficult in terms of actually proving an offence. This is a vexed question that needs to be debated properly, and I thank the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse for raising it. I do not want it to be used as a reason for further delay.

The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) made an important and powerful contribution on the case of Jacqueline Wileman, which she has put to me before in the Chamber. I am grateful to her for having brought Jacqueline’s family to meet me some weeks ago. What they said to me was powerful, informed, measured and dignified, and I pay tribute to her and her family for campaigning in this area.

That was an important case because the prosecutors used the principle of joint enterprise to bring to book those who were not actually driving but who were part of the course of conduct in that heavy goods vehicle. That sensible use of the law will hopefully send a wider message to prosecutors that, just because an individual might not be at the wheel, it does not mean that he or she is not responsible for what happens in the vehicle and the consequences of those unlawful and criminal acts. I am grateful to the hon. Lady.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) made a distinctive contribution in which he rightly talked about the number of people disqualified from driving. He asked about discretionary disqualification. It was certainly always my understanding, from practice, that to achieve an exemption under a discretionary disqualification, you had to show exceptional hardship, and, of course, beyond the ordinary inconveniences of not being able to drive. If that test is not being applied stringently, that is a
matter of concern to me. It was intended not to be some cheap get-out clause, but to reflect those exceptional cases where there might be real hardship—usually not to the driver, but to people who might depend upon that person.

The hon. Gentleman made a general point about impunity and rightly prayed in aid the important work of local voluntary groups in speed watch schemes. I am a qualified speed watch operator, and I have joined many local groups in my constituency to patrol roads of particular concern, with some good effect, I am glad to say, where the behaviour of drivers has changed, with greater forethought given to the quality or otherwise of their driving, particularly in residential areas.

I take the hon. Gentleman’s point about consequences and how to better use the information obtained from devices in speed watch schemes to improve conduct and enforcement. That information is usable, and I am happy to talk further on that with him, and perhaps with some of our local police and crime commissioners, to see how we can achieve further crime reduction in our neighbouring police constabulary areas. I readily take up that invitation for us to work together.

The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) rightly drew the House’s attention to the work of the Scottish Government on reducing road casualties and on dealing further with the offence of driving while over the alcohol limit. I am glad to say that, on the south side of the border, work continues within Government to pursue the strategy set out in the 2015 road safety statement, which drew together a number of important safety measures. That statement resulted in a number of successful bids to the safer roads fund from right across the country; increased penalties for drivers who use handheld mobile phones while driving; and—I think rightly—learner drivers being allowed to go on our motorways, thereby obtaining vital experience before qualifying, rather than leaving it until after qualifying, which I always thought was an odd way to train new drivers.

That road safety statement is refreshed and improved upon periodically; this work is ongoing. As always in the sphere of criminal law, before and after devolution, much we have learned from the Scottish criminal justice system has been used here. While I cannot make any commitments relating to drink-driving legislation on behalf of my colleagues from the Department for Transport, we watch with great interest the effect of those changes on behaviour within the population. I note the figures that the hon. Gentleman cited on the reduction of drink-driving incidents, which I found extremely informative.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The Minister mentions the road safety statement, which was welcome and made a difference. It is refreshed occasionally, but that is now overdue by at least six months. The Department for Transport was supposed to produce it, and the reshuffle has delayed it even further. Perhaps he can have a quiet word with his colleague at Transport to find out when it will arrive.

Robert Buckland: My colleague will hear that. I am told that the statement is due later this year, so they had better crack on with it.

Jim Fitzpatrick: It was due at Easter. It is now summer.

Robert Buckland: The point is made and understood, which I can say because I can make promises on behalf of my colleagues. I am sure they would do the same for me. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), whose measured and sensible remarks drew together the debate in an informative way. He rightly reminded us that this issue goes beyond party politics and should bring people together in a constructive tone. That is certainly what I want to do, with him and other Members, to make the sort of progress that all our constituents expect.

I bitterly regret that I am not able to give hon. Members that all-important timescale, but the force of the speeches today leaves me and the Government in no doubt about the high priority placed on this much-needed reform—in fact, I would say it is the highest priority. The force of the argument put forward reinforces my sincere wish and drive to bring forward this reform at the earliest possible opportunity. Let us work together to do that.

I once again thank all right hon. and hon. Members for the part they have played in making this a wide-ranging and reflective debate. I hope it struck the appropriate tone not only for the families of those we have lost, but for everyone who rightly wants to see that higher degree of justice for offences of this appalling nature, because they are committed against us all.

6.48 pm

Helen Jones: I thank all those who have spoken in the debate. They have raised a number of issues about road safety, changing the culture and the treatment of victims. However, there is one thing on which we all agree, and that is the need to increase the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving to life. The Minister says that he cannot give us a timetable for that at the moment, and he wants us—rightly—to work together on getting it through, but I say to him that it is the Government who have to introduce a Bill. This is in the Government’s hands. If they introduced a short Bill simply to raise the maximum sentence, it could go through the House in a day, I am convinced. If the Government tried to include in it other things or, heaven forbid, to make it what the Clerks call a Christmas tree Bill—one on which the Government could hang anything—there would clearly be amendments tabled to it.

I urge the Minister to show the relatives of victims not words, but action. Bring forward the Bill and bring it forward soon, and it will have a clear, unimpeded passage through the House, I am certain. That is what people want to hear from him; that is what needs to be done. If he has been given no timescale for this, he needs to go and have a word with the Government’s business managers and get a timetable. We can all agree that that needs to be done and it needs to be done swiftly. That is no less than the relatives of victims deserve and no more than most people in today’s debate have asked for. For heaven’s sake, let us just get on and do it.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.
That this House has considered e-petition 236952 relating to dangerous driving.

6.50 pm
Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 9 July 2019

[Mr Adrian Bailey in the Chair]

Active Travel

9.30 am

Robert Courts (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for active travel and local walking and cycling infrastructure plans.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I am delighted to have been granted this important debate on active travel, and I am particularly pleased to see so many Members from both sides of the House present to take part in it. I declare at the outset that I am a long-standing member of Cycling UK and a member of the all-party parliamentary cycling group. I also sit on the Transport Committee, and I am delighted to see our Chair, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), present. We are currently preparing a report on active travel, and although I am not speaking on behalf of the Committee this morning, I suspect there will be strong agreement.

I have been a keen cyclist for many years for leisure reasons, but in recent years I have noticed a gradual but significant change in the way in which cycling is viewed in this country. No longer are we cycling and walking just as a way of getting from A to B. Increasingly, cycling is seen as a crucial element of our approach to not just transport and alleviating congestion, but town planning, public health, obesity, mental wellbeing, air quality, the environment and, of course, climate change. The range of benefits that active travel provides forms the basis of the debate and of my reasons for urging the Government, through the Minister—it is very good to see him in his place—to do more to promote cycling and walking in our cities, towns and villages.

John Howell (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned town planning. There is a crucial point on which the Government could be helpful. His constituency is very similar to mine: it has a lot of footpaths going across what is basically agricultural land. Does he agree that the Government should insist that, when development takes place, those footpaths are not allowed to be extinguished, so that we keep the network that allows us to walk and cycle?

Robert Courts: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and neighbour for making that point. He is right. Those of us who are lawyers know that expunging a footpath is, rightly, one of the hardest things to do in the law. Footpaths are protected, and I agree that they must remain so when new developments are built, to ensure that our latticework of footpaths continues to exist. I would extend that to bridleways as well, which similarly have an historical provenance. I ask the House to bear in mind that, although we tend to think of cycling and walking in the context of the strategy I mentioned, horse riders in areas such as mine and my hon. Friend’s are also vulnerable, and ought to be thought about in the context of active travel as well.

Anneliese Dodds (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent case. On planning, he will be aware that the bidding process for the housing infrastructure fund is quite unclear on whether cycling infrastructure will be funded or is just viewed as a cost. Does he agree that, ultimately, infrastructure should be viewed as something that adds to the attractiveness of schemes, and should be favoured within them?

Robert Courts: I could not agree more—the hon. Lady makes an excellent point. The housing infrastructure fund is an important part of Government funding, and I would like cycle paths to be included. I am conscious that a great many Members wish to speak, but if time allows I will mention the B4044 community path from Eynsham in my constituency to Botley, which, although not in her constituency, is in the county she represents.

I have supported the path from Eynsham for many years; in fact, one of the first events I attended as a Member of Parliament was when I cycled along it on a cold winter’s morning, accompanied by many others in yellow jackets. As it stands, it is quite a dangerous little lane to cycle on, but the potential is enormous for Eynsham, and even for going as far as Witney—there is a cycle path along the A40, which I used only this weekend when I went out to stretch my legs. Increased housing growth will be unlocked, facilitated and made sustainable by the use of cycling paths, so I could not agree more with the hon. Lady.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): We also have a lot of urban footpaths and ginnels. Would it not make sense to have funds for signposting, so that people know how to get away from the main routes and use the often hidden, beautiful routes to get from A to B? Often it is the lack of signposting that prevents people from using all those opportunities.

Robert Courts: That is an excellent point. In rural areas such as mine, there are often such signposts. One of the joys of living in the country is that people can see but not on those routes. I recommend to everyone the wonderful Ordnance Survey maps, which record everything down almost to the inch. However, in those areas where signposts are missing, I urge local authorities to look at installing them, because they make it much easier for those who wish to use footpaths.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): We talk about infrastructure in urban areas, but one of the big complaints I receive is about infrastructure in rural areas. We are trying to encourage more children to cycle to school. It is not an easy problem to solve, but surely we should spend some money on infrastructure in rural areas to help children to get to school.

Robert Courts: That is an excellent point. Again, I entirely agree. I represent a largely rural area, although it has significant market towns. Given the obesity crisis in this country and how we would like children, in particular, to build exercise into their day-to-day life, it is better if infrastructure is in place that allows them to get to and from school easily, quickly and safely. Again, I am conscious of how many people wish to speak, but if I have time I will mention a cycle path on the A44 that is off the road and therefore entirely safe for people going from Oxford up to Woodstock. Confidence is increased if parents know that their children are going to and from school on a path that is off the road.

I received is about infrastructure in rural areas. We are trying to encourage more children to cycle to school. It is not an easy problem to solve, but surely we should spend some money on infrastructure in rural areas to help children to get to school.
Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): My hon. Friend is being incredibly generous in giving way, and I congratulate him on securing the debate. Most of the funding the Government make available for infrastructure investment is through the ambitious cities programme, which means that rural areas such as Cornwall and many others cannot access funding for cycling infrastructure. Will he join me in pressing the Minister, as we approach the comprehensive spending review, to enable us to build on the huge success of the ambitious cities programme with an ambitious towns programme?

Robert Courts: One of the main points of my speech is that I would like the comprehensive spending review to ensure that active travel is built into our infrastructure plans for the future, for urban areas, towns and, of course, rural areas such as those that many of us represent.

I will deal quickly with some of the benefits of active travel, though I suspect the House will not need a great deal of persuading. Active travel is not only safe, convenient and attractive, but a cost-effective way of delivering the benefits we would all like to see. Cycling and walking are healthy, enjoyable and flexible ways of making a local journey, or a longer journey in combination with a car or a train, and enable us to take cars off the road wherever possible. For wider society, active travel is clean, safe and attractive. It reduces the environmental costs, such as the congestion that I spoke of, reducing air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

Investment in active travel is also cost-effective for the taxpayer, which I am sure the Minister is aware of and will celebrate. The Department for Transport estimates that investment in cycling and walking yields on average £5.50 of benefits for every £1 invested. That is a significantly higher benefit-to-cost ratio than many large road and rail schemes, which tend to have benefit-to-cost ratios of between £1.50 to £1 and £2 to £1.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I am a keen walker. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that some of the biggest benefits for those who cycle and walk are the personal health benefits, particularly in today’s climate of childhood and adult obesity? The active travel he suggests, and which the Government will hopefully promote, will actively target obesity among young people and adults.

Robert Courts: I could not agree more. The health benefits are some of the most important. I started my speech by saying that there are many benefits, and health benefits—both physical and mental—are pre-eminent among them. I am sure we all realise that, as people who do jobs that are sometimes slightly stressful and sedentary as well. Speaking as a keen hiker and cyclist, there is nothing quite like getting on a bike or putting on hiking boots at the weekend and shaking off some of the stress. It certainly kills a number of birds with one stone.

I am delighted that the Government recognised the benefits of active travel with the adoption of the cycling and walking investment strategy in 2017, which set out their ambition to make cycling and walking the natural choice for shorter journeys, or as part of longer journeys, by 2040. It sets out aims and targets for 2025, including doubling cycling activity from the 0.8 billion cycle stages made in 2013 to 1.6 billion in 2025. I understand that the Government have commissioned research into how the strategy’s aims for 2025 can be met and that the research, when published later this year, is likely to suggest that significant additional investment in cycling and walking will be needed to meet the targets.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): I completely concur with the hon. Gentleman. Eastbourne is a town that has been built up over many years. We have a wonderful cycling group called Bespoke, which I and the council very much support. We want to put in more cycling infrastructure, but the challenge is simply lack of funds. Towns such as Eastbourne will need Government funding to do what they really want to do in support of cycling. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Robert Courts: The hon. Gentleman makes a valuable point, which is very much in line with my points. Investment in cycling and walking in England has trebled since 2010. We spent roughly £2 per person annually in 2010; the figure is now around £7.50. That is a significant increase, but it is still some way behind the world’s most cycle-friendly countries. The Dutch, for example, invest around £26 per person annually in cycling and have been doing so for around 40 years. That is probably the crux of the hon. Gentleman’s point, and it may explain why 26% of trips are cycled in the Netherlands, compared with less than 2% in Britain. We are looking to address that strategic funding over the months and years ahead, but that will not happen overnight. Realistically, it may not even happen by 2025, but we need to start moving in the right direction. I ask the Government to use the forthcoming spending review period to increase investment in active travel. No doubt the Minister will address that point in due course.

It is not just a matter of central Government funding. When I was at the Bar and working in the centre of Oxford, I used to travel from where I live in Bladon, near Woodstock, down the A44, which, as I mentioned, has a wonderful, almost completely off-road cycle path. I was struck by the fact that it was not as well used as it ought to have been. A lot of the difficulty is in what happens at the other end. I make no criticism of where I used to work, but the difficulty arises when a cyclist gets off their bike. In my case, working at the Bar, if I needed to go to court or to meet clients, I needed to be in a presentable state. That is not easy if there are no adequate changing facilities at the other end. Some organisations provide those facilities, which is wonderful—I know that Oxfordshire County Council does—but we need to see more investment in the public and the private sectors. Once cycling facilities are in, that is all well and good, but people also need the facilities at the other end so that they can make themselves fit and ready for the working day.

The cycling and walking strategy also encourages local authorities to develop what are called local cycling and walking infrastructure plans for high-quality cycling and walking networks and then to prioritise schemes to deliver them. The Government have supported 46 councils so far to develop their local infrastructure plans, but there is no dedicated funding stream to help them to do so. Without that, local authorities may not be able to plan and develop comprehensive cycling and walking networks with any confidence. I ask the Department for Transport to work with the Treasury at the spending review to develop a dedicated funding stream to enable local authorities to implement ambitious local cycling and walking infrastructure plans.
That appeal is part of the joined-up thinking that we hear so much about in the House and that we would like to see more of. I ask the Minister to press for greater joined-up thinking to ensure that all Departments are pulling in the same direction. I make that appeal with particular passion, because of the B4044 community path I alluded to earlier. I want to mention it in a little more detail, and I have raised it repeatedly with the Minister’s predecessor and the Secretary of State.

The B4044 is a key route between Eynsham, which will experience significant housing growth in the coming years, and Oxford. The path is the brainchild of Bike Safe, a passionate group of local cyclists who are campaigning for high-quality, safe, local cycle infrastructure. I commend the group’s passion and drive, and will never forget my visit to the project in its early stages. The group has done very well in giving it such a high profile. I ask the Minister to work with Oxfordshire County Council to explore what can be done to deliver this crucial project at the earliest possible opportunity, either through the housing infrastructure fund or as a stand-alone project.

I also want to mention the Hanborough pedestrian bridge in the context of integrated transport networks. It is all very well having great train services, roads that are quick and easy, and cycle paths, but they must link up. We need people to be able to get on their bikes and get to the train station. They may want to get on a bus to get to the train station. When they get there, they want the trains to be regular and reliable. We need to ensure that the journey from home to workplace can be undertaken on public transport and in an integrated fashion.

The Hanborough pedestrian bridge is a good example, and I fully support it. It has been energetically and admirably pursued by Hanborough Parish Council and will provide safer access for pedestrians and cyclists seeking to get to Hanborough station, which is vital to my constituency because it serves not just the villages of Long Hanborough and Church Hanborough, but also Witney and wider West Oxfordshire. People need to be able to get on the cycle path and the footpath safely at that narrow pinch point over the bridge, and they also need to be able to leave their bike at the train station if there is not enough space to take it on the train.

It is also vital that the schemes we are discussing are safe for all users—I think particularly of those who are visually impaired or who have other restrictions on their travel. Any infrastructure that is put in ought to cater for all users in the community, including the vulnerable.

I welcome the Government’s ambition to promote active travel, but I want to see further action to ensure that the encouraging words are joined by decisive action that will enable the targets of the cycling and walking investment strategy to be met and then enable us to go further still. That will require three things, which I look forward to hearing the Minister address in his remarks.

First, the Government should use the forthcoming spending review period to increase investment in active travel, with an eye to meeting, and if possible exceeding, the Government’s own targets. Secondly, I ask the Department for Transport to work with the Treasury to develop a dedicated funding stream that will enable local authorities to implement ambitious local cycling and walking infrastructure plans to develop world-class local active travel networks. Thirdly, the Department for Transport should work across Departments, particularly with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, to ensure that its ambitions for active travel are supported and not undermined by other Departments. That way we can have an integrated strategy within Government to provide us with an integrated transport strategy in West Oxfordshire and all our constituencies.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Back-Bench speakers, I calculated prior to the debate that I could allow Back Benchers 2.66 recurring minutes each to speak. Having negotiated with the Front-Bench speakers, I think I can allow a hard three minutes for each speech. I also make it clear that, as Chair, I cannot interfere with the democratic right of a speaker to take interventions. However, I can exercise my democratic right to put any interveners at the end of the queue of speakers. Will speakers please bear that in mind in order to facilitate the debate? I call Ruth Cadbury.

9.49 am

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Bailey. I did not see myself as a Front Bencher; I am very much a Back Bencher.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): You are a Back Bencher who speaks first.

Ruth Cadbury: Thank you. I welcome this debate. I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on cycling, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts), who introduced the debate, as well as the Backbench Business Committee, which allowed it.

I will try to make points that others might not make, which is difficult as I am speaking at the beginning of the debate. The reasons for active travel are many and have already been mentioned: better air quality, the reduction of CO₂ emissions, less congestion and better health. I would add another: productivity. Many of us know schools that do the extra mile in the morning, and children who do that mile run or walk are better learners during the day.

It is no coincidence that a large number of City companies pushed the former Mayor of London, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), to go ahead with the east-west cycle route in London. They pushed for that because they knew that it would make their staff more productive at work, as more people cycling often reduces sickness and absence from work, and increases alertness during the working day. Since I have been more active over the last 10 years, I have certainly felt that I have higher energy levels.

When commentating on the Tour de France a few years ago, Chris Boardman made a YouTube video in which hundreds of people cycled behind him in Utrecht. He said that they were ordinary people going about their day-to-day life, and that he did not see “cyclists”, but normal people going about their life, dressed for their destination and not the journey. The Netherlands did not come by its high levels of cycling and walking by accident; it was a conscious change of policy in the 1970s as a result of parents worrying about their children’s safety. It took decades of serious financial support and leadership from the Government; that is what we need.
Issues in the justice system need to be taken on board. People will feel safe walking and cycling only when drivers are aware of more vulnerable road users and reduce risks such as close passing. We need training for professional drivers, sentencing for those who commit serious crimes, and, most importantly, investment from all Departments.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Cycling is a big part of the answer to the major issues that we are looking at across the House: climate change, congestion, pollution, obesity, poor physical health, poor mental health and social and economic exclusion. I am very excited about the possibilities offered by electric bikes, particularly for older people. For those who are frail or in poor health, who have longer journeys, who need to commute and look reasonably smart when they arrive, as my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) mentioned, and who live at the top of a hill, as I do, electric bikes are part of the solution.

I want this country to be world leading in cycling; I do not want us just to inch up the rankings. In the Netherlands, 25% of people cycle, while in Germany the figure is 10%. In the UK, only 2% cycle. Let us get to the head of the pack, not just improve a bit. We all know that it makes sense. To that end, every new housing estate that we build in this country should have cycle paths connected to the local schools and employment areas. When people get to those places, there must be enough parking for their bikes; it is not just motorists who need parking. If people cannot park securely and safely, or wash and freshen up if they need to when they arrive, they will not cycle in the numbers that we want.

I look forward to Central Bedfordshire Council completing the “green wheel” around Leighton Buzzard in my constituency. We have spent money on cycle paths, but they run out. When they come to a busy road, they just stop, and they are not as connected as they should be. We also need to ensure that when we build new roads, we put in cycling infrastructure, because it is much more expensive to retrofit later. Cycling needs to hold its own in business cases. I was concerned to hear about a recent road scheme from which the cycle scheme was taken out because it was viewed as a problem, and it was thought that it would reduce the power of the business case. That is nonsense. It is wrong and should not happen.

I hope that the Department for Transport’s review will be completed before the comprehensive spending review, and will provide the evidence that we need to get the necessary increase in funding. We also want fairness and equity of funding. It is not right that only 46 council areas get extra money. This matters in the constituency of every hon. Member in the Chamber, right across the country. We need fairness and equity to ensure that every part of the country benefits from the coming cycling revolution.

Most of us remember our first bike. I loved riding as a kid, and have enjoyed teaching my children how to ride their bikes. I believe that our passion for exploring the world on two wheels as youngsters does not leave us as adults. However, that passion has a tendency to be overtaken by practicalities, by a lack of safe cycling infrastructure, and by a lack of confidence in a world where the car is king.

It is my job as a mayor, our job as MPs, and the job of those with whom we work closely in local authorities to do all that we can to enable people to walk, cycle and run if they want to. I recently submitted a bid for £220 million from the Department for Transport’s transforming cities fund. If that is approved—fingers crossed—it will unlock major improvements in transport networks across South Yorkshire. I have also brought on board the brightest and the best talent; there is none better than my new active travel commissioner, Britain’s most successful female Paralympian, Dame Sarah Storey, who is already making a huge impact.

In the Sheffield City region, nearly 40% of car trips are under 1 km, which is the equivalent of just a 15-minute walk. It is no surprise then that our motorways and major roads are under great strain. If we are to safeguard our health, our environment, and our economy, now is definitely the time to act. That is why I have been working closely with other metro mayors, their active travel commissioners, and experts such as British Cycling, Sustrans, the Ramblers and Living Streets. I am also working with Transport for the North to create policy that will shape the North’s infrastructure.

I will rattle through my five asks for the Minister: I hope he will be familiar with them. First, commit to long-term devoted funding for cycling and walking. Secondly, commit to minimum quality levels to ensure that no more public money is wasted on infrastructure that is not fit for purpose. Thirdly, reform policing and enforcement. Fourthly, enable innovation by keeping road traffic regulations under review. Fifthly, ensure that transport investment decisions account for the true cost to society of car use.

This debate is about much more than encouraging people to get on a bike or put on their walking shoes. People do not need to be encouraged; they need to be enabled. That responsibility lies with us and with national Government.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing this important debate. I would put cycling and walking into two broad categories.

First, there are established areas where we need to enhance and improve the facilities. We sometimes see green paint slapped on the ground to mark out a cycle lane, but that does nothing for the cyclist—it does not improve safety or their ability to navigate those roads. We have to be cautious about a council or an area being able to claim that they have more and more miles of cycle tracks when those tracks are of almost no value.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) mentioned, often those tracks stop and start, which is of no value to the cyclist who wants to carry on their journey. It would be far better to focus on repairing potholes. That is what many people on their bicycles would like—smooth, open roads where they can carry on cycling.
There are opportunities in new developments. The largest housing development in Greater Manchester, the Horwich loco works, of 1,700 houses, almost connects Horwich town centre with Horwich Parkway railway station. That should have been a wonderful opportunity to connect the town centre to its local railway station with a superb walking and cycling route. There was a master plan for that development, but it included zero information about cycling or walking. We hear national Government, the Mayor of Greater Manchester and our town or borough council leadership talking about their ambitions for cycling and walking, yet in the plan for the largest single housing development in Greater Manchester of 1,700 houses, there were no details about cycling and walking. There is a huge mismatch between that and what some people say about this important agenda.

We want more people to cycle and walk, for the obvious reasons that have been given: it is better not just for physical but mental health, and we want people to have active lifestyles and be more part of the community. However, those ambitions must link up to the reality on the ground. I am pleased that Bolton Council will, under its new leadership, form a liaison group with the local community and Horwich loco works to make sure the development has the interests of local people at heart. I will champion the cause of cycling and walking.

10.1 am

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing this debate, and I thank him for his contribution to the Transport Committee, which I chair. It has been looking at precisely the matter we are discussing. The Government’s 2017 cycling and walking investment strategy—CWIS—is extremely welcome. As many Members have said, the economic, human and environmental cost of inactivity, climate change, air pollution and traffic congestion are huge. Active travel can help us to tackle all of those, if it gets the attention and funding it deserves but historically has not received. There are serious questions about the funding available for active travel and local cycling and walking infrastructure plans—LCWIPs, which we have been told are the main vehicle for delivering the Government’s strategy.

We have been told that the funding framework for active travel remains challenging, because the wider framework for local transport funding is complex, short term and under severe pressure. When the Government published the CWIS, they described it as a £1.2 billion plan, but only a quarter was ring-fenced funding for cycling and walking schemes. The rest was for local authorities to decide how to prioritise. We know all too well the pressures on local councils from adult social care and children’s services. Since the CWIS was published, the Government have stated that almost £2 billion is projected to be invested in active travel between 2016 and 2021. That is a good start, but it pales in comparison with spending on other modes, and equates to just £600 million a year, or 1.5% of the £26.4 billion that the Government spent on transport in England in 2017.

The Transport Committee has heard about the impressive ambitions of combined authorities and local authorities to increase cycling and walking in their area. I do not have time to go through them, but if they are to be achieved, as so many colleagues have said, dedicated funding is needed to deliver those improvements in LCWIPs to enable the Government to succeed in delivering their strategy. Phil Jones, an independent transport consultant who has been very involved in the development of the local plans, told us that if LCWIPs are just a plan and sit on the shelf, “it has been a complete waste of time”.

He told us that LCWIPs have to lead quickly to actual schemes on the ground, and he is right. If the Government want to deliver their strategy, which is essential and not a nice to have, “they need to consider how their funding will ensure that that happens.”

Funding is not the only issue; the Government need coherent and consistent policy. People will not walk and cycle if their roads and pavements are poorly maintained; they will not feel safe if cars are parked on pavements; it will not be good if estates have no pavements, which I often see. People will incorporate walking and cycling into a longer journey only if the public transport element is up to scratch.

10.4 am

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I have three points to make and, not surprisingly as a former Public Health Minister, I will begin with health. I very much enjoyed working with the Minister’s predecessor on creating some of the Government’s plans. Part two of the child obesity strategy, which I was responsible for bringing into place, was important for the obesity crisis that we face in this country. It was not all about the sugar tax, although I place on record how important that is. It must continue, despite protestations to the contrary. The obesity strategy was about moving more and giving children options for cycling. As the Minister’s predecessor said, it is about producing plans that mean a 12-year-old can cycle on the road with some sort of confidence.

My second point is on money and infrastructure. I was a vice chair of the all-party parliamentary cycling group when I first came to the House. We recommended in our “Get Britain Cycling” report, published in April 2013, that we should create a cycling budget of £10 per person. I pay tribute to the Government because, as has been said, investment in cycling and walking in England has trebled since 2010 from around £2 per person annually to around £7.50 per person. That is a success story. Another key recommendation of that report, which has been mentioned so many times since, is that local authorities should deliver cycle-friendly improvements to their existing roads. We will hear a lot this morning about new developments and how they must be connected up with cycle roads. They must, but just as most of our housing is existing housing, most of our roads are existing roads, and I want them to be transformed.

In Winchester we have a new local community action group called Cycle Winchester, which is campaigning to make the city better by bike. It is an excellent organisation that has arranged many mass cycle rides in the centre of Winchester, and it is working with the local council. We have something called the City of Winchester movement strategy, an important element of which will be a local cycling and walking infrastructure plan. Cycle Winchester is a very good, dedicated charity run by people who want cycling to be better in the area that I represent, but what support can the Government give to it? My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) talked about the comprehensive spending review; surely, that is where we have to look.
We have talked about the carbon emissions net zero ambition in this Parliament, which is important, but local authorities will have to deliver so much of that. They only intend to produce an infrastructure plan; the Government want them to produce it, but they do not require them to. My council has declared a climate emergency, but what does that mean for cycling paths and dedicated cycle routes? We have to keep cyclists and cars separate. That means dedicated cycle lanes and investment, and making sure that local authorities carry through with their intentions to make that happen.

10.7 am

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing this debate. As a lifelong cyclist, I could speak for hours about why cycling has become so difficult in this country. We know the benefits of cycling, but what are the barriers to more people cycling? I think they are habit and road safety, and the two things are linked. If our young children start by cycling and walking to school, that will become a lifelong habit, as it became for me; I used to cycle to school every day when I was growing up in Germany. But when I became a parent in this country, I was terrified of sending my children to school on their bikes because it was not safe.

Let us concentrate on school travel plans, to allow children to travel safely to school and, therefore, embed a habit early on that people will continue into their later lives. What does that mean? As a councillor for 10 years, I was actively involved in trying to create meaningful, continuous cycle routes to get from A to B. That is very difficult, but as I said in my intervention, we can use existing infrastructure by signposting routes properly away from the main traffic.

Where we cannot get away from the main traffic, the Government could legislate for 20 mph zones in every town and city. In fact, studies say that a continuous 20 mph zone may make congestion much less likely because, as happens on motorways, traffic flow is much better if everybody travels more slowly. Why not go ahead and introduce 20 mph zones in all towns and cities? That would make cycling and walking so much safer, even if cyclists and pedestrians were mixed with motorised traffic.

We have many opportunities, and there are many good news stories. My council, which became Liberal Democrat in the last local election, is looking actively at walking buses: schools are encouraging parents to let their children walk with a dedicated person. Use of the Bath to Bristol cycle route increases by 10% every year. Where we have such cycling opportunities, they are used, but they have to be attractive. It does not help that a lot of money is spent on capital projects rather than on revenue, which can mean that where we create cycle routes we cannot maintain them. There are many things that the Government and local authorities could do, but we should start by looking at our young people and make walking and cycling to school the first priority.

10.10 am

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing the debate.

I would like to draw the Minister’s attention to an excellent opportunity to support an important cycling infrastructure plan in my constituency. The route would link Liskeard, Looe and Plymouth and is expected to bring up to £3 million per year into the important local tourism economy. A detailed feasibility study has already been undertaken for the Looe Development Trust. That had widespread support, having been funded by Cornwall Council, the LEADER EU funding programme, Cornwall and Isles of Scilly local enterprise partnership, Liskeard and Looe Town Councils, Liskeard Town Forum, and the Cornish mining world heritage site. I have a copy of the report, which I am happy to give to the Minister after the debate.

Tourism is massively important to my local economy. Research shows that the proposed scheme could generate millions of pounds in extra spend with accommodation providers, local restaurants and shops and many other services. I also anticipate new businesses, including cycle hire businesses, creating new jobs in my beautiful constituency.

In Cornwall, we know the benefits that such trails can provide. There is already a fantastic route in north Cornwall, between Padstow and Boddin along the Camel Trail. Its success is clear from all the cycle hire businesses and other successful businesses along the route. It would be great if we could repeat that successful venture in my constituency. It would bring health benefits and allow people to get on a bike in beautiful surroundings and a safe environment, which we do not always get in our cities.

Simon Pratt from Sustrans, the UK charity that makes it easier for people to walk and cycle, said:

“These trails fill a missing link in the national cycle network, connecting with Plymouth and Dartmoor to the east and Bodmin and the Camel Trail to the west. The Looe to Plymouth section in particular has been on our radar for many years and I hope that the time has come when it can now be delivered. As well as the tourism benefits, these trail routes are well connected to the railway network at Bodmin Parkway and Liskeard and offer more sustainable travel options for commuters and local people” in a rural location. I would appreciate it if the Minister looked at this thorough, well thought-out proposal and worked with local partners to ensure its completion.

10.13 am

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing the debate.

Let me start by mentioning horse-riding. I have to say this, because my horse-riders have been on to me. Pat Harris of the Mid Cotswolds Tracks and Trails group tells me that there are 2.9 million regular horse riders and half a million carriage users. They do not like being left out of debates about cyclists and pedestrians, because they feel they are an important part of the group of non-motorists.

On cycling, a couple of weeks ago we had a very interesting session upstairs, which was led by members of the science community. They mentioned that the number of cyclist and pedestrian accidents had flattened recently. That is sad—obviously, we want the number of accidents to reduce considerably—but they reminded us that there are ways in which side-on accidents can be prevented. If we “think bike” when we come to a road junction, we should always be looking to avoid anything coming into conflict with us.
I am a keen cyclist. The problem is that it is getting increasingly difficult to cycle, particularly during the winter. Sadly, our roads are deteriorating beyond all recognition. Potholes are a nightmare for cyclists, but my biggest bugbear is leaves. Because we do not sweep up leaves any more, they all get pushed to the side of the road, where cyclists cycle, and they get wet and freeze. I challenge anyone to stay on a bike while going over such a slippery surface. My plea to the Minister is to ask local authorities to undertake decent road maintenance so that cyclists are prioritised. I suspect that an awful lot of accidents involving cyclists—notwithstanding the even more serious accidents involving other road users—occur because people come off their bike as a result of the road surface.

The real reason why people do not walk nowadays—the reason they do not walk their children to school in particular—is air quality. Particularly in built-up areas, the quality of the air leads people to use their cars. That is counterintuitive and wrong. We have to get children back to walking as their main way of getting about; otherwise, we will have increasing issues with obesity, which has been mentioned, and all the things that come from that. We must ensure that the Government address and prioritise these issues.

10.16 am

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): We have heard the environmental, health and economic cases for cycling. I fell in love on a tandem and I am still cycling 40 years later, so perhaps I should add that there is a case to be made for cycling’s benefit to your love life, and for the sheer joy of cycling.

We need to focus on how to make cycling happen. We should look across the water to see how it is done elsewhere. There is a formula to it: it requires consistent, long-term political support both locally and nationally, and the right funding. We spend £7.50 per person on it, but other countries, where this works and cycling has been transformed, spend between £10 and £35 per person. Will the Minister therefore continue his predecessor’s commitment to the ambition of doubling per-person investment in cycling? That is what we need.

When we have that level of spend, we can go to the next stage: ensuring that councils can employ people to develop expertise in the long term to put these schemes in place. We need consistent rather than stop-start funding. One of the problems with competitive bids for funding is that some areas do very well, but others, such as mine, lose out altogether. We need much more consistency, so that we do not focus, as others have said, just on cities or even towns, but look at rural areas.

We need to spend not just on infrastructure, but on services and maintenance for our network, and to join up the network. Disgracefully, in my area there is still a gap in national cycle route 2, partly because of the prejudice cyclists sometimes face. For example, a bridge, half of which was paid for with public money, is still blocked to cyclists unreasonably by its owner, South Devon Railway. That prevents a critical join-up. I would like councils to have the power to sweep some of this nonsense out of the way, because this has been going on for more than nine years.

We need to fix those problems and join the network up, and look at links with other infrastructure, such as the rail network. We must also look at traffic calming. There are 20 mph speed restrictions on 75% of the network in urban areas, and they work. We should look at that, and at introducing traffic calming in rural areas where we have quieter routes for cyclists.

We know what works. Will the Minister look at the evidence base and assure us that we will implement what we need if we are really to have a revolution and get people to enjoy the benefits of cycling?

10.19 am

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I join my fellow members of the Transport Committee in thanking the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) for bringing the debate. On walking, when we took evidence, it was clear that the original cycling and walking investment strategy was woefully unambitious in its targets. I hope that today the Minister will confirm much stronger targets for the future.

On cycling, I agree with the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), the Chair of the Select Committee, and the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) on the £1.2 billion figure, which is frequently wheeled out when in fact only a quarter of that is genuinely available for cycling. I also agree on stop-start funding; there is too much competitive bidding. Local authorities spend time setting up teams and then running them down after only a brief period of effectiveness.

I have two new points to introduce. However good a local cycling and walking infrastructure plan might be, our major strategic roads are run by Highways England, and sadly its relationship with cycling is not as good as it should be. We heard evidence from the Office of Rail and Road that that is one area where Highways England certainly needs to improve. Sadly, there are examples from my patch of Cambridge; one is from just a few days ago. People think of Cambridge as an exemplar, but Highways England does not seem to have noticed that if it shuts down a major cycleway but gives people only five days’ notice and does not provide proper diversions, people will be, quite rightly, very unhappy. Sadly, negotiations with Highways England over cycling-safe- and-friendly roundabouts and road junctions continue to be difficult. Although Highways England is good at building bridges and roads, it needs to be an agency not just for road building but for mobility. It really needs to improve its communications.

My main point is to echo the call by the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) for an electric bikes revolution. I have had my electric bike for four years, and it is transformational. I am grateful to Dr Lynn Sloman, the Transport for Quality of Life team and the Bicycle Association for highlighting how well other countries in Europe are doing, and how we are falling so far behind. A million electric bikes were sold in Germany last year; just 60,000 were sold in our country. By head of population, the Dutch are doing 25 times better than we are. Electric bikes are a simple solution to the transport crisis, so why on earth are we not doing better?

Although I welcome the improvements to the cycle to work scheme, that only benefits people who are in work, and many, many others need to be helped. The French offered a simple subsidy to encourage people and promoted it.

My mantra for many months has been revoke and remain. It is now revoke, remain and recharge.
10.22 am

**Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. Active travel is an integral part of our arsenal when it comes to tackling climate change, but not enough people are involved. Cycling makes up just 2% of trips taken in the UK, and in a European Commission report on rates of cycling in 28 countries, the UK feebly features in 24th place. How can we change that? We must see widespread reform and structural overhaul.

With headlines this weekend showing that eight people were killed in London in five days, it is clear that better infrastructure is required. We need separated and dedicated cycle routes. We need adequate pedestrian bridges and underpass tunnels. As a colleague said, active travel should be for the many, not the brave. We need major reform that puts the UK on a level playing field and ahead of European leaders in active travel.

Following work undertaken with local organisations such as Portsmouth Cycle Forum, and from cycling around my city—I do not drive; I use my Brompton to get around Portsmouth—I have seen at first hand how disjointed infrastructure can be a major obstacle in getting people out and active. While the increases in search for poorly signposted funding. As the Local Government Association said, "Too often funding is provided in the form of short-term capital grants linked to bidding processes with strict criteria. This stop-start funding...doesn't allow councils to develop long-term sustained plans."

I ask the Minister: why have the Government not yet provided any dedicated funding to deliver local cycling and walking infrastructure plans? When will they begin to do so?

Portsmouth’s geography and conditions would make it an ideal trailblazer for active travel. It could be a world leader, as is demonstrated by the ambitions in our document, “A City to Share”, which I urge the Minister to read. It is clear that as a society we will be better, healthier and greener if we properly invest in walking and cycling infrastructure. I therefore urge the Minister to visit Portsmouth and meet with the Portsmouth Cycle Forum.

10.24 am

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) for setting the scene for us all. The main town in my borough, Newtownards, is classified as a central business district town or a commuter town. There have been recent moves to expand the Glider service into Newtownards and supply a park and ride for the area. There are also plans, though the city deal, to extend the greenway to enable people to avail themselves of cycle-to-work schemes.

I am fully supportive of the cycle-to-work schemes run in co-operation with Sustrans, which helps workplaces become cycle-friendly employers. That accreditation was developed with the EU project “Bike2Work”, with Cycling UK the recognised provider for the UK. Site auditing and advisory work is provided by Sustrans for organisations in Northern Ireland. Sustrans says:

> “We support employers to encourage their staff to consider active travel in their daily routine. Being a cycle-friendly employer brings real benefits by promoting staff health and well-being, reducing absenteeism, increasing productivity and saves organisations money”, so clearly there are benefits. I believe that in this kind of scheme, there should be funding—at least a token amount, as a gesture—to encourage employers to provide the facilities needed.

The Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland has shown that it practises what it preaches, as it became the second UK organisation to receive international recognition as a cycle-friendly employer. It is to be congratulated, but if funding was there, I honestly believe that more employers would help us to make the goal of carbon-neutral commuting a reality for many people. There are many benefits to this, yet when it comes to funding, we are not so forward-thinking. That needs to change. There is an appetite for change in our cities—and indeed in our lives.

“Bike Life”, the UK’s biggest assessment of cycling in cities, showed that 81% of people in Belfast want more protected bike routes to make cycling safer, even when that could mean less space for other road traffic. Almost three quarters of Belfast residents surveyed supported more investment in cycling, with 71% saying that Belfast would be a better place to live and work if more people cycled. There is a movement and a need for change.

Sustrans, in its mission to educate people, put it succinctly:

> “Research shows that keeping physically active can reduce the risk of heart and circulatory disease by as much as 35% and risk of early death by...30%. It’s recommended that adults take part in 2.5 hours of moderate activity per week. But...activity levels in the UK are low: only 40% of men and 28% of women meet these minimum recommendations. One way to achieve this target is to do 30 minutes’ exercise at least five times a week—the perfect length of time for short, local journeys on foot or by bike.”

The charities and institutions are doing their part, but I believe we can do more in this place to make cycling a priority for health and the environment. That must come from increased funding. That puts the onus on the Minister to make the case to his colleagues in the Exchequer.

10.27 am

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on bringing forward this clearly important issue. Like him, I sit on the all-party parliamentary group for cycling. I am a keen cyclist; according to *The Sun on Sunday*, I am a “fanatic”—I am not sure how that came to be. I would say I am an advocate; let us leave it at that. In that vein, I put it on record that I am a member of my local Cycleways group, which I congratulate on its campaigning work, as well as Sustrans. It is important that we have such bodies who speak out and campaign in these areas.

We have heard about the generic benefits we can get from cycling: the great health advantages, both mental and physical; the reduction in congestion as a result of using existing capacity more efficiently; and the improvement EU project “Bike2Work”, with Cycling UK the recognised provider for the UK. Site auditing and advisory work is provided by Sustrans for organisations in Northern Ireland. Sustrans says:
We have also heard about how the lack of safe provision on our roads is deterring new cyclists and road users from taking up a really important form of transport. Last week’s tragedy in Battersea, in which a young design student, Giovanna Cappiello, was killed, is a reminder of how vulnerable people can feel. Our thoughts are with her friends and family. The priority must be to make our routes, particularly routes to schools, safe, to encourage behavioural change, and to encourage the next generation to think about how they move.

Let me focus briefly on a scheme in my constituency and in Kenilworth, which adjoins it. The Kenilworth to Leamington scheme is a three-mile route that has been talked about for 20 years, although no progress has been made. I believe it would be transformational. It would cost just £3.5 million, including a bridge that would cost £1 million. A petition has been signed by more than 1,000 people. The route would enable students and academics to access the University of Warwick from the town of Leamington far more easily. That would reduce queues and congestion, particularly on the A425. I encourage Warwickshire County Council to look closely and favourably at this scheme, because its expenditure on cycling is a fraction of the £7.50 average.

Infrastructure is holding us back, but as we have heard, a revolution is coming, particularly through e-bikes. In Germany, 960,000 e-bikes were bought last year. That compares with 64,000 in the UK, which was up by just 1,000 on the year before. France has a subsidy of €200 for every e-bike. That is driving active travel, and the Netherlands has had a subsidy for e-bikes for 15 years. In Germany, 960,000 e-bikes were bought last year; France has a subsidy for e-bikes. In Germany, 960,000 e-bikes were bought last year; France has a subsidy for e-bikes. In Germany, 960,000 e-bikes were bought last year; France has a subsidy for e-bikes. In Germany, 960,000 e-bikes were bought last year; France has a subsidy for e-bikes. In Germany, 960,000 e-bikes were bought last year; France has a subsidy for e-bikes.

Despite all that promise, however, the tunnel is lost for ever, and that that incredible example of Victorian engineering is scheduled to be filled in with concrete. To restore the route would cost around £16 million. That sounds like a lot, but the tragedy of the abandonment proposal is that such work is likely to cost in the region of £5 million pounds—money that would be funded by the taxpayer but provide no local benefit at all. Latest extensive research suggests that to invest in the tunnel’s restoration would return £2.31 for every £1 invested.

An alternative future for the tunnel would be transformational. Restoring the tunnel with a cycle path would place it at the centre of a cycle network that connects Halifax to Bradford and Keighley, and would boost sustainable travel. It would add another landmark structure to the Great Northern railway trail, making it one of the most spectacular foot and cycle paths anywhere in the country. It would further enhance our area’s cycling credentials, becoming both the longest continuous incline in England, and the longest re-used railway tunnel. I encourage the Minister to come and visit that tunnel if at all possible. I have no doubt that if he spends five minutes with the wonderful campaigners, Norah McWilliams and Graeme Bickerdike, whose passion for the tunnel is infectious, he will be left with little option but to consider investing in it and in its future at the heart of Yorkshire’s cycling heritage.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. Many requests have been made to the Minister, and I am sure we all wish to hear his response. I want to give him the maximum time to respond, which is 10 minutes, so if the Opposition speakers can ensure that I am able to call the Minister at 10.48 am, that would be helpful.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Bailey, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing this debate and on his passionate and articulate opening remarks. As the MP for Halifax, right in the heart of Yorkshire, I am truly blessed and articulate opening remarks. As the MP for Halifax, right in the heart of Yorkshire, I am truly blessed.

Today I wish to advocate one infrastructure scheme—the Queensbury tunnel. The campaign proposes to convert a disused railway tunnel that was constructed in 1878 but closed in the 1950s into a cycle route to connect Bradford with Calderdale. The tunnel is a magnificent feat of Victorian engineering. It is about one and a half miles long, and at the time it was the longest tunnel on the Great Northern railway. We are the masters of up-cycling our heritage in Yorkshire, and restoring and repurposing that historic tunnel for the modern world as part of a regional cycle route would offer a positive environmental impact, as well as an economic one, as there would be yet another Yorkshire gem for cyclists, and visitors more broadly, to come and see.

Despite all that promise, however, the tunnel is currently slated for abandonment by its custodian, Highways England’s historical railways estate. The campaign therefore has a sense of urgency. We could soon find that the tunnel is lost for ever, and that that incredible example of Victorian engineering is scheduled to be filled in with concrete. To restore the route would cost around £16 million. That sounds like a lot, but the tragedy of the abandonment proposal is that such work is likely to cost in the region of £5 million pounds—money that would be funded by the taxpayer but provide no local benefit at all. Latest extensive research suggests that to invest in the tunnel’s restoration would return £2.31 for every £1 invested. An alternative future for the tunnel would be transformational. Restoring the tunnel with a cycle path would place it at the centre of a cycle network that connects Halifax to Bradford and Keighley, and would boost sustainable travel. It would add another landmark structure to the Great Northern railway trail, making it one of the most spectacular foot and cycle paths anywhere in the country. It would further enhance our area’s cycling credentials, becoming both the longest continuous incline in England, and the longest re-used railway tunnel. I encourage the Minister to come and visit that tunnel if at all possible. I have no doubt that if he spends five minutes with the wonderful campaigning, Norah McWilliams and Graeme Bickerdike, whose passion for the tunnel is infectious, he will be left with little option but to consider investing in it and in its future at the heart of Yorkshire’s cycling heritage.

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Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey, and on behalf of the Scottish National party I congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing this debate. I am grateful to my colleagues from the Transport Committee, and for the work of the Committee Clerks during our recent evidence sessions on active travel. Today we have heard about the health, productivity, environmental, economic and even enhanced love life benefits of cycling, and we all recognise the need for fair funding. We have also touched on the enjoyment of cycling. I have great memories of cycling as a kid; having a bike gave me freedom and independence—something that I have continued to enjoy throughout my life.

Let me speak about what is happening in Scotland and my constituency of Inverclyde. If we are to improve our cycling and walking infrastructure, we need an accurate understanding of people’s current patterns of travel. It is therefore helpful that Cycling Scotland’s annual cycling monitoring report examines trends and statistics at both national and local level. Such work gives us an important insight into current rates of cycling participation. There is significant potential for growth in cycling in my constituency. Nearly 60% of journeys made in Inverclyde are under 5 km, which relates in some way to the fact that 35% of households have no access to a car for private use. Some 24% of households have access to a bike, yet in 2015-16, just 0.4% of people usually cycled to work.
A similar picture can be found among school students. In 2016 only 0.8% of primary school students cycled to school, while the average percentage of high school students who cycled to school was 0.1%.

Some will feel tempted to explain those statistics by highlighting the weather in the west of Scotland or the hilly topography of Inverclyde, but it is clear that a great many more people could start cycling if Inverclyde had a more suitable cycling infrastructure. Cycling Scotland is actively working to address that deficit through two main areas of activity in Inverclyde. First, Bikeability Scotland cycle training is a programme for schools that is designed to give children the skills and confidence to cycle safely, and to continue using that mode of travel into adulthood. Secondly, the Cycling Friendly programmes promote local cycling by making workplaces, schools and communities more cycling friendly.

Improving cycling infrastructure is undoubtedly part of the solution in reaching that goal. Locally, Cycling UK has worked with an associate group, the Inverclyde Bothy, on a range of actions related to cycling and walking. Such work includes delivering on road cycling training, working with health authorities to identify opportunities for people to ride a bike, establishing a walking network, liaising with local partners such as Sustrans to identify priority areas for cycling network enhancements, improving safety on the path network, and ensuring that new land and housing developments include plans to promote cycling.

Our local cycling and walking network is greatly enhanced by such work, and I wish to mention the efforts of Cycling UK’s development officer, Josh Wood, and project manager, Shona Morris, whose local expertise and passionate advocacy for cycling has made a real difference. Other organisations include Community Tracks, which is led by Stewart Phillips—the Phillips family and biking in Inverclyde go back generations—and Sustrans, which plays a vital role in supporting local initiatives.

If we were to design and implement a system to support cycling from scratch, I am not sure that we would design what we currently have. Across every constituency a patchwork of organisations, responsibilities and funding streams lobby on behalf of our cycling infrastructure, and that is before we even consider issues such as walking. Since we cannot turn back the clock, we have to live with our current circumstances, but perhaps we can envisage a more efficient way of delivering improvements and streamlining the work undertaken by that patchwork of groups.

More broadly, the Scottish Government committed up to £51 million for active travel infrastructure in 2019-20. In announcing that funding, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity, Michael Matheson MSP, highlighted the importance of high-quality infrastructure in the Scottish Government’s ambitions for cycling. Representatives from Cycling UK, the walking charity Living Streets, and Sustrans, were united in calling for England to follow Scotland’s lead and allocate 5% of transport spending to active travel, with a view to increasing that to 10% in future. If we are serious about tackling climate change, air pollution, traffic congestion and the health ramifications of inactivity, we must show a commitment to our cycling and walking infrastructure. The long-term costs of not treating that issue as a priority will be significant. In conclusion, I thank those organisations that promote cycling and walking in my constituency, and I urge hon. Members to ensure that the relevant authorities, from local councils to the UK Government, allocate sufficient funding to match our ambitions for active travel.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Admiringly disciplined.

10.39 am

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I thank the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) and my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) for securing the debate and I commend the many excellent points we have heard this morning.

The Government have admitted, albeit under pressure from the Opposition, that the UK and the world as a whole face a climate emergency. We have just 11 years to dramatically reduce carbon dioxide emissions and we need to take practical steps now to protect the planet for future generations. Changes in the way we travel have a vital part to play in responding to this emergency and, as has been discussed this morning, walking and cycling can play an important role in that.

Were the UK to achieve the same cycling culture and levels of infrastructure as the Netherlands, we could reduce carbon gas emissions from cars by as much as a third, and that is not to mention the many social and economic benefits, such as tackling the air pollution crisis and reaping health benefits by reducing sedentary lifestyles, which in turn could save the NHS up to £9 billion per year. I will return to the central point about climate change later and outline some of the other many advantages of encouraging walking and cycling.

Before addressing those points, it is important to consider where we are as a country, so that we can fully understand the scale of the challenge. Mr Bailey, we need to be honest about this challenge: the UK quite simply has a poor track record of encouraging cycling and walking, and the Government are missing their own targets to increase walking and cycling. There are a number of reasons for that. The most fundamental point is the lack of investment. We have too much car-dependent development on the edge of cities or in the countryside, as colleagues have mentioned today. To make matters worse, the budget for the police has been cut severely since 2010, leading to a lack of traffic officers to tackle speeding and to educate motorists. It is hardly surprising, as colleagues have mentioned, that according to the British social attitudes survey, many people believe cycling is simply too dangerous to try, even though they are well aware of the health and lifestyle benefits.

Despite the Government’s failure, there are signs of improvement at a local level, and there has been real leadership from some mayors and local councils. I commend the imaginative mini-Hollands scheme in London, which has made a significant difference in a number of boroughs. I visited parts of Waltham Forest that have been transformed, with dedicated cycle paths, improved pavements and selective road closures, all of which have made a huge improvement in walking and cycling. More people are choosing active travel and there has been a real change in the atmosphere in the streets, which are now easier to get around on foot or by bike, after years of being...
dominated by cars. There are many other benefits. Trade has increased for local retailers as more people shop locally in these areas, which has encouraged further walking and cycling.

In Manchester, the Mayor's cycling tsar, Chris Boardman, is focusing on reducing the risk of accidents at crossings, a point that was well made earlier in the debate, which are often the most dangerous places for both cyclists and pedestrians. He has also worked on joining up local routes. His emphasis on asking the public what they want and on low-cost paint and plastic transformation is leading the way; I believe that it is making it easier to introduce real change at a local level.

There are many more examples of this, not least in my constituency where a new cycling and walking bridge over the Thames at Reading has significantly increased active travel. Imaginative work is being done around the country. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), who is Mayor of the Sheffield City Region, and other colleagues about their local authorities. I commend this work, wherever it is occurring.

Encouraging active travel will also breathe new life into our towns, as I mentioned earlier, by reclaiming the urban realm and creating public spaces that are free from traffic and accompanying pollutants, fostering environments that are pleasant places to live and work. There is no doubt that this is a significant task, but we have the benefit of clear examples to show us how it can happen. Cities in the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark experienced steep declines in cycling until policy changes in the 1970s put them on a trajectory to become the most cycle-friendly places in the world. We must have the same ambition in the UK.

We should follow these examples and make a massive step change in funding to match the most successful towns and cities in Europe, as called for by organisations such as Cycling UK. There must be significant investment in infrastructure to develop dense, continuous networks of cycle paths that are physically separated from traffic, including building cycling and pedestrian bridges or tunnels, as we heard earlier. Cycling should be for the many, not the brave. People must also be encouraged and given the confidence to cycle, so there needs to be training and support for all who need it, including affordable bike access for all. Support for e-bikes is vital, particularly for those who are less physically able.

We know that cycling and walking are hugely important. They can play a vital part in helping us tackle climate change. There are health benefits and real benefits in terms of reducing air pollution. Yet, the Government are failing to meet the targets set by the European Union. Mr Bailey, I believe that we need a programme of concerted action with a step change in investment, which is why Labour would improve investment in cycling and walking, to encourage the sort of transformation we have seen and heard about on the continent.

We would take other practical steps, as referred to by other hon. Members. For example, we would encourage use of canal and river tow paths, safe routes in parks and quiet streets to create green ways into cities and towns. We would work with industry—a point that has not been discussed—by developing proper industrial strategy for cycling, which is very important and would focus on both conventional and e-bikes. We would support cycling and walking by our wider transformation of investment in transport, bringing the railways back into public ownership to deliver better value for passengers and to encourage more people to walk to the station. More investment in bus travel would also encourage walking to bus stops. Encouraging brownfield redevelopment rather than greenfield building would encourage better access to towns and villages from new development.

I am conscious of time, so I will conclude. Walking and cycling are hugely important if we are to tackle climate change and lead healthier lives. It is clear that determined action can make an enormous difference, whether in northern Europe or closer to home in the UK. We need action now, not delay, and I urge the Minister to change the Government’s approach.

10.46 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing this popular debate about active travel, local walking and cycling infrastructure. I am delighted to have had the opportunity to hear the contributions of hon. Members from across the House, who spoke about how cycling improves productivity, health and even one’s love life, according to the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). I need to do more cycling for all those reasons, all of which are acknowledged. I was also pleased that my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) mentioned equestrianism. Active travel includes horse riders and bridle paths—this debate includes them.

The good news is that the Government are committed to increasing cycling and walking and to making our roads safer for those who walk and cycle. That is borne out by the facts and the investment that has been put in.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Queensbury tunnel is a 1.4 mile long former railway tunnel in my constituency that links Queensbury to Halifax. This vital piece of infrastructure is threatened with a bandonment by Highways England. Given the wide range of support from across the House, including from all five Bradford MPs, my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) and the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), will the Minister agree to meet us and to step in so that this can be stopped? It is directly at odds with the Government’s cycling and walking strategy.

Michael Ellis: I am happy to explore that issue. I will ask my officials to liaise with Highways England about it, and I will write to the hon. Lady.

Our ambition is to make cycling and walking the natural choices for short journeys, or as part of longer journeys, by 2040. That ambition will be realised through the statutory cycling and walking investment strategy. The strategy represents a shift in approach from the short-term, stop-start and spasmodic interventions of previous Governments, which were referred to by hon. Members, and towards a strategic, long-term approach up to and beyond 2040.

In the short term, the Government have set an aim to double cycling activity to 1.6 billion stages per year, increase walking to 300 stages per person per year, and increase the percentage of children aged five to 10 who usually walk to school to 55% by 2025. Far from a lack of investment, this Conservative Government have massively increased the budget and the ambitions for cycling and active travel generally.
We know what the benefits are, but it is worth rehearsing them. Increased levels of active travel have huge benefits, including for health, mental health and wellbeing; road congestion; air quality; economic productivity, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury); and increased footfall in shops. For society as a whole, it means lower congestion, better air quality and more vibrant and attractive places and communities. As a former tourism and heritage Minister, I recognise that attractive places help with wellbeing, but also help economies.

In relation to health, illness as an outcome of physical inactivity costs the NHS up to £1 billion per annum, with further indirect costs calculated at £8.2 billion per annum. As forms of physical activity, cycling and walking can and do provide particularly high benefits for physical and mental health. Walking or cycling for just 10 minutes a day can contribute towards the 150 minutes of physical activity that we want adults to do per week, as recommended by the chief medical officer.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Witney, who called this debate, recognises that our aims and targets are challenging, particularly that of doubling cycling activity within five or six years, by 2025. Achieving our ambitions requires co-ordination of a complex delivery chain comprising Government Departments, yes, but also agencies, third sector organisations and hundreds of local authorities.

Andrew Selous: Will the Minister give way?

Michael Ellis: I am conscious of time, and I will not be able to give way much, but I will give way.

Andrew Selous: Will the Minister address the issue of parking? If we want employees to cycle to work, will there be a requirement for new office developments to have sufficient parking places?

Michael Ellis: We are looking, with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and other Departments, at a wide range of issues, including charging points and the like, so we will be able to address that question, and I hope to come back to it. As I say, achieving our ambitions requires co-ordination of a complex delivery chain, and we have made good progress.

Dr Wollaston: Will the Minister give way?

Michael Ellis: I will just make some progress, if I may. Given all the contributions, I want to address the points that have been made.

We have made good progress in delivering the commitments set out in the strategy, and the overall number of cycling and walking stages increased in 2017. We recognise, however, that there is some way to go. We also face challenges in attracting higher levels of activity, particularly among certain socioeconomic groups and broader ethnic groups, and we want to work on that too. Those are challenges that we must address.

In the limited time available, I want to move on to the all-important issue of funding, which a number of hon. Members raised. This debate comes at a crucial time in the delivery of the cycling and walking investment strategy, as the Government prepare for the next spending review. As my hon. Friend the Member for Witney mentioned, that will be the vehicle for identifying the funding required across Government to meet the strategy’s 2025 aims and targets.

The Government recognise the scale of the challenge. When the cycling and walking investment strategy was published in 2017, it identified £1.2 billion of funding projected for investment in cycling and walking between 2016 and 2021. Since then, local authorities have added their part and allocated an additional £700 million to safe infrastructure and other active travel projects. Between central Government and local government, that is almost £2 billion being invested in cycling and walking over this Parliament. That is a good investment. Spending on cycling and walking in England has doubled from £3.50 per head to around £7 per head in this four-year spending review period alone. I will always accept that there is more we can do and that there is more to be done, but doubling investment is a good achievement.

Many of the decisions on the allocation of those funds will be made by the relevant local body, in line with the Government’s devolution and localism agenda. We do not want to centralise everything from Whitehall; we want to let local authorities make those decisions where possible. That is an important point in the context of this debate, and one that I will return to shortly, but I want to say something else about additional funding, beyond the £2 billion I have already mentioned.

The transforming cities fund of £2.5 billion is helping to improve local transport links, including cycling and walking routes, which will make it easier for people to travel between often more prosperous city centres and frequently struggling suburbs. Some £220 million of capital and revenue funding is available through the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs clean air fund from 2018 to 2020. That can be used by eligible local authorities to support measures such as improving cycling. There are funding streams coming from different quarters.

In 2019 alone, we have announced £21 million for Sustrans, which the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) mentioned, to deliver a range of activation projects to upgrade the national cycle network across England. We have also provided £2 million to support the Big Bike Revival and Walk to School programmes, launched a £2 million e-cargo bike grant programme and published refreshed cycle to work guidance, which clarifies the position in respect of employers providing cycles and equipment costing more than £1,000—we are helping them to do that for their employees. There are a number of schemes across Government, with different funding streams and pockets of funding that have been allocated—vast sums of money, and rightly so, going in this direction.

As we have heard during the debate, cycling and walking deliver a range of benefits, including for health and the environment. That is why Ministers and officials at the Department for Transport work closely with many other Departments to ensure that our policies are properly joined up—hon. Members have mentioned working across Government, and that does happen. I want to ensure that cycling and walking feature prominently in strategies such as the sports strategy, the childhood obesity plan and the “Prevention is Better Than Care” approach involving the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and MHCLG. We want to work together.
Ruth Cadbury: Will the Minister give way?

Michael Ellis: I am afraid I have less than two minutes left, so I will have to continue.

I will just address the issue of safety, which I think the hon. Lady mentioned. We will achieve our ambitions only if people feel safe when cycling and walking, and that is something the Department has prioritised in recent months. I recognise that concerns about safety are a disincentive to a number of people. Following a major cycling and walking safety review, we published a Government response setting out 50 separate actions, including reviewing guidance in the highway code and encouraging local councils to invest around 15% of their local transport infrastructure funding on cycling and walking infrastructure.

However, it is not just about the scale of investment, although that is massive; it also has to be the right investment in the right places. This is why my Department is supporting the preparation of local cycling and walking infrastructure plans. We are currently providing a £2 million package of technical and strategic support to 46 local authorities, including Portsmouth, Oxfordshire and dozens of others. The support package will assist with the development of their plans, often made in partnership with the local enterprise partnership. Local cycling and walking infrastructure plans do not come with dedicated funding for implementation, but local bodies are able to channel investment for cycling and walking from a range of areas.

I welcome the contributions from hon. Members during our all too brief debate. I welcome the ideas proposed. As I stated at the outset, the Government are committed to increasing cycling and walking and to making our roads safer for vulnerable users such as cyclists, pedestrians and equestrians. As we start to develop the next phase of the cycling and walking investment strategy, I welcome all ideas for how we can achieve our collective ambition. In my view, there is a cross-party, non-political, collective ambition to make cycling and walking the natural choice for short journeys, or as part of longer journeys, across the country.

Robert Courts: I thank all hon. Members for an outstanding debate and for all their contributions. I also thank the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) for co-sponsoring the debate with me.

I will not go through everything that everyone has said, but there are a few points I would like to emphasise. One of the great joys of these debates is that, no matter how many points we think we have covered when writing a speech, there are always some that we have not, and other hon. Members always come along and raise them. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) made an excellent point about school travel plans: cycling must be safe for a 12-year-old. I know how passionately my hon. Friend feels about that, having known for many years of his drive to promote environmental and active travel agendas in his city.

Dedicated cycle lanes were another issue that my hon. Friend raised, as did the hon. Member for Portsmouth South and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green). There is no point having a cycle lane if it is not safe and it conflicts with traffic. The hon. Members for Stroud (Dr Drew) and for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) rightly mentioned unsafe road surfaces. I will also put in a big plug for electric bikes and technology, as the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) did.

The hon. Members for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire mentioned enjoyment and health, as did the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), who also mentioned the daily mile. Of course, it is the fun and exercise that are so important, and we should not lose sight of that.

I agree entirely with the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about routine. I also very much agree with the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) and others on the importance of reusing old railway lines; I wish we did more of that in our countryside. Of course, an integrated transport—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Electrical Products: Online Sales

11 am

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the regulation of online sales of electrical products.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I am pleased to have the opportunity for this short debate. The Minister knows that this issue is of deep concern to me, especially given an incident in my constituency in March 2015, in which my constituent, Linda Merron, died in a house fire after buying an electrical product on eBay. Since then, I have campaigned for a presentation. I am disappointed by the lack of engagement by the online sales platforms, and their total disinterest in helping to find solutions to these problems.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Lady agree that, with online marketplaces, it is much harder to trace supply chain operators? Transparency can be almost non-existent. Consumers may often be under the impression that they are buying from the marketplace directly, rather than from a trader. Does she agree that we must do something to regulate this online industry through enhanced legislation?

Carolyn Harris: I most certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman; it is rare that I do not. That is exactly why I set up the all-party parliamentary group for home electrical safety: to help to find solutions, particularly for this wild west of electrical goods sales, whether the goods are fake, unsafe, second-hand or recalled. I pay tribute to Electrical Safety First, which helps with the administration of the all-party parliamentary group, brings together several important stakeholders, and campaigns tirelessly to prevent electrical fires in people’s homes.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I pay tribute to the full extent of the hon. Lady’s work in this area, for which, I am sure, we are all grateful. Does she agree that it is shocking that 80% of fires in Scotland are caused by faulty electrical goods? People who buy these goods are often not aware of the danger that they are bringing into their home. Does she agree that we need a public education programme as well as better regulation, particularly of online sales?

Carolyn Harris: I certainly do. Anything that we can do to help to prevent any fire is of the utmost importance.

The Minister will be aware of the all-party parliamentary group’s recently published report, “The Problem with Online Sales of Electrical Products”, which I sent to the Department. It followed consultation with Electrical Safety First, the Chartered Trading Standards Institute, the Anti-counterfeiting Group, the Local Government Association, London Fire Brigade and others who attended all-party parliamentary group meetings. I also reached out to the online platforms Amazon and eBay, to request their input into the report. Only eBay responded, and I am grateful to it for doing so. Its representatives attended a session of the all-party parliamentary group, at which they gave a presentation. I am disappointed by the lack of engagement by the online sales platforms, and their total disinterest in helping to find solutions to these problems.

I will always remember the words of an Amazon executive who sat in my office and, when challenged, said, “We are just a landlord”, washing the company’s hands of all responsibility. So far as I am concerned, Amazon is totally disengaged, showing a complete disregard for consumer rights, safety and the work of the Office for Product Safety and Standards. The Minister needs to tackle these online platforms, just as she has tackled Whirlpool in recent weeks.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for the case she is making in her own inimitable style. Does she agree that more needs to be done not only on online platforms, as she mentions, but on second-hand sales between individuals, to create a much safer environment for the sale of electrical goods?

Carolyn Harris: Yes. It terrifies me when I see second-hand shops selling electrical goods that we do not know the provenance of. That brings me on to a really important point about Whirlpool.

The Government say that they take issues of consumer safety very seriously, and recently took unprecedented action on unsafe tumble dryers. Overnight, Whirlpool issued a 21-page list of 650—or thereabouts—recalled models. Have the Minister and her Department looked at the list? This morning, I saw numerous listed machines on Amazon, Facebook and eBay. The TCFS83BGP is one example, and anybody looking on their phone will find numerous models on sale today, even after the recall.

The Minister needs to take immediate action to stop these sites selling recalled models. Will she commit to an immediate review of the list, and to stopping those online platforms selling those machines? Will she also commit to enforcement action against any company allowing the placement of unsafe products on the market? As Electrical Safety First highlighted in its briefing to MPs for the debate, many sites sell recalled and substandard electrical goods.

Despite eBay’s willingness to engage, there are many significant problems on that site. In recent weeks, Electrical Safety First informed me that was to intervene in a case involving an eBay listing for non-UK CCTV equipment. The product did not comply with the low voltage directive for CE marking, or the Plugs and Sockets etc. (Safety) Regulations 1994—the plug did not comply with BS 1363, as required by the regulation, making it illegal—and there were no manufacturer markings.

It was only as a result of the charity’s work that the consumer was able to get her money back, as neither eBay, nor trading standards nor Citizens Advice were able or willing to help the purchaser. The listings are still available, and the seller is still selling non-compliant products. I am of course happy to pass to the Minister the details provided to me by Electrical Safety First. However, the issue I go back to every time is: why do the online sales platforms not have basic checks and algorithms in place to proactively comply with the law? Why can their algorithms not prevent recalled and non-compliant electrical goods from being uploaded?

To prevent cases like this, the all-party parliamentary group report recommends five specific areas of action. First, online marketplaces enable the sale of counterfeit and substandard electrical goods with little effective oversight or transparency. The all-party parliamentary group and I believe that legislation should be introduced...
to ensure that online marketplaces take responsibility for what is sold on their sites. Sellers must be clearly identifiable and accountable, and there should be a legal responsibility on online marketplaces to remove counterfeit and unsafe products as soon as possible, and to co-operate fully with enforcement agencies.

Secondly, although enforcement agencies, on the whole, have sufficient powers, they need the resources to enforce them properly. The Government should ensure that all enforcement is adequately funded, reversing funding cuts where necessary, especially post-Brexit. Thirdly, there needs to be improved co-operation and information sharing between different tiers of enforcement and with online marketplaces. Jurisdictional limits and the reach of the different tiers of enforcement bodies are insufficiently clear, and are a barrier to effective enforcement. Although the large organisations under discussion have primary authorities—an example is eBay working with Westminster—the OPSS should be given the task of co-ordinating and improving interaction between enforcement agencies and online marketplaces.

Fourthly, online marketplaces benefit from the UK’s product safety regime and so should contribute towards its operation, in a similar way to other industries. The UK Government should consider how online marketplaces could contribute to enforcement and should lead conversations with major marketplaces on the issue.

Fifthly, consumer education must be improved. It is key to reducing the risk from counterfeit and substandard electrical products. The UK Government should work with stakeholders to ensure greater consumer awareness through national advertising campaigns.

As part of the OPSS strategy, there is a workstream on combating unsafe, counterfeit electrical goods and second-hand electrical sales. I am aware that the OPSS is working on a funded project with Electrical Safety First on the latter, but I would be grateful if the Minister would inform the House of the following or, if she is unable to do that today, write to MPs to provide us with an update. Can the Minister tell us where we are in the OPSS strategy with implementation and preventing sales of unsafe electrical goods online, particularly in relation to the Whirlpool example that I have just raised? When did the Minister last meet representatives of the online sales platforms to discuss self-regulation? For example, why do the platforms not have systems in place only to place safe products on the UK market, and distributors have a duty of care when it comes to the safety of those we represent. It is important that consumers should have a choice when it comes to buying all kinds of products. In today’s world, more and more of us are turning to online retailers when we purchase all manner of things, including electrical products.

The changing ways in which we consumers purchase all manner of products make it more likely for consumers to buy to electrical safety is to be commended.

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The changing ways in which we consumers purchase all manner of products make it more likely for consumers to buy electrical products online. The online marketplace makes it possible for consumers to sell to other consumers. That is important that consumers should have a choice when it comes to buying all kinds of products. In today’s world, more and more of us are turning to online retailers when we purchase all manner of things, including electrical products.

The OPSS, working closely with a number of key stakeholders—including Electrical Safety First, which the hon. Member for Swansea East mentioned, and major online retailers—is bringing together those with specific expertise in this area to make the system work more effectively. The project is at an early stage, but a first strand is focused on evidence gathering, so that we can really understand how and where electrical products are being sold online. That work will form the basis of ensuring that we have the best system in place to protect people when they buy goods in online or offline marketplaces.

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In addition, the OPSS is working with local authorities to ensure that checks are being made by sellers on products being sold online to determine whether they are subject to a recall. If a business is found to be selling recalled products, the OPSS will inform the business of its findings, so that the business can take immediate steps to remove the product from sale.

Gerald Jones: Will the Minister recognise that in the current climate, the financial pressures on local authorities make it more difficult for them to have the capacity to deal with some of the issues that she is discussing?

Kelly Tolhurst: When we are talking about such a wide brief as consumer product safety, there will always be pressures on budgets, but the OPSS is working with local trading standards, with scientific, technical support. It is providing support, through training, to trading standards, to enable local authorities to carry out the job that they have been tasked with doing.

The hon. Member for Swansea East asked a direct question about Whirlpool and the published list of recalled models, and I want to address that straight off. If products on the recall list are being sold on online platforms, that is absolutely wrong, and I will instruct our officials to ensure that those online platforms are made aware of those products, and that the products are withdrawn, as I have outlined. The hon. Lady will appreciate, because she knows this area very well, that this is ongoing work. Market surveillance—the identification of illegal and unsafe products—is not a job done today or tomorrow, with one list. Market surveillance is ongoing, and is how we continue to protect consumers. It is right that our policy and research evolves. This is work that we do independently as a Government to ensure that consumer safety is always our top focus.

Patricia Gibson: The Minister has talked about fines and punishments for people selling illegal or unsafe products online. Does the product safety and standards unit monitor particular sites, or does it wait for the public to make representations about them? I am interested to know how the sites operate and how they are monitored. Where does the intelligence about illegal or unsafe products come from?

Kelly Tolhurst: As part of the OPSS’s ongoing work, it has developed a database through which information is shared with online platforms when we are alerted to problems and particular safety concerns. That list is changing every day or every week, as new illegal products are registered. It is an ongoing piece of work, and part of what we are doing weekly to combat people who act illegally by putting illegal products on the market, and also to ensure that unsafe products that are being marketed are removed from sale. I have already outlined that this is a big challenge; it is something that the OPSS is very mindful of. That is why it is included in the first part of the workstream about understanding the extent to which such products are sold and how that can be moved forward.

A further strand of this work relates to online sales in second-hand electrical goods. OPSS is gathering evidence on the extent of the second-hand electrical goods market across the UK, so that it can provide advice to sellers on their responsibility when selling second-hand goods online.

Carolyn Harris: Has the Minister’s Department seen the listings put up overnight, and has it taken action to remove Whirlpool products from online platforms?

Kelly Tolhurst: That is a conversation that I did not have with my officials prior to the debate, so I am unable to give a direct answer. However, I have already outlined that the list has been published on the website and has been shared with our enforcement agencies. Where products on the list are being sold by online platforms, our enforcement bodies such as OPSS or trading standards—whoever is available or appropriate to deal with it—should absolutely ensure that they are removed from sale. That is a sensible thing to suggest, and I am sure the hon. Lady would expect me to say nothing less.

We have been running a series of campaigns to raise consumer awareness on keeping safe. This is being done in partnership with the leading consumer bodies, including the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, Electrical Safety First, the Chartered Trading Standards Institute, Netmums and the Child Accident Prevention Trust. I was lucky enough to visit the CTSI symposium a couple of weeks ago, where I met many of those organisations. As part of the programme, OPSS and those organisations are planning a specific consumer campaign targeting issues that relate to online sales. I am sure that hon. Members agree that consumers are better able to protect themselves when they have the information and are aware of the risks.

OPSS is working to address the challenges posed by the operation of fulfilment houses. New types of businesses have emerged, and it is recognised that we need to do more online. They provide a range of services to online retailers. This work aims to combat the distribution of unsafe and non-compliant products in the UK supply chain via fulfilment houses. OPSS is working closely with local authorities and trading standards, and is targeting those businesses that choose to place unsafe or non-compliant products on the market without regard for the safety of their customers. This is an ambitious, two-year project. Our early work with national trading standards, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, Border Force and local trading standards has already identified targets.

The project is bringing together OPSS, local authorities, HMRC and the Intellectual Property Office to develop a multi-agency approach to tackling the new risks that the new model of sale and delivery poses to UK consumers. OPSS has been working to understand the scope of the challenge facing trading standards from fulfilment houses, and it has developed an up-to-date intelligence profile to ensure that activity in this area is targeted at the appropriate businesses. As I mentioned, the scale of this project is significant, and it has the potential to make a serious impact on the sale of unsafe products online. Projects on this scale bring together local and national bodies, and that is one of the reasons why OPSS was created. We now have the capability and focus to identify and tackle issues on a national scale.

Although there are many challenges from online sales, a number of which the hon. Lady has outlined, many online sales businesses already have strong relationships with trading standards and work with them to ensure the safety of the consumers for whom they sell. Businesses with primary authority relationships with an individual trading standards department know that they have available to them an expert source of assured and tailored advice.
on complying with consumer product safety regulations. Working closely with trading standards can help online sellers identify and address at an early stage product safety issues that may arise. E-commerce marketplaces such as Amazon and eBay are uniquely well placed to play an important role in product safety. A significant number of electrical products are sold through these platforms, which have systems to track these products.

The hon. Lady mentioned that Amazon has yet to engage with her and the APPG, but eBay has. Amazon and eBay have strong primary authority relationships in place. In both cases, the partnership has established robust systems to monitor products and sellers. Should non-compliant or unsafe products be identified, there are arrangements in place to ensure that product listings are removed from those sites quickly. I want to make it clear that we are under no illusion about the scale of the task. Those companies are among the largest in the world, and we cannot afford to be complacent about dealing with them.

As this is a global issue, OPSS is encouraging major online retailers to sign up to the product safety pledge that was initiated by the EU Commission. Under the pledge, online retailers commit to taking specific actions on the safety of products that are sold on their platform by third parties. The aim of the scheme is to improve the detection of unsafe products before they are sold to consumers, or as soon as possible afterwards.

I have spoken about the work that OPSS is doing directly to tackle the risks from second-hand and online sales, but it is important to remember that local trading standards are the main enforcers of product safety up and down the country. They play a hugely important role, and OPSS has been working with them to provide the technical and scientific advice, data and intelligence that supports their work every day. OPSS has developed a new product safety database to capture and share information on unsafe goods, so that risks can be identified and action taken as quickly as possible. It is already being rolled out across trading standards, and OPSS provided £500,000 last year to fund the testing of products by trading standards. We have increased that sum to £600,000 for 2019-20.

The hon. Lady asked many questions on issues such as additional resources and changes to the law. She will appreciate that this is the first time such questions have been levelled at me. I am more than happy to attend a meeting of the APPG, as I indicated I would; unfortunately, diaries have meant that I have been unable to. I will happily write to the hon. Lady with further detail on that, or we can have a meeting to discuss the issues—whichever way she prefers to communicate with me.

I want to reiterate that this is “job not done”. This is about how we evolve in a changing market and ensure that importers, manufacturers and marketers place safe products on the market. The onus is on the companies to ensure that they place safe products on the market. We will do all we can to ensure that we continue to monitor products and try to protect consumers as best we can. That is something that I feel very strongly about.

I thank the hon. Lady for bringing forward this important issue. I understand her passion and am desperately sorry about what happened to her constituent. I look forward to constructive conversations with her in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
Immigration Detention: Trafficking and Modern Slavery

[SIR GARY STREETER in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the immigration detention of survivors of trafficking and modern slavery.

As always, Sir Gary, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I am grateful for the opportunity to debate this issue in Parliament today. Trafficking and modern-day slavery have been described by our current Prime Minister as “the great human rights issue of our time”.

The Government have rightly committed to safeguarding and supporting those who are exploited in this way, yet new research published today by the charity Women for Refugee Women shows that Chinese women who have been trafficked to the UK are routinely being locked up in Yarl’s Wood detention centre, often for months on end. Instead of offering help and support, the Home Office is inflicting yet more distress and trauma on these women by subjecting them to indefinite immigration detention. I have stood in this Chamber and the main Chamber so many times to speak about this; sometimes it feels as if we are constantly repeating ourselves when we ask for the issue of vulnerable women in detention to be properly managed.

Women for Refugee Women’s research makes for very worrying reading. Since the summer of last year, it has received an increasing number of phone calls from Chinese women detained in Yarl’s Wood. The Home Office’s own figures show that since 2016, the number of Chinese women locked up in immigration detention has almost doubled. Women for Refugee Women has spoken to 40 women from China in total, and 29 of them have said that they have experienced some form of trafficking—often sexual or labour exploitation. For its research, Women for Refugee Women looked at the legal files of 14 of these women to see if it could identify patterns in their treatment by the Home Office. It found that the Home Office was deliberately refusing to protect these women and was knowingly inflicting further harm and trauma on them.

In four of the cases reviewed, women were detained directly from massage parlours or brothels—the very situations where they were being directly exploited and where there was a clear objective indicator that they were victims of trafficking. This is not to be questioned. These women were being taken directly from brothels. In spite of that, they were not given any help or support; instead, they were arrested and sent straight to Yarl’s Wood.

In eight of the cases, moreover, when women disclosed what had happened to them, they were referred to the national referral mechanism and the Home Office said that it did not believe them. What is more, in six cases, its reasons for refusing to recognise them as survivors of trafficking were in direct contravention of its own guidance on assessing credibility. It said that it did not believe them because they had not disclosed what had happened to them at the point when they were arrested—even though its own guidance explicitly says that delayed disclosure may be a result of the trauma and exploitation that they have been subjected to.

In some cases, the Home Office made obviously absurd assertions to justify its negative decisions. In the case of a woman who was encountered during a raid on a brothel, the Home Office said that it was reasonable to expect her to disclose her exploitation at that point, even though she was still in the situation of exploitation, and even though she thought that she was being arrested by the police.

Just take a moment to think about someone who is being exploited and is working in a brothel against their will, being forced to have sex with however many men it may have been that day. If that institution was raided by a group of uniformed officers, even I—a citizen of this country—would not be able to identify that they were the goodies, not the baddies I had been told about, who would arrest me if they found out what I was doing and who I had been groomed to be wary of. Yet we expect those women at that exact moment to say, “Yes, I am being prostituted.” It seems so unlikely and so inhumane.

Even when the Home Office recognised some of the women as survivors of trafficking, it still did not provide them with help or support. In one particularly shocking case, a woman who had received a positive reasonable grounds decision was not released from Yarl’s Wood to the safe house; she was actually sent back to the address where she had been sexually exploited before she was detained. I have worked in human trafficking services, and I understand what the pathway is meant to be once somebody goes through the national referral mechanism: safe houses, benefits and support should be available. It is a good system from the Government; it is well designed and kind, although it is not perfect. I have absolutely no idea why that pathway is not clear in situations where women are detained.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. She has done well to secure the debate and to highlight the excellent work of Women for Refugee Women. Does she agree that behind many of the problems that she describes is the way in which two separate responsibilities—for modern slavery and for immigration enforcement—sit uncomfortably within the Home Office? I declare an interest as a trustee of Focus on Labour Exploitation, a charity that works in this area; our research has shown that the conflict between those two responsibilities is repeatedly hampering attempts to protect victims. Does my hon. Friend agree that the only way to resolve the problem satisfactorily is to have truly independent decision making?

Jess Phillips: I could not agree more; it is clearly a problem, and not just in trafficking services. Sometimes I have to speak to the immigration wing of the Home Office and explain issues of domestic violence or sexual violence. I always sit back and think, “Hang on a minute—you’re the Department that is in charge of dealing with domestic violence and sexual violence. Why has it taken my explanation for your immigration officers to understand the nuances of the case?” I do not doubt that the Home Office is a caring and kind institution when it comes to tackling issues of trafficking, domestic abuse and sexual violence; I believe truly that its heart is in the right place, but while targets for immigration removal are paramount and the law has来看看更多关于移民拘留的话题，我们可能会看到 vulnerabilities, and the care side of the Home Office will be completely swept aside. I absolutely agree that there needs to be a severing and an independence.
Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right to say that she has raised the matter many times, I have heard her do so in various debates. It strikes me that very often these women are not getting any legal aid or legal assistance. Organisations that could provide such support, such as CRASAC—Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre, which I am sure my hon. Friend has heard of—are totally underfunded. Once again, as they do in every mode of life in this country, women seem to be paying a price somewhere down the line, whether it is in dealing with the national deficit or in other issues—benefits, universal credit, the lot. Although women have equal rights in this country, it all paints a pretty grim picture of the way in which they are actually treated.

Jess Phillips: I completely agree. Paradoxically, the support services that the Home Office funds specifically for human trafficking are good and relatively well funded for those who have already gone through the national referral mechanism. The problem is the idea that a trafficked woman, a trafficked child or a trafficked anyone understands what the national referral mechanism is. There is a high bar to accessing services, and the community-based support for people to enter the system has been completely and utterly degraded by years and years of austerity.

Birmingham, where I live, is certainly heavily reliant on religious organisations for the low-level support of trafficking victims who have not yet got to the national referral mechanism stage. That support is incredibly patchy and there is no outreach element to it; it is only provided if people manage to find those services. So, good advice and guidance on the streets, and a change in the culture of how we help these people, are vital.

I will go back to the specific cases of the Chinese women covered in this report. The distress caused to these women by their treatment at the hands of the Home Office is immense. One woman who was forced into prostitution in the UK described her arrest and detention in the following way:

“One day men in uniforms came to the house. They dragged me out and took me to the police station. Later, I was put in a van. It drove for a long time through the night and ended up at Yarl’s Wood. I was taken from one hell to another.”

Shalini Patel, a solicitor at Duncan Lewis Solicitors who has taken on many of these cases, has said:

“There is sheer disregard for the safety of these women who have already been subjected to such horrendous sexual abuse and exploitation. These women are by no means fit for detention, but despite this they are detained for months at a time with no adequate support. It is only when legal representatives step in that they are eventually released from detention. I hate to think what is happening to those women who are not able to access legal advice”,

which is an issue that has quite rightly been raised here today.

The Home Office will say that this report looks at only 14 cases, which is an understandable retort. However, although this report is the first piece of research to examine the treatment of Chinese women who have been trafficked into the UK, it is just the latest report to document how the Home Office is refusing to help and support survivors of trafficking. Research by Detention Action published in 2017 and a report published by the Jesuit Refugee Service in 2018 both showed how men and women who had been trafficked into the UK were routinely being locked up in detention.

Also, new Home Office data, which was obtained by the After Exploitation project and released today, shows that in 2018 alone 507 potential victims of trafficking were detained under immigration powers in the UK. In fact, this figure includes only those who have received positive reasonable grounds decisions and whom the Home Office recognises as possible survivors of trafficking, so it really is just the tip of the iceberg.

In all the cases that Women for Refugee Women looked at, the women were detained for over a month and four of them were detained for more than six months. These long periods of detention caused a drastic deterioration in their mental health; half the women in the sample had suicidal thoughts and six of them were self-harming in detention. And, incredibly, 92% of asylum-seeking women from China who are locked up in Yarl’s Wood are not subsequently removed from the UK but are released back into the community, which prompts the question: what was the point of putting them through that horror? As well as being extremely damaging, even traumatising, the detention of these women serves no purpose.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): As always, my hon. Friend is making an impassioned speech. Does she agree about one of the other disconnects that exists in the system? She has read out details of some traumatic cases of the long-term detention of individuals who need help, yet perversely some of us in this place have been arguing that the Government should extend the “move-on period” for those who have been given a determination past the 45-day mark, because 45 days is not long enough. The Government say it is sufficient time, even as they lock people up for months and months at a time in Yarl’s Wood. It just does not make sense to me.

Jess Phillips: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that it is ridiculous that the “reflection period”, as I believe it is called, is 45 days and is considered to be the reasonable amount of time that somebody who has suffered terrible trauma and horrendous abuse requires. Given my experience of working in one of the services that helps these victims, I know that often it is possible to make claims for longer periods, based on certain circumstances. It is like any local resident who says, “Gosh! If I paid my council tax with the same irregularity as the bins are collected, I would be put in prison!” It is one of those things where it seems that there is one rule for the state and one rule for others.

It is also important to remember that, in developing policies on helping survivors of trafficking, the Home Office has repeatedly promised that it will reduce the use of detention for people who are vulnerable. Following Stephen Shaw’s review of detention in 2016, the Home Office introduced the adults at risk policy, which it said would result in fewer vulnerable people going into detention. The AAR policy explicitly says that survivors of trafficking and gender-based violence should not normally be detained, yet the research published by Women for Refugee Women today shows that the Home Office is deliberately going against this policy.

In fact, the report by Women for Refugee Women adds to the wealth of evidence showing that, despite the Home Office’s repeated promises to reform its use of immigration detention, very little has changed since 2016. The number of people in immigration detention
has fallen, of course, but Stephen Shaw’s follow-up review of detention, which was published a year ago, found that “it is not clear that AAR has yet made a significant difference to those numbers”—

That is, to the numbers of vulnerable people in detention. And just a few months ago, the Home Affairs Committee found that the AAR policy “is clearly not protecting the vulnerable people that it was introduced to protect.”

What is the Home Office doing about this constant hamster-wheel of our coming here and asking that trafficking victims and victims of gender-based violence in detention be looked at and properly managed? It seems like many years now, but in 2015, when I became an MP, I went with Women for Refugee Women to Yarl’s Wood, to meet some of the women there. While I was there, because I was fresh out of working for an anti-human trafficking service, I was able to identify within seconds that the first person who I sat down to talk to—a woman—was a victim of human trafficking.

As I say, when I was sitting in that room in front of that woman, it took me seconds to identify what had gone wrong in her life, so I cannot understand why it has already taken four more years for the Home Office to consider putting in place proper safeguards. At the very least, there should be a proper specialist who risk-assesses everybody who comes through the doors at Yarl’s Wood on the day that they arrive; I will volunteer my time and I will gladly go and sit there for a few weeks.

I have three key demands of the Minister. First, the Home Office needs to stop detaining survivors of trafficking and gender-based violence immediately. It is very simple for the Home Office to do this; in fact, it is simply a matter of putting its own policy into practice.

Secondly, there needs to be a 28-day time limit on all immigration detention. The harm and distress caused by indefinite detention is immeasurable, and the research by Women for Refugee Women shows how the Home Office is detaining vulnerable people for very long periods of time. We already have much a shorter time limit of 72 hours for the detention of families with children or women who are pregnant, so I do not see any practical reason why a 28-day limit for everyone else cannot be introduced.

Finally, the Home Office needs to recognise that immigration detention is harmful, costly and completely purposeless; quite simply, nothing justifies its continuing use. Immigration cases can be resolved much more humanely and effectively in the community. If I was the Minister, I would shut down Yarl’s Wood and end immigration detention.

Again, there is this idea of one Government Department with two heads. I sit opposite Ministers from the Ministry of Justice who talk about women’s justice centres and how everybody knows that what is needed is proper community voluntary-sector provision, rather than sending women to prison, especially when so many women in prison have been victims of sexual and domestic violence, and often of human trafficking as well.

The Government line on this is completely different to reality, as they recognise that channelling the money away from prisons and into women’s centres in the community is the right thing to do, yet here we have this blot on the landscape, which is immigration detention, that does exactly the same thing as before and costs the taxpayer far more than specialist voluntary sector providers, who would do the same work better and more humanely.

I do not understand why we have to keep on having a debate on this issue. I hope that this is the last time that we all participate in a debate on this issue, but I imagine that, if she is still in her current post, I will see the Minister who is here today—the Minister for Immigration—the same time next year.

2.49 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I start by declaring an interest, which appears in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking and modern slavery, of which my hon. Friend the Member for Yardley (Jess Phillips) is also an officer. I congratulate her on having secured this debate.

I very much agree with my hon. Friend. I started to write a few comments for this debate and then abandoned them, because what I really wanted to say is that I just do not believe, as my hon. Friend said, that the Minister, anybody in the Government or indeed anybody who works in the Home Office wants to deliberately harm these people. But as I was writing, I got to the point that everyone knows this is happening, so how does it carry on? Why does nobody stop it? Over the last few months in particular, I have found myself in quite a number of debates thinking, “If we can’t stop it, where do the public go?” I know the Minister cares about this, which is why I wanted to start with it, but she is a Minister of the Crown, and she, along with others, is responsible for the policy and its implementation. When it goes wrong, as it clearly has in some respects, she will be appalled at the individual circumstances, but this is a systemic failure. It is a failure of public policy.

All of us here are frustrated, even more than we are angry, about why we cannot do something about this. I will make a couple of other points, but I wanted to stand up alongside my hon. Friend and others and to say to the Minister that she should use this debate as a further incentive—a further motivation—to say, “This is not made up. This is not according to the guidance that we have set. This is not what is supposed to happen, so why is it still happening?” The Minister has the authority to bring people together and demand that, if a contract is not being properly implemented, those responsible are held to account and something is done about it. The cry from everyone will be, “If the people who work in immigration are not following the guidelines, do something about it.”

Although the reports my hon. Friend referred to are outstanding, I am sick of reading them. I think we have all read the report that Women for Refugee Women has published today. It is a disgrace; there is no other word for it. It should be on the front page of every newspaper. In our country, in 2019, victims of modern slavery are imprisoned. That is not the sort of country we are. That is not the sort of country the Minister represents, or that any of us represents. But that is what is happening.

For goodness’ sake, can the system not wake up? Can it not regenerate itself and have a bit of passion and urgency in it? This is not a bureaucratic exercise; this is
men, women and children detained, not for a crime, but because they are victims. Which other victims would we lock up? It beggars belief. As I say, I do not feel angry about it—actually, I do a bit—but I do find it unbelievable. Sir Gary, you will have been in the position, as we all have, of having somebody come to one of your surgeries and raising an issue where you just sit there—I know I am getting older—and have that “I can’t believe it” moment. You just cannot believe it. I say to the Minister that this is one of those moments.

Only today, a Sky News report—published alongside the Women for Refugee Women report about Chinese women—stated that 507 potential victims of modern slavery were locked up. The Government’s response did not dispute that figure; it was just the bureaucratic very were locked up. The Government’s response did women—stated that 507 potential victims of modern slavery are locked up. That is not good enough. There are 507 people locked up. Is that not unbelievable? Is it not incredible? In 2019, 507 potential victims of modern slavery are locked up. That is not good enough. It is not right, and it is not the sort of country that any of us wants to live in.

Going back to what my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley said, the heart of this is that these are victims of crime, not immigration offenders. Until the system gets hold of that fact, recognises it and runs its policy accordingly, we are going to lock innocent people up. We are going to lock innocent families up. We are going to put children behind bars. People say that is emotive, but that is the truth of it. These people cannot come and go; if they cannot come and go, and there are co-operating with the police—what is that called? We get into propaganda if we are not careful. These are prisons, in which people are locked up.

I say again to the Minister that this has to be sorted out. I have been saying so for years, as have other people; some have been campaigning on this issue for years. Why is it that when somebody is brutalised, terrorised, forced into work or forced into sex—when a child is working umpteen hours, terrified that their family is going to be beaten up or killed if they co-operate with the police, and frightened of all the different threats they face—the first thing we do when we get most of them is lock them up? It is partly because we say that we do not believe them or that they are not co-operating with the police. Can I come clean here? If my family were threatened with being mercilessly killed, I am not sure the first thing I would do when arrested by a police officer in a country that I was not used to, that I did not know and that had a language I did not properly understand would be to say, “Quite right, officer. Take me down to the station. Let me help you out as best I can to bring before the courts the people who have been threatening me and who told me that if I co-operate they are going to kill my family.” That is not the real world. What do we do? We lock them up. I am not going to say much more, because in a sense, that encapsulates it.

I have bundles of things in my office—stacks of reports, of statistics, of this and that—but my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley has made the case that this is not good enough, and I am making that case as well. What are we going to do? I know the Minister does not want this to happen, but she is a Minister of the Crown; she is the person responsible. She has the opportunity, the chance and the power to do something about this. If she does not have the power in a democratic society, who does? She is part of Her Majesty’s Government—an elected Member of Parliament who is the Government official with responsibility for this issue, and she can do it.

Why are trafficking victims held? Is it public policy? If not, why does it happen? How long are these people held for? How many are there? Sometimes, we are not even totally sure of the data. How many children are among them. Is it none, or some? Are they detained only if they are with their family? What guidance is there, and how do the Minister or the Government check the guidance is followed? In evidence to the Home Affairs Committee, the Home Secretary himself said he was not totally sure that the guidance was put in place and properly acted on. As my hon. Friend said, Mr Justice Julian Knowles said in his judgment that the Government’s 45-day policy for someone found to have conclusive grounds was illegal and would have to be changed. Can the Minister clarify what the Government’s response has been? My understanding is that they have said they will no longer implement the 45-day policy for those found to have conclusive grounds. Will the Minister confirm that? Although it is a slight aside to the debate, that issue is important.

I will finish with this point. These women, these men, these children—these victims—have no voice. We are their voice; they are the voiceless. We are speaking up for them. We are crying out and shouting out for them. Is anyone listening and is anyone going to act on what is being said?

3.1 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for securing this debate and speaking so passionately and well on an issue that I know is a lifelong passion of hers. I am grateful for her continued pressure on this issue. I am also grateful to Women for Refugee Women and well on an issue that I know is a lifelong passion of her. I am grateful for her continued pressure on this issue. I am also grateful to Women for Refugee Women.
My good friend Linda Fabiani recently found that these things are happening at Dungavel as well. Through a freedom of information request, she found that, between 2014 and 2018, 19 children were detained at Dungavel. Between 2016 and 2018, six pregnant women were detained at Dungavel. That is in clear contradiction of all the things that the Home Office said it would do. What is being done to deal with the issue? I appreciate that the Minister might say that some of those are age-disputed cases, but that does not excuse the fact. Even if these young people are on the margins of that, they should be treated as children, not detained and traumatised.

Even when people get through the immigration detention system and through their applications, they face further difficulties. A constituent was in Glasgow for five years before her case was decided—she now has refugee status and was supported by the Trafficking Awareness Raising Alliance in Glasgow—and the Home Office continues to refer to her on her biometric residence permit by the name under which she was trafficked. That causes her huge trauma and stress. I can provide the Minister with the details afterwards, and I ask her to intervene in that case. It is just not right that that woman has gone through so much trauma and is still being referred to by the name under which she was trafficked. That is just not acceptable, and it needs to stop.

Finally—I appreciate that time is tight—I want to talk about the costs of the system and the costs of detaining people. There is a huge cost in human lives, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley set out, but there is also a huge cost to the Department. In 2018-19, the Home Office paid out £8.2 million for 312 cases where people had been wrongfully detained. That was up from 212 people and a cost of £5.1 million in 2017-18. That does not even include all the costs of the immigration and detention estate, or the adverse legal costs and the cost of other compensation that the Home Office has had to pay. It is hugely expensive and traumatising, and it damages lives. As the Women for Refugee Women report points out, people are being denied their rights within the system. Will the Minister intervene urgently and ensure that no more women are held under the system?

3.5 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Gary. Thank you for calling me to speak in this debate, which is close to my heart and that of many constituents. First, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for bringing this debate on the immigration detention of survivors of trafficking and modern slavery to the House. She has clearly articulated the report by Women for Refugee Women and Amnesty International’s research, many incidents of trafficking are missed or reported. However, this has not been the case with two women who had been trafficked to the UK, one of whom was pregnant. One of them had been in detention for almost nine months and had no idea when she was going to be released. She was at the mercy of the Home Office and its internal review system. That uncertainty was a great source of anxiety and fear for the women. Neither of them had access to adequate healthcare, even though the detention centre rules clearly stipulate that women in detention should receive the same care as the public.

Following my visit, I held my first Westminster Hall debate on healthcare in Yarl’s Wood. As many Members will be aware, Yarl’s Wood is the UK’s only predominantly female detention centre. Most of the women are victims of sexual violence and persecution in their own countries. The women I visited in Yarl’s Wood were from India and Nigeria—countries that are part of the Commonwealth family and with whom we share deep ties. It is disheartening to think that individuals from countries that have enriched our communities and culture, and who are rooted in countries we have close ties with, can end up in immigration detention. I will never forget that visit and the conversations I had there. Both as a citizen and as a parliamentarian, I was shocked, and remain so, by what goes on in Yarl’s Wood. It is scandalous to hold a pregnant woman in detention.

Like many of my constituents, it is difficult for me to reconcile our discourse on human rights, equality and justice for all as we continue to lock people up indefinitely. I am astounded that three years on, we are having a similar debate. The lack of progress should force us to reflect on our commitment to human rights and liberty, particularly as we have the boldness to encourage other countries around the world to follow them. Many will be aware that the UK has one of the largest immigration detention systems in Europe. Furthermore, we are the only country on the European continent without a statutory limit on the length of detention. This is the stuff of nightmares and reminiscent of practices seen in some of the most oppressive regimes in the world.

Human trafficking is a scourge on our society and must be properly investigated whenever it is suspected or reported. However, this has not been the case with two women for Refugee Women and Amnesty International’s recent research, many incidents of trafficking are missed by the Home Office decision makers, and even when...
they are accepted, detention is nevertheless maintained. In June this year, UK Home Office decision makers were using a country policy and information note on Nigeria for trafficked women. The policy was used to form a base of information on the UK’s analysis of Nigeria. However, on page 1 under the assessment, I found the following:

“Trafficked women who return from Europe, wealthy from prostitution, enjoy high social-economic status and in general are not subject to negative social attitudes on return. They are often held in high regard because they have improved income prospects.”

I understand that the July policy has removed that insulting text. I hope that the Minister can confirm that when she sums up.

I want to highlight a case from Amnesty’s research, which, all things considered, is very pertinent. It reported on:

“A Nigerian woman who was trafficked into the UK by her husband, who was physically abusive and forced her to engage in prostitution to provide funds for after their visas had run out. After escaping, she was fully compliant with her immigration reporting requirements, but was nevertheless detained. The sole reason given in her internal Home Office file was that there were ‘no barriers to removal’.”

Frankly, I find that inconceivable. Given the level of systematic abuse, how could the internal Home Office file attached to her say that there were “no barriers to removal”?

For Members to truly understand and appreciate the reality of immigration detention, it is necessary for all of us to critically examine the ethnicity and race of those impacted by the process. Immigration detention is a racist practice, and the policies used are racist and discriminate against certain groups. There is nothing controversial or novel about my statement. Just ask the many women and men who have been detained.

I ask the Minister to address four questions in her summning up. How does the Home Office ensure that victims of trafficking are recognised and supported? What is being done to stop indefinite detention? What medical assistance is given to victims of trafficking held in detention centres? Lastly, how are the Government implementing the adults at risk policy?

I will also take this opportunity to ask the Minister to ensure that the UK respects our responsibilities under international law and protects human rights for all of us and not just a select few.

3.13 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for calling me to speak, Sir Gary. It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. The record of the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) stands in great esteem in this House. I apologise for missing the start of the debate; I was attending another pressing engagement. We have worked on this issue on numerous occasions and it remains close to my heart. Becoming a new Member of Parliament is extraordinary. We learn a lot very quickly. One of the first things that I learnt about was the huge indignity faced by so many people in our immigration and asylum system. The ordinary member of the public might not be aware of it.

I watched the TV series, “Years and Years”, recently and I was amused by the fact that it depicted a future dystopia in which people were arbitrarily detained. There is a creeping sense that an authoritarian regime is starting in this country, and I could not help but think of it as something that is fairly normal in this country today. The UK is the only country in Europe that has arbitrary detention without limit. Normally, that is associated with regimes and dictatorships that are not democratic. It is extraordinary that it happens in this country—the only country in Europe.

The statistics speak for themselves and of the extent of immigration detention: 27,000 people detained in one single year on average, and at any one time 2,500 to 3,000 people detained. As has been mentioned, the majority of those individuals are eventually released, anyway, so it seems to be an entirely vexatious exercise: not just one that harms those individuals and causes immense anguish and suffering but one that is hugely wasteful of talent and potential and massively financially wasteful. It costs this country £30,000 a year on average to detain those people. It is extraordinary that it happens. It is now clear that there is an emerging consensus that such a practice is no longer fit for purpose. Not only is it an affront to human rights and to every modicum of common sense in what should be a compassionate and civilised society with mercy at its heart but it is a hugely wasteful exercise.

Many people who are well qualified and in many cases have lived here for years have come to see me. People who have escaped the most appalling situations that one can scarcely even imagine have a sword of Damocles hanging over them. They do not know when a knock on the door might come. Indeed, it goes further than that. In many cases, the way in which our asylum accommodation system works is effectively an extension of the detention system. I have had reports from the Women Asylum Seeker Housing Project in Glasgow that women, terrified out of their wits, have woken up to find a housing officer standing over their bed, and of people getting out of the shower to find someone in their house. How can the Home Office possibly tolerate its contractors undertaking such behaviour? I call on the Immigration Minister to make sure that the report that I sent her about the situation in Glasgow is investigated thoroughly and that the practices of Serco and its successor contractor are thoroughly investigated and the guidelines implemented appropriately. That is just one thin end of the wedge.

Recently I visited the opening of the Saheliya childcare project in my constituency. It is a fantastic charity that works with asylum seeker women, who are often hugely disorientated when they first arrive in this country, especially if they have children and have to understand a labyrinthine system. The work that the charity does is incredible, but it is extraordinary that it is almost the exception to the rule. Unless we find people and charities willing to help, it is a lottery and the women can often fall between the gaps and can effectively be disappeared into the sinister system of immigration detention. That is just a flavour of what I have experienced in the two years or so since I was elected to Parliament. I have been aghast at the way the system works. It is shocking, and I think I speak for everyone in this debate when I say that we are eager to see a change and we hope that the Minister will recognise our concerns.
Some of the examples that have been cited are not unfamiliar to me. However, not only women are affected. Many men are also affected. A Vietnamese gentleman in my constituency, Duc Nguyen, was trafficked to the UK to work in a cannabis farm, which was raided. He was charged and sent to jail, even though the Home Office recognised that he was a victim of human trafficking. He was released, but suddenly arbitrarily detained, even though the Home Office knew that he was a victim of trafficking. Trying to track down what happened to him was a nightmare. His friends realised he had disappeared when he was not turning up at the church where he was a volunteer. He had disappeared and nobody knew where he had gone. Trying to get legal aid and assistance was difficult because he was moved around from Dungavel to Colnbrook, where he was outwith the jurisdiction of the Scottish legal system. That is really difficult to deal with and must be addressed within the immigration system. The rules must ensure that people are not arbitrarily moved around within it to avoid giving them legal assistance. MPs are informed as a matter of routine when constituents are detained under the system so that we are able to advocate and provide assistance, rather than it being a matter of cat and mouse and hoping for the best when someone is detained and that someone knows that they have disappeared, that that is a common occurrence.

I had another situation with an asylum seeker from Sri Lanka who had managed to survive the Boxing Day tsunami. He broke out of the jail where he was held as a political prisoner and made it to the UK. When he went to a meeting to report and claim asylum, members of the Sri Lankan secret police were there. They threatened him, intimidated him and threatened his family back home, because he went to try to further his Home Office case.

This man was arbitrarily detained, even though he had the right to work and his case was still under consideration. It was only because his workmates realised that he had not turned up to work—everyone wondered where he had gone; they could not trace him, and he was not at home—that it was eventually uncovered that he had been detained. He was trying to reach his solicitor. He was saying to the officers at Dungavel that he should not be there, that he had the right to work and that his Home Office case was being dealt with. They mocked him, saying, “Oh yeah—we always hear that.”

The contempt in which the people who work in the system seem to hold very vulnerable people in is appalling. No wonder 10 deaths happened from November 2016 to November 2017. It is a very suspect and horrible system. It is high time that we ended immigration detention altogether. At the very least, we could impose a limit of 28 days. I fully support the campaign. Immigration detention is a waste of life, talent and money. We should invest in these people, bring them into the heart of our communities and unleash their potential. I would like to see that happen. I hope that the Minister recognises this opportunity, and treats it as such.

3.21 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Sir Gary. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) on securing the debate and on a characteristically powerful and comprehensive introduction to the subject.

I pay tribute to all hon. Members who have contributed to today’s debate. They have pointed out how well timed it is, given that two new, excellent reports have been published in recent days, one by Women for Refugee Women and one by After Exploitation. I pay tribute to groups that continue to campaign for the rights of those who have been detained. As the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) said, this issue should be on the front page, but it is not. Immigration detention centres are often far out of sight and mind, and those groups do sterling work in keeping these issues on the political agenda.

As we have heard, we have had a large number of reports and expert inquiries into detention, including Stephen Shaw’s review and the reports by the Home Affairs Committee and the Joint Committee on Human Rights. There will be another report that touches on this subject in the not too distant future. Last week, the Home Affairs Committee continued to hear evidence on modern slavery, with some pretty damning evidence from three witnesses about the significant numbers of modern slavery and trafficking survivors being detained. A lot of excellent submissions have been made to the Committee.

All those submissions and reports highlight the same thing: the frustrating, systemic public policy failure that the hon. Member for Gedling referred to, which sees so many victims of slavery and trafficking detained. At the outset, it is important to put on the record that we remember the harm that is done by immigration detention. As Stephen Shaw explained in his first report, “detention in and of itself undermines welfare and contributes to vulnerability”.

It is a hellish thing to inflict on anybody, especially victims of crime, and some cases were highlighted vividly and horrifyingly by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and the hon. Members for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) and for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney).

On the broader question of immigration detention, as I repeat every time we debate this subject, my party and I believe that the widespread routine detention of many thousands of people for an indeterminate period in what are effectively private prisons, simply at the discretion of immigration officers, is nothing short of a scandal. It has been fairly described as a stain on our democracy and an affront to the rule of law. The current system detains too many people. It detains people who should never have been detained, and it detains people for too long and without a defined time limit. The safeguards are utterly inadequate. The system is costly and inefficient, and does not even achieve what it is supposed to, with many people being simply released back into the community again.

I recognise that there has been some progress in cutting the size of the immigration detention estate, but there is a long way to go, and we need to go much further and much faster. In terms of the detention of vulnerable victims, including trafficking and slavery survivors, some of the evidence suggests that we have gone backwards in the last few years. In short, the systems and policies are not working as they should. The adults at risk policy, in particular, is not preventing many vulnerable victims of trafficking and slavery from ending up in detention.
Signs of trafficking or slavery are being missed at various stages. Even when such signs are picked up, they are either ignored, as we have heard, not acted on, or given less weight than factors relating to immigration control. We need urgent reform to stop that happening. Importantly, as I think my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central alluded to, we need to think about changing who makes key decisions and who has oversight of them. A host of changes could and should be made to help to eliminate the detention of vulnerable people. Our policy goal must be a bar on the detention of trafficking and modern slavery victims.

As a small starting point, we need to see significant improvements in awareness and understanding of the issue among those who are most likely to encounter victims in the first place. That includes police, most obviously, and staff in the Department for Work and Pensions or elsewhere. Treating victims as criminals or as illegal immigrants, rather than recognising them as victims, is a disastrous start to the process. If we can improve the response at that stage, problems further down the line could clearly be avoided.

We also need to look again at the precise processes that are supposed to stop detention after those first encounters occur. Gatekeeping is quite simply not working. Desk-based reviews of selective information will never achieve the sensitive and informed assessment that needs to be made. The Home Office should not be balancing vulnerability against immigration control requirements.

If an individual is suspected of being a victim, detention should not happen at all.

Turning to the issue I referred to of who is making decisions, the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) mentioned the conflicting policy goals that the Home Office, as a Department, is wrestling with. A whole host of organisations have commented on that.

Quite simply, looking after the interests of trafficking victims on the one hand, and relentlessly pursuing immigration enforcement on the other, are irreconcilable. To the greatest extent possible, we need to look at how decision making in trafficking cases can be removed from the Home Office altogether. For example, decisions about referral through the national referral mechanism for those in detention, or those being considered for detention, should be made by independent first responders or another independent body altogether.

Finally, I turn to the issue of oversight. As we know, a series of cross-party amendments have been tabled to the Immigration Bill that would introduce the time limit on detention I think everyone present seeks and that would strengthen judicial oversight. I very much hope that that becomes a reality. Given the experiences highlighted in the new Women for Refugee Women report, the report is accurately titled “From one hell to another”.

We cannot have it on our conscience that, every year, we inflict that journey on hundreds—possibly even thousands—of people. I hope the Minister will listen to all the constructive suggestions that have been made, and the powerful arguments that have been made for reform, so that we stop inflicting that journey on so many victims of modern slavery and trafficking.

3.27 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for securing the debate and for the hard work she does on this subject—as a new MP, I have witnessed the tremendous work she does. I also pay tribute to all the organisations and individuals who work on this issue day in, day out.

Survivors of trafficking and modern slavery are being locked up in immigration detention. Before I examine why that is happening, or what the solutions are, it is important for the Minister to recognise that fact and to apologise for the unimaginable harm that it is causing people as we speak. The detention of survivors of trafficking is not an accident or an isolated mistake; it is the result of a deliberate policy to create a hostile environment and to systematically erode migrants’ rights. There is a fundamental contradiction between the hostile environment and the modern slavery strategy, made worse by the fact that they are both managed by the same Department. So far, the hostile environment is winning.

The solution to the problem cannot be piecemeal. We desperately need a wholesale change in the culture and rhetoric at the Home Office. If immigration detention were used less, fewer trafficking victims would be in detention. If we had judicial oversight and a time limit on detention, fewer trafficking victims would be in detention. If there were legal aid for immigration cases, fewer trafficking victims would be in detention. Flowing down from the abhorrent rhetoric at the top, failures at every stage of trafficking survivors’ interactions with Government have meant that people have ended up in detention.

Starting with how people end up in detention in the first place, there is no independent screening process when someone is detained for administrative convenience. The Home Office has a detention gatekeeper, but it only uses information that the Home Office already has about a person, and often such information does not prevent victims of trafficking or modern slavery from being detained. The Home Office is failing to communicate with itself or to pick up on clear indicators of trafficking. Thanks to the hostile environment, bodies such as the police have taken on the role of immigration enforcement.

Women for Refugee Women has encountered at least four women who were taken straight from raids on brothels and massage parlours to immigration detention. Amnesty’s briefing for this debate outlines the case of someone who was encountered during a raid on a cannabis farm. They were arrested and taken through the criminal justice system, and they served a prison sentence. On release from prison, they were taken directly to immigration detention. That happened even though the Home Office knew, and had accepted, that that person was a victim of trafficking and a survivor of sexual violence. What is striking about this failure of communication is that information-sharing works well when it comes to locking people up. It is just when it comes to trying to get people released, or not detained in the first place, that the Home Office cannot seem to communicate with itself.

Once someone is in detention, it is difficult for them to be recognised as a survivor of trafficking or modern slavery, and many people find it extremely difficult to disclose their experiences. Such experiences are traumatising, but detention is re-traumatising for many, which makes it a poor environment in which to disclose abuse. The Home Office does not create an environment that would be conducive to disclosure. Women for Refugee Women found that six of the 14 women it spoke to had their initial health screenings between 10 pm and 6 am, despite
the chief inspector of prisons repeatedly recommending against that. In two cases, women’s initial health screenings were carried out by a male nurse. In another case, there was no interpreter.

Even when someone does disclose their experiences, the Home Office fails to follow correct procedure. When a rule 35 report states that someone has been a victim of trafficking, the Home Office does not always refer the case to the national referral mechanism. The quality of referrals to the NRM is poor, and there is a discrepancy in decision making both inside and outside detention. What does the Minister think is causing that discrepancy? According to the Jesuit Refugee Service, it is not uncommon for someone to be unaware that they have been referred to the NRM, and people need access to legal aid to prepare for an NRM referral in detention. A positive decision taken on reasonable grounds does not always trigger release. The Jesuit Refugee Service knows of at least three people who spent their 45-day recovery period in detention, and by all accounts, the adults at risk policy has made the situation worse for vulnerable people in detention. Caseworkers must now weigh vulnerability against immigration factors, which means that the bar for release is higher.

Some of the immigration concerns the Home Office has given to deny release are absurd. For example, the risk of abscondment is cited because someone will be released from detention into destitution, but it is the Home Office’s duty to provide support on release. Nowhere in the guidance does it say that, if a person is a victim of trafficking or modern slavery, they must be released, and such decisions are always weighed against other considerations. Will the Minister commit to changing that?

Once someone is finally released, support is often poor. Many people are released into destitution, and are at risk of being re-trafficked. If they have been refused asylum, they will be faced with study bans, have no access to English language classes, and live in isolation. Solicitors often fight to secure someone a place in a safe house. When asked to give an address for release, people may not provide a safe one. In one case, Women for Refugee Women found that a woman who had been forced into prostitution was released back to the address where she was sexually exploited before she was detained.

In conclusion, there is a basic contradiction between the Government’s modern slavery strategy and the hostile environment. If the Minister is serious about wanting to stop criminal gangs and protect survivors of trafficking, she must make it safe for people to come forward. At the moment, the traffickers’ threats that reporting abuse will get someone arrested are being proved right. We need legal aid and an independent body that makes decisions about detention. We need judicial oversight and a time limit on detention, and we must end the hostile environment. Labour would do those things. It would also close the Yarl’s Wood and Brook House immigration detention centres, using the money saved to fund support for survivors of modern slavery, trafficking and domestic violence.

3.35 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) on securing this important debate. I pay tribute to her tireless campaign work on the rights of women and victims of domestic violence. Many of us have heard her powerful speeches in the Chamber and Westminster Hall on several occasions, and we heard another such speech this afternoon.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions to this important debate. The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) described becoming a Member of Parliament as a steep learning curve, and I assure him and others that becoming the Minister for Immigration is also a steep learning curve. I was as struck as other Members will have been when visiting immigration removal centres. One of my first visits was to Brook House, which the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) referred to, and my second was to Yarl’s Wood. Subsequently I have been to Campsfield House, Colnbrook and Harmondsworth, and I am conscious that our immigration removal centre estate provides a necessary service that remains part of our immigration policy. It is, however, important that when detention occurs, it takes place sparingly and in the most humane way possible.

As I said, my role as Minister for Immigration involved a steep learning curve, particularly when learning about the shocking exploitation of vulnerable individuals from overseas, who are duped by the promise of a better life in the UK. The hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) mentioned the false promises that some people are sold when offered a different life in the UK, and that is one of the most horrific things. In too many cases those people are not brought to the UK for a better life; they are sold into prostitution or forced labour, and tackling that abhorrent crime has always been a priority for the Government.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) mentioned the report “Supported or Deported”, and as has been stated, Home Office correspondents in that report disclosed that 507 individuals who were believed to have reasonable grounds in their trafficking cases were detained under immigration powers in 2018, either before or after receiving an NRM decision. Although that number is correct, the statement is not, because those 507 individuals were not detained after getting a positive decision on reasonable grounds to remain. As clearly stated in the freedom of information response provided by the Home Office, that figure is for people who had a positive decision on reasonable grounds to remain when entering detention, or while in detention. Further analysis of the figures shows that of those 507 people, 479 received a positive decision on reasonable grounds during a detention period. Of those, 328 were released within two days of that decision, and in total, 422 people were released within a week.

I was asked about the availability of legal assistance in immigration removal centres. All detainees in immigration removal centres are made aware of their right to legal representation and how they can obtain such representation within 24 hours of their arrival at an IRC. The Legal Aid Agency operates free legal advice surgeries across the detention estate in England. Detainees are entitled to receive up to 30 minutes of advice regardless of financial eligibility or the merits of their case. There is no restriction on the number of surgeries a detainee
may attend. If a detainee requires substantive advice on a matter that is in the scope of legal aid, full legal advice can be provided.

At all IRCs, detainees who already have legal representation may receive visits from their advisers by appointment. Those visits take place in private, in designated interview rooms within sight, but not the hearing, of custody officers. Of course, detainees are also able to contact representatives by telephone.

The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) made reference to the recent judicial review. The Home Office is always trying to build its understanding of the complex needs of victims of modern slavery and to improve the support available. That case highlights the importance of tailoring support according to the individual needs of victims. In response to it, we will embed a more needs-based approach in our services.

**Vernon Coaker:** This is an important point. Does that mean that the arbitrary 45-day limit does not apply to any individual in those circumstances?

**Caroline Nokes:** It is difficult for me to comment on the application to individuals, but I will certainly come back to the hon. Gentleman with a fuller response to that point.

Several comments were made about the reform of the national referral mechanism and the importance of ensuring that the NRM gets victims of modern slavery the support they need. We have made significant progress in delivering that complex reform programme, including the launch of the single competent authority, which is an expert caseworking unit responsible for all NRM decisions, regardless of an individual’s nationality or immigration status. That unit has replaced the competent authorities previously located in UK Visas and Immigration, Immigration Enforcement and the National Crime Agency.

To improve the decision-making process, we have set up an independent, multi-agency assurance panel of experts to review all negative conclusive grounds decisions, adding significantly to the scrutiny such cases receive.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) mentioned the detention of children. I wish to reassure her that the UK ended the routine detention of children in immigration removal centres in 2010 and then enshrined that in primary legislation in the Immigration Act 2014. There remain limited circumstances in which children may be detained, but that is usually in a family unit immediately prior to removal. That requires ministerial authority should a family be detained for more than 72 hours, and there is a maximum of one week. I reassure her that this year—in 2019—no children have been detained at Dungavel immigration removal centre. There was one age dispute case, but the individual was found to be an adult.

The hon. Member for Edmonton mentioned women in immigration detention, and we heard from several Members about Yarl’s Wood. On 6 June this year, the independent monitoring board published its Yarl’s Wood annual report for 2018. The IMB made positive comments about the continuing efforts at the centre to retain and recruit female staff and to improve healthcare provision. We have considered all the recommendations in the report and an action plan has been drawn up in response to concerns raised. We take our responsibilities towards detainees’ health and welfare very seriously. The provision of 24-hour, seven-day-a-week healthcare in all immigration removal centres, including Yarl’s Wood, ensures that individuals have ready access to medical professionals and levels of primary care in line with individuals in the community.

The hon. Lady also raised the specific issue of trafficking from Nigeria. Last summer, or perhaps last autumn, I travelled to Nigeria and listened to harrowing accounts of people who had been trafficked. I also heard about some of the measures that the Nigerian Government were taking to address what is a very serious problem in that country. I am very conscious that there are significant numbers of Nigerians among victims of human trafficking found in detention in Libya or attempting to cross the Mediterranean. A disproportionate number of Nigerian victims of international trafficking come from Edo state in the south-west, where long-standing trafficking networks operate.

Modern slavery programming in Nigeria is a cross-Government effort, with each Department—the Home Office, the Department for International Development and the National Crime Agency—working co-operatively and focusing on areas of comparative advantage. The Home Office’s own modern slavery fund programme provides support and reintegration assistance to victims of trafficking and supports the judiciary to process trafficking. In addition, DFID funding has been directed to the International Organisation for Migration to rehabilitate victims returned from Libyan detention camps. That is a separate cohort of victims from those supported by Home Office funding. There is a real need for us to continue to work with DFID to help develop livelihood options for communities at risk of trafficking in Edo state and to help local government and civil society respond to trafficking there.

The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton raised some issues with rule 35 of the detention centre rules. We are committed to ensuring that the rule 35 process operates effectively as a reporting system for removal centre doctors’ concerns about the welfare of detainees. In March this year, we launched our targeted consultation on the overhaul of the detention centre rules. The operation of rule 35 is a key element of that and is closely linked to the operation of the adults at risk policy. Input from non-governmental organisations, the independent detention oversight bodies and medical experts will ensure that the replacement for rule 35 better supports the identification, reporting and caseworker consideration of people with vulnerabilities. In the year 1 April 2018 to 31 March this year, 2,146 individuals were the subject of a rule 35 report made by a medical practitioner.

Various hon. Members mentioned the adults at risk policy. In September 2016, we implemented the adults at risk in immigration detention policy, a key part of our response to Stephen Shaw’s original review of the welfare of vulnerable people in immigration detention. The policy does not, as some have interpreted it as doing, mean an automatic exemption from immigration detention for any particular group of people. Under the policy, vulnerable people are detained, or their detention continued, only when the immigration considerations in their particular case outweigh evidence of vulnerability. Cases are reviewed regularly and also when new evidence comes to light.

I appreciate that there has been criticism of the adults at risk policy. However, as Mr Shaw said in his follow-up review last year,
"it would be folly to give up on the Adults at Risk policy. It is best thought of as an exercise in cultural change, and like all such programmes it will take time to reach full fruition. The focus on vulnerability that"

the policy

"has engendered is a genuine one".

I believe that the policy will prove its full worth as it develops further and once it and the systems around it are in full alignment. Stephen Shaw made a number of recommendations for improvements in these areas and we are working hard, in conjunction with experts and in discussion with external organisations, to make the system as effective, protective and workable as possible.

It is worth remembering that the adults at risk policy replaced a policy that determined whether vulnerable people should be detained by reference to the concept of “very exceptional circumstances”. The difficulty with that approach was that nobody—caseworkers, legal representatives or detainees themselves—could interpret that in a consistent way. The adults at risk policy represents a much more coherent way of assessing the appropriateness of detention of vulnerable people and is a rational and proportionate approach.

Several hon. Members challenged me with the question, “What has changed?” That is a really important part of the comments I want to make and something I really wish to emphasise. We are committed to reducing the number of people in detention, to improving the welfare of those who are detained and to providing appropriate support to the most vulnerable in detention. Detention is used sparingly for securing the removal of individuals who do not have leave to remain in the UK, and people are detained for as short a time as possible.

We are detaining fewer people. At the end of December 2018, there were 30% fewer individuals in detention than a year earlier, and it is likely that that figure will be lower still this year. Over time, changes in legislation, policy and operational procedures will reduce the number of those detained and the duration of detention before removal, in turn improving the welfare of those detained.

Stuart C. McDonald: The Minister referred to work done in response to Stephen Shaw’s follow-up review. Will she confirm whether the Home Office is looking again at the gatekeeper process? Those 400 individuals who had referrals made after they were put into detention will all have been through that process, yet they did so without anyone picking up signs that they were a victim of slavery or trafficking.

Caroline Nokes: The gatekeeper function remains under close scrutiny. I and the many individual monitors who look at our detention system have scrutinised and continue to scrutinise the process of detention gatekeeping. The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that if people have been through the detention gatekeeper function and still vulnerabilities have not been picked up, it is right that we continue to reinforce those processes.

When it comes to numbers, before 2015 there were about 4,200 detention beds in the estate. Since then, we have rationalised and modernised the estate. We have closed Campsfield immigration removal centre and reduced occupancy levels in the other IRCs, in turn improving staff-to-detainee ratios. There are almost 40% fewer beds—about 2,600 fewer—than there were four years ago, and they are of significantly higher quality.

Alison Thewliss: The Minister is talking about numbers in the immigration removal centre estate. Will she tell me what has happened to the numbers of people held in the prison estate over that period?

Caroline Nokes: I will have to get back to the hon. Lady with precise numbers on those in the prison estate. Of course, it is important to reflect that those in the prison estate will be foreign national offenders who have committed some crime, which has determined that they are worthy of a prison sentence.

Each time an individual is detained, there must be a realistic prospect of removal within a reasonable timescale. Those making detention decisions consider the likely duration of detention necessary in order to effect removal.

I turn to the Shaw reforms. The Home Secretary made clear his commitment to going further and faster with reforms to immigration detention with four main priorities: encouraging and supporting voluntary return; improving support for vulnerable detainees; greater transparency on immigration detention; and a new drive on dignity in detention. We are making real progress in delivering those commitments and have laid the groundwork for that progress to continue.

I emphasise a project that I am sure hon. Members will welcome and support: the development of a series of pilots of alternatives to detention. The first one started in December 2018 with our delivery partner Action Foundation in Newcastle. We have released more than 10 women from Yarl’s Wood immigration removal centre to be supported in the community, and further recruitment into the pilot is under way. We want to divert women at the point of detention into the pilot to fill the remaining places.

I can report progress towards the second pilot. There is interest from several credible potential delivery partners, and we expect to have our chosen delivery partner by August, enabling the second pilot to commence in the autumn. All irregular migrants will be in scope of that project. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is independently evaluating the pilot series, and findings will be fed into the overall evaluation framework that is being developed to monitor progress across all of Shaw’s recommendations so that any findings can be examined within the context of the wider changes to detention across the Home Office. The UNHCR is also creating an independent external reference group to monitor progress and share expertise and best practice.

We are in the process of implementing other changes as a result of the Shaw review. We are introducing detention engagement teams in all IRCs, who are ensuring better induction and improved links between detainees and their caseworkers. We are also piloting the two-month auto-bail referral, which builds on measures introduced in the Immigration Act 2016 to refer cases to the tribunal at the four-month period of detention, and introducing a new drive on dignity in detention to improve facilities in immigration removal centres, including piloting the use of Skype and modernising the facilities. We are bringing greater transparency to immigration detention, and publishing more data, including on deaths and escapes from detention and on pregnant women in detention.

I reassure hon. Members that the Government are committed to providing those being considered for immigration detention with the necessary levels of
protection. We have particularly stringent safeguarding arrangements in respect of vulnerable people in the immigration system.

Jess Phillips: I appreciate everything that the Minister has been saying, and some of those things show signs of improvement. There are two points I am not sure she has answered. My hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) asked about the Nigerian issue. Is the policy of sending people home, saying basically that prostitution was making their home country a land of milk and honey, now over? Secondly, on the Minister’s point about the Government doing safeguarding in this area, how is it that women are being taken straight from brothels to Yarl’s Wood?

Caroline Nokes: The quote, which the hon. Lady has somewhat misinterpreted, has been amended to give clarification. It should not have been able to lead to such a level of misinterpretation. None of us would ever say that prostitution leads to an ideal way of life. It certainly does not. However, there is much more that we can do, working with Nigeria and our partners to address the particular problem that has arisen there with trafficked women.

The hon. Lady spoke about the safeguards we need to put in place. I will be completely candid with her, and I will give her a couple of minutes to wind up the debate. It is important that we do more. She and I recently attended a roundtable with the Minister for safeguarding, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Home Affairs, the Minister for Countering Extremism, Baroness Williams of Trafford, and the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar). At that event, I said that we needed to do much better on safeguarding across Government. That was particularly in reference to victims of domestic abuse, but I am conscious that victims of trafficking are, in many instances, victims of abuse.

We must do better at safeguarding those individuals and treating them as victims. The hon. Lady and I may disagree from time to time, but we must ensure that when we share data, we do it for good reasons so that we can safeguard and protect people in vulnerable situations. There is more work to do across Government. I said at the roundtable and will repeat today: it is no good enough for just the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice to be involved; we need the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education involved, too. There is a piece of joined-up Government work there to ensure that we enable victims to be treated as victims, who are safeguarded appropriately, while at the same time recognising the important role of our immigration policies now and going forward.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Jess Phillips will have the final word.

Jess Phillips: I like that sentence, Sir Gary. I thank everyone who spoke today. The strength of feeling in this House is clear: we wish to see the figure for people in our detention estate who have suffered any form of trafficking down to zero. Many of us wish to see the end of detention.

I am heartened by the Minister’s pilot projects. This system can be handled much better in the community with proper specialist partners. I hope we can go away with some sort of assurances that the Government can hear that the first thing we should do with anyone found in a brothel or clearly in a place of exploitation is care about them, not incarcerate them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the immigration detention of survivors of trafficking and modern slavery.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. We can move straight on to our next debate as I see the protagonists are here. Please will those who are leaving kindly do so quietly and quickly? That would be much appreciated.
Devolved Administrations: Borrowing Powers

3.58 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered borrowing powers for devolved administrations.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I thank the House for allowing this important debate on the borrowing powers of the devolved authorities across the United Kingdom. People might be wondering, "Why have this debate?" We have a packed audience here to listen to it, which shows the importance of the powers and why they matter so much for our constituents. If people do not realise how much the powers matter, hopefully this timely debate will help them to see that.

Funding is often contested. Speaking as a Scottish MP, and as I am sure colleagues will attest, there is confusion about the powers available for tax raising and borrowing, as well as about where the funding comes from—Westminster, Edinburgh or a local authority. That stands in Wales and Northern Ireland as well. In my constituency of Ochil and South Perthshire, recently a Barnett consequential for the high street and towns fund was denied. Representatives of the devolved Administration in Edinburgh said that there was no Barnett consequential, and that the funding came from Edinburgh. It is important to have this debate to discuss exactly where the money comes from, and the powers that devolved Administrations have throughout the United Kingdom.

There is also some confusion on social media; I am sure cross-party colleagues will agree. When funding plans are welcomed or criticised, there are often such comments as “Scotland has no powers to borrow any funds”. Today’s debate will hopefully be an opportunity to demystify the borrowing powers of the devolved Administrations and some of the funding routes across the United Kingdom. I hope that it will make the situation clearer and will raise the debate to a higher level.

I start with the facts. All devolved Administrations can borrow. That includes Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and even some of the devolved areas in England, although powers and the amounts vary across the devolved Administrations. I will attempt to make things clear for constituents and those who want to learn more about our financial settlements. Those powers will often be split into two parts: capital, going to assets, and resource spending, which is more cash-based.

My focus is very much on Scotland. I have some live examples, and I am sure colleagues will have interventions to make. In Scotland, local public revenue raises about £60 billion, which is about 8% of UK GDP. Expenditure stands at just over £73 billion, which is about 9.3% of the UK’s spend, so there is a gap of about £13 billion between what we raise in Scotland, including the oil and gas revenue that is often quoted, and what we spend. That gap is bridged by central Government, by other tax revenue raised in Westminster from across the United Kingdom.

What powers does Scotland have for additional tax raising and borrowing? Tax-varying powers have existed since devolution started. We had some flexibility over the penny on income tax. Obviously, our powers increased through the Scotland Acts 2012 and 2016, and we now have powers to vary the income tax bands—powers that the Scottish National party Administration in Edinburgh have used. They have lowered taxes for those earning under £26,990. If someone earns less than that threshold, they are now about £20 better off per year. That is about 38p better off per week—very helpful if someone wants to buy a Tunnock’s Teacake. Someone who is in the higher tax band will be charged about £1,500 more than other taxpayers in the United Kingdom.

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

That is a significant point. Not all the higher-rate taxpayers in Scotland—about 14% of Scottish taxpayers—are ludicrously wealthy; the people who fall into that tax band will be teachers, doctors—some will be nurses—and public servants, as well as some very hard-working private sector workers. They should have their hard work rewarded; they should not be penalised for being in Scotland.

We want to attract more people to Scotland. As my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) has brought up many times, this issue is especially important for our armed forces. Everywhere else around the world, they pay the Westminster rate of tax. It is only in Scotland that they are penalised and have to pay additional tax for being based there. Being based in Scotland is, of course, a benefit, and that benefit should not be eroded by the tax system imposed on them by Edinburgh. Thankfully, due to the work of my colleagues and the Government, that tax impact has now been neutralised, and members of the armed forces will now pay no more tax in Scotland than they do in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Devolved Administrations can borrow. Scotland can borrow about £3 billion for capital and about £1.75 billion for resources. What does “resources” mean? Breaking it down, it means that if we are a bit short in our cash flow in Scotland, we can borrow up to £500 million for cash.

About £300 million is for forecast errors, and we see some of those coming through at the moment. There is a fantastic National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee report on devolved income tax collection in Scotland. It makes for fantastic night-time reading; it clearly outlines some of the difficulties and costs of having additional income tax rates in Scotland.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a good point about the limited borrowing powers in the Scottish Parliament, which do not match the growing taxation powers. Yesterday, the Foreign Secretary ruled out more economic powers for the Scottish Parliament in his Tory leadership bid. Would the hon. Gentleman agree that the Scottish Parliament needs greater borrowing powers to invest in the Scottish economy?

Luke Graham: In short, no. We should use the borrowing powers that we already have. The SNP Administration underspent by a reported £450 million in the last year, which suggests that the proper economic programme is not being put forward for Scotland. They are not delivering for us. We have the power to vary tax rates, we have
additional borrowing powers, and we do not have half the risks and responsibilities that the Treasury in London has to bear, yet in each of the next four years, we are forecast to underperform, compared with the rest of the UK. Going back a year, we were the lowest performing economy in the OECD and out of the G20 advanced economies.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the capacity for surplus borrowing. The Scottish Government have used only about half of the capacity in that borrowing envelope. He will also note the huge, disproportionate cuts to local government. I understand that Government funding has been cut in Scotland by about 2.8% in the last decade, but 7.5% cuts have been imposed on local government. That has had a huge impact on the provision of municipal services. Why on earth are all the borrowing powers not being used, including issuing bonds to maximise the capital capacity of local government and to ensure we minimise the negative effects of austerity on local government?

Luke Graham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I could not agree more. What I cannot understand is the clamour and constant push for powers from the SNP, who have been saying, “We want more powers; we need them.” We have the borrowing powers. We have the tax-varying powers. We have flexibility over the business rates. We have flexibility over council tax. It is Edinburgh that decides how much our local authorities get. Just like the hon. Gentleman, I have experienced my local authority being underfunded in a way that has meant that education and general maintenance in our counties has suffered. I cannot understand it either. I wish a representative from the SNP was here to put the SNP’s case for those cuts and its economic programme. Unfortunately, the SNP is completely absent from a very important debate.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. These are the kind of debates we should be having to set the record straight about what is happening in Scotland and its fiscal position. He mentioned the Scottish Government’s underspend. I believe that they have returned more than £2 billion in the last four years in underspend. On the borrowing requirement, I understand that the Hong Kong dollar is an independent currency, but it is supported by reserves of double the GDP of Hong Kong. That means that if an independent Scotland were to set up its own currency, it would require somewhere in the region of £360 billion of reserves to support that currency. Where would Scotland get that from?

Luke Graham: I wish SNP Members were here to say how they would meet those responsibilities. I will not speak on behalf of the Scottish Labour party or the Scottish Liberal Democrats, but we are parties who support and respect devolution. We are the parties who are trying to make devolution work more effectively. That is why we are having these debates and changing the machinery of government to try to make it work more effectively. The SNP is the only party that does not believe in devolution. That is why it is not involved in these debates and why its members are not here today. All they care about is separation.

As the hon. Gentleman rightly points out, the SNP has not faced up to some of the responsibilities and costs of that separation. That is illustrated by the underspend. Some £100 million is somehow being rolled forward as part of setting up a new social security agency. That was agreed in 2016. We want to look at how to best serve our constituents. We do not want to be state building; we want to make sure that our constituents get the benefits that they need. Rather than spending £100 million-plus on setting up a new social security agency, which means our constituents will have to stop at three or four places to get the benefits they require, I would prefer to use that money to top up the benefits, and use current Department for Work and Pensions systems to ensure that constituents get the money they need. Our constituents would benefit, but we would not have to go through state building, and we would not have to spend money when it is not required. As I am sure the Chair appreciates, welfare is an incredibly complicated area of policy, and the systems that have supported our welfare state have been in development for over 60 years.

On the borrowing powers that we have on the resources side, there is power to borrow up to £300 million for forecast error. That is important, because as Derek Mackay, the Finance Secretary in the Scottish Government, recently outlined, their income tax forecast is down by around £1 billion. Again, this might be something that we should be debating in Westminster and Holyrood. The forecast error borrowing allowance is around £300 million, and it already looks like there will be a £1 billion gap. How will we bridge that responsibly without increasing taxes for people in Scotland, or irresponsibly having to go back to Westminster?

Mr Sweeney: The hon. Gentleman knows that I am certainly a staunch critic of this Government’s social security policies. However, he will be aware of the scope of powers available to the Scottish Government to deliver a system in Scotland that is qualitatively, as well as quantitatively, different. For example, ending the two-child cap in Scotland costs around £60 million, which is a fraction of the £500 million revenue underspend in Scotland, and would not even mean dipping into the available borrowing powers. What does the hon. Gentleman think are the motives behind not using those powers?

Luke Graham: I would not be so bold as to speak on behalf of the SNP—I do not think the party would like it. I can theorise that the SNP has not prepared for some of those powers and is not ready for them. Looking at the recent Fraser of Allander Institute report on the welfare and tax powers being given to Holyrood, we see that there are significant structural and programme changes that need to take place before those powers can be used effectively. I am sure the hon. Gentleman appreciates and welcomes some of the changes that the new Work and Pensions Secretary has made to the two-child cap policy. It is an issue that I have debated since I was elected to this place, and certainly before.

Welfare powers are available, and I am at a loss to understand why the SNP has not used them when it is so critical of a lot of my Government’s policies in this area. If the party is so critical, and the Scottish Administration have the powers, I do not understand
why they have not used them in the time that they have had them. They have been supported centrally by the Department for Work and Pensions in Westminster. The SNP told us in 2014 that it would take only 18 months to establish Scotland as a completely separate state, so I do not understand why it takes seven-plus years to try to get a basic social security system for our constituents.

The other £600 million that is available for resource funding is protection for a Scotland-specific shock. Should our GDP fall to 1% below the rest of the UK, we could borrow an additional £600 million to try to prevent any additional hardship for our constituents and to support our public services in the way they need.

As I touched on earlier, it is important to note that even with all those powers and the levers at the disposal of the devolved Administration in Edinburgh, we are still looking at an economic performance over the next four years that trails behind that of the rest of the UK. After more than 12 years of an SNP Administration, we have to ask why. It is not just that they disagree with policy coming from Westminster; it is that they have powers but are not making devolution work. This is not good or bad devolution; it is dysfunctional devolution. I hope every colleague in the House will work with me and MSP colleagues to try to improve that.

We have three tiers of government in Scotland, or four if we include community councils: our local authorities, the Administration in Edinburgh, and central Government in Westminster. As an MP, I am determined to ensure that they work as effectively as possible.

**Mr Sweeney:** Further to the point on the possible motivation, does he share the view that if the Scottish Government were to deploy all those powers fully, it might in some way diminish the appetite for independence? After all, a majority of Scots agree that the United Kingdom is over-centralised, but if they were to see devolution fully deployed and fully activated, it might well address any dissatisfaction that they had with the current system.

**Luke Graham:** It feels wrong to bash the SNP when its Members are not here to respond, but this is another clear example of the SNP putting the nationalist interest above the national interest. We could be using those powers to serve our constituents today, rather than deferring their use for years and years to further grievance and stoke the flames on social media.

Why is this important? Why did I apply for this debate on borrowing? It is so important because of the undervisitng by nearly half a billion pounds and then standing up in the Chamber and criticising the Prime Minister, the Government and often Opposition party leaders for their lack of policy and lack of caring for our constituents. That is inconsistent, it is indefensible economics, and it is unbecoming of MPs and a political party that sits in this Parliament.

**Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con):** I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Does he agree that it was quite telling that when there was word of the UK Government’s potential direct spending in Scotland, the Scottish National party was running scared? It is the only party I know that would run scared from somebody else wanting to deliver further funding in Scotland. It just shows that this is not about money. Everything the Scottish National party does is down to playing politics with policy and people’s lives; it is not about getting the best for Scotland.

**Luke Graham:** I could not agree more. The whole point of being an MP is that we put people before politics. I have certainly been critical of my Government on issues of spending—I know my hon. Friend has, too—and Members of the Opposition have certainly
been critical about getting funding for Scotland, be it in block grant or city deals. We have made the arguments and posed the difficult questions time and again in this place. As I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister appreciates, we will continue to do so in a future Administration.

Mr Sweeney: We have had an interesting exchange of views on this matter. On the use of powers and the logical disconnect between the rhetoric in this place and how it plays out in governance in Scotland, the Daily Record has recently been reporting on the scourge of drug-related deaths in Scotland, which are at epidemic levels and are a real national emergency. How can the SNP reconcile the rhetoric about the need for the Home Office to change its views on the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971—I agree with that—with cutting addiction services in Glasgow by a quarter? How can that possibly help?

Luke Graham: The hon. Gentleman will have seen at first hand the impact of some of those cuts in his constituency, just as I have seen their impact on frontline services in mine. No Government are perfect and no party is perfect—I respect that—but the whole point of these debates is to discuss the issues, come forward with facts, put forward arguments, fight for our constituents and, at election time, convince them that we are the best people to represent them, and that we have the best ideas and arguments. That is why I secured this debate.

If an hon. Member or a colleague in Holyrood were Finance Secretary, rather than underspending by £450 million and putting £100 million into the social security agency, they could have invested £294 million, which is what COSLA—the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities—has requested for inflationary increases in council spending. They could have uplifted that by 10% or so to help close the funding gap in Clackmannanshire and Perth and Kinross, and they would still have had around £100 million left to put into a reserve for a rainy day, if that were genuinely their intention.

I will wrap up as I am conscious that the Minister wants to respond. I hope that he will support me and other colleagues in taking a more mature approach to funding and borrowing in our United Kingdom, to ensure that devolved parts of the United Kingdom are not separate, and to ensure that central Government engage with all levels of government, so that there is appropriate borrowing and spending, and funding goes directly to the frontline public services that need it.

As colleagues have mentioned before in such debates, balance sheets and borrowing do not sound all that exciting, but every single number on the balance sheet represents an opportunity for an education, or for investment in the NHS and social care. It is vital that we get the facts out there and have a mature and appropriate debate. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will support us in that.

4.21 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): It is a delight to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. This is an important topic that commands interest not only across the House but, more importantly, across the four constituent nations of our Union and among our constituents. I take my hat off to my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) for securing the debate and for the energy that he and his generation of Scottish Conservative MPs bring to the House of Commons. It has been a tremendous tonic and has been very good for the House as a whole.

Like my hon. Friend, I am surprised and a little dismayed that the Scottish National party is not present for the debate. That in itself tells a story that we need to explore more widely and that I will come to later. He raised a wide array of issues. I will talk about what the Government are doing more generally before I address the question of Scotland that he raised so eloquently.

As my hon. Friend and everyone in the Chamber will know, the Government are committed to strengthening the Union, which is arguably the oldest and most successful partnership of its kind in the world. Only last week, the Prime Minister announced an independent review to ensure that Departments in Whitehall work in the best interests of the Union. Protecting the Union is also a priority for both candidates who are vying to be the next Prime Minister.

Ian Murray: I understand that the Minister’s opening remarks are about the Government protecting the Union, but what does he say to the 63% of Conservative members who would rather see Brexit than the UK staying together?

Jesse Norman: I do not think that they regard that as in tension with a proper unionism; they worry about the Union with the EU. In their view, they are giving voice to a sovereignty that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland expresses and has done for more than 200 years.

As colleagues will know, I can never talk about the Union without mentioning my great hero, Adam Smith. He said that the 1701 union was: “a measure from which infinite Good has been derived” to Scotland. How right he was. The reason why that was true for Smith and is true now is that the Scots took advantage of the potential offered by that incorporating political arrangement. As the House will know, Scots spread out across the world, ran large chunks of it and were extremely effective and successful entrepreneurs and businesspeople. Their country and the United Kingdom as a whole greatly benefited.

Borrowing powers are one of the most important ways in which the Government are strengthening the constitutional settlement, by providing devolved Administrations with greater choice and responsibility. Greater resource borrowing helps to ensure budgetary stability and affords devolved Administrations the flexibility to manage volatility associated with their new revenue-raising powers—or tax powers, in Scotland’s case. Similarly, capital borrowing powers offer much greater control over infrastructure investment.

The Scotland Act 2016 increased the Scottish Government’s capital borrowing limit to £3 billion, with an annual limit of £450 million. The resource limit was also raised to £1.75 billion, with an annual limit of £600 million. Those are substantial sums that create a degree of responsibility. To have those powers is to be trusted to exercise them responsibly. If that means investing them in better services on behalf of local people, that is the responsibility that those Administrations face.
It should be clear that those individual borrowing powers come on top of the funding that devolved Administrations receive through the Barnett formula. The fact that devolved Administrations already receive a share of all UK Government borrowing under the formula explains the need for limits on their borrowing to ensure the sustainability of the public finances. Spending decisions taken by the UK Government continue to deliver growth and prosperity across the whole of the United Kingdom. As my hon. Friend and colleagues will know, last year’s Budget provided a funding boost of £950 million in Scotland, £550 million in Wales and £320 million in Northern Ireland.

By 2020, all three devolved Administrations will therefore have received a real-terms increase during this spending review. Before adjustments for tax devolution, block grant funding will have grown to more than £32 billion in Scotland, £16.1 billion in Wales and £11.7 billion in Northern Ireland. There has been further support through city deals and growth deals, including more than £1.3 billion for eight such deals in Scotland.

I reassure my hon. Friend and the House that the Government are also committed to devolving greater responsibilities on tax and welfare. Once the 2016 Act is fully implemented, more than 50% of the Scottish Government’s funding will come from revenues raised in Scotland, making the Scottish Government more accountable to the people they serve. That is surely the point—with power comes responsibility—so the fact that the SNP is not present in the Chamber is a token of the wider problem of the Scottish Government’s lack of accountability. It is unfortunate that, although one constantly hears that Government’s grievances, they do not spend to address the issues of which they complain—my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) is absolutely right to make the point about playing politics. However, the question at the heart of the debate and of the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire is not one of disingenuousness or hypocrisy but one of public service and accountability.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire for securing this debate and for his important and eloquent speech. It poses a challenge to the Scottish Government to live by what they say and to do what they profess. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to speak for the Government and demonstrate our continued support for the sustainability and prosperity not just of the Scottish nation and economy but of those of Wales and Northern Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

4.29 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the future of the UK steel industry.

It is a real pleasure to serve with you chairing, Mr Hollobone. Two thirds of the types of steel around today were not around 15 years ago—proof positive that steel is a highly innovative, flexible and recyclable product that we need to make in the UK if we are serious about having our defence and infrastructure security in our own hands. The strongest economies have strong steel sectors: the USA, China and Japan are first, second and third in the steel league table, with Germany coming in at seventh, while the UK lags behind in 30th position. If we are serious about our place in the world, it is high time we took steps to move up that table. Scunthorpe and Port Talbot provide the UK’s independent steelmaking capacity for long and strip steel products, and we need both for our future security.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend warmly on securing this debate on such an important issue. Does he agree that one of the obvious steps to take to get up that league table would be for the Government to commit to have the Royal Navy fleet solid support ships built purely out of UK steel?

Nic Dakin: Procurement is a real challenge for the Government, and my hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I am sure that the Minister has picked it up, and I will return to it later in my speech.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. On the issue of procurement, does he agree that we need more regional support? In response to a written question, the Government admitted to me that defence spending is only £40 a head in Yorkshire, which compares with £1,000 a head in the south-west. Surely such spending should be spread much more evenly across the north and the south.

Nic Dakin: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Certainly, steelmaking is predominantly in the north, and better investment in procurement pipelines would help to address the inadequacies to which she draws attention.

Sadly, British Steel is in liquidation, and Tata is determining the direction of its UK business in the light of the failure to progress the merger with Thyssenkrupp. We face serious questions about the sector’s future. Other steelmakers, such as Celsa and Liberty, also look to the Government to confirm their commitment to the steel industry.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate, which affects many of my constituents, who are just along the A180 from his constituency. Has he had any discussions about the impact of losing the steel industry
in Scunthorpe and about the wider impact across the south bank, which has many of the jobs in the supply chain?

Nic Dakin: My hon. Friend makes an important point: there are 5,000 direct jobs in the Scunthorpe area, in Teesside and elsewhere in the UK, but also 20,000 jobs in the supply chain. Steel is a significant employer, as well as a significant strategic asset for the UK. All the work that everyone is doing is to ensure that the whole business progresses under a new owner, which is the direction we all need to remain focused on, across the House and across the country.

The British Steel workforce in Scunthorpe, the north-east and elsewhere has responded brilliantly at a time when everyone working for the company sees their future in the balance. Workers, trade unions, the management team and the supply chain must be congratulated on keeping the show on the road in such difficult times. The magnificent outputs that they are achieving show what a sound business this is, still producing world-class steel day after day. British Steel has a strong strategic plan in place, externally validated by top-tier management consultancy McKinsey.

The Government have made all the right noises. The Secretary of State and the Minister showed real leadership in putting in place the indemnity that allows the business to continue as a going concern. When local cross-party MPs met the Prime Minister, she made clear her Government’s commitment to finding a sustainable future. The Secretary of State’s chairing of the British Steel support group’s weekly meetings is valued by all stakeholders. However, we are now reaching a crunch time, when warm words need to be matched with further actions to close the deal with prospective buyers.

Assurances may need to be given about the environmental liability—a no-brainer, as the liability is likely to fall to the Crown anyway if the business fails. On future carbon credits, the Government will need to show the flexible thinking that they have already shown in their dealings with Greybull Capital. Other things for the Government to look at might include loans to support investment and so on. To be helpful, will the Minister confirm that the Government, while being mindful of the need to act within the law, will do all they can proactively to close the deal with those bidders the official receiver believes can take the business forward?

Over the past few years, we have bounced from one steel challenge to another. Too often, steel policy responds to the urgent needs of the now, but fails to set out a strategic future path for this crucial foundation industry. In 2015, Sahaviriya Steel Industries in Redcar closed, meaning that the UK’s strategic steelmaking assets there are now lost forever. The cost of cleaning up the site, alongside the human cost of huge job losses at the heart of the northern powerhouse, will be with us for a very long time.

Instead of lurching from one crisis to another, the UK needs a Government that will put a plan for steel in place by responding positively to the five strategic asks made by steel MPs; trade unions and employers with one loud, consistent voice. First, the threat of a no-deal exit from the European Union is what sparked the current crisis, and anyone who talks blithely of a no-deal exit risks steel jobs and livelihoods throughout the supply chain—no deal risks no steel—so we need a positive new relationship with the EU to give certainty on the timely provision of UK-specific quotas within the EU steel safeguards. That should be a major first priority for the new Prime Minister when he takes up his post.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this vital debate. I also pay tribute to him for his absolutely outstanding work as chair of the all-party group on steel and metal-related industries. He shows real leadership in this area. On the subject of the steel quotas, he rightly pointed out that, in the case of a no-deal Brexit, we potentially have the disastrous situation of UK steel being subject to EU dumping regulations. What steps should the Government take specifically to ensure that we are given those quotas, which UK Steel has said are the No. 1 priority in the short term?

Nic Dakin: It is about talking to the EU about the necessity of having UK-specific quotas. That could be part of a deal; it is a deal that can be done, and one that the new Prime Minister needs to put high on his list of priorities. That needs to happen, because steel is a strategic industry that is important not only to us in steel communities, but to the UK if it is serious about its place in the world. Ensuring that we get those quotas is therefore the first ask.

Secondly, a level playing field is still needed on electricity prices for UK steel. It is not good enough for the Government to say that they have given some of the “higher than our competitors” energy taxes back; we need some innovative approaches to level the energy-costs playing field. For example, we could put measures in place to maximise the level of relief on renewables levies, which is allowable under state aid rules, we could bring in German or French-style network cost reductions, or we could provide an exemption from the capacity market levy, as the Polish Government are doing. Those things happen in our competitor countries and, given the political will, they could happen here.

Thirdly, something needs to be done to tackle the much larger level of business taxes on steel in the UK compared with our competitors. It is bonkers that the site in Scunthorpe has higher business rates than the equivalent site, which is twice the size, at IJmuiden in the Netherlands. That is not a level playing field under anyone’s rules.

Fourthly, more could be done to maximise public procurement of steel, as my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) indicated. Progress on Government policy note 11/16 on procuring steel in major projects remains patchy. I was pleased to see the previous Minister with responsibility for the steel industry, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), begin trying to make Departments accountable, but we have a long way to go to get real, effective traction, and we are three years on since the Government put that policy guideline in place. In answer to my written questions asking Departments if they have signed up to the steel charter, all confirmed that the current Minister is on the case and has written to them—but, in the main, the answers were hesitant and generic. The honourable exceptions were the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Work and Pensions, both of which confirmed that they will sign the charter. The next step for them will be implementation.
Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman—my constituency neighbour—for securing this debate; he is a genuine champion of our local area and for steelworkers in particular. Would he encourage more local authorities to sign up to the steel charter? Last week, North Lincolnshire Council’s leader got the first London authority—Bexley, I believe—to sign up. It is really important that more councils sign up to that charter.

Nic Dakin: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; to its credit, North Lincolnshire Council has shown strong cross-party unity and leadership on this issue by signing up to the procurement of UK steel. A number of local authorities across the country have done so, but many more could follow that lead, and he is right to call for that action.

All Government Departments, bodies and infrastructure projects that purchase large quantities of steel should sign up to the UK steel charter, committing to specific, ambitious actions to increase the amount of UK steel used in public projects. The guidelines should be extended to cover all major public procurement and infrastructure projects. The good practice exemplified by Network Rail and Heathrow airport should be the rule, not the exception.

The fifth ask is to use the UK’s €250 million share of the research fund for coal and steel, which is paid for by industry levies and will be returned after we leave the EU, to secure an ambitious programme of innovation for the UK steel sector. A practical use for that money would be investment in our steel sector’s future. The previous Steel Minister made a commitment on behalf of the Government to convene a steel summit to consider how to realise a steel sector deal that would take the industry, its supply chain and the country forward. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will take forward that commitment? Will he respond positively to the practical suggestions I have made about how the Government can act to back steelworkers, steelmakers and UK plc?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 5.30 pm, and I am obliged to call the Front-Bench speakers no later than seven minutes past 5. The guidelines are that the SNP spokesperson may speak for five minutes, the Opposition spokesperson may speak for five minutes and the Minister may speak for 10 minutes, while Mr Dakin will have two or three minutes at the end to sum up the debate. However, our afternoon will be interrupted by Divisions in the House, which are expected at 4.58 pm, so the debate is likely to finish later than 5.30 pm. Six Members wish to speak—a galaxy of talent and knowledge about the UK steel industry. Therefore, each speaker may speak for no more than four minutes, beginning with Simon Clarke.

4.43 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I will endeavour to stick to that limit; thankfully, I echo many of the comments made by the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin). I congratulate him on securing this important debate; the cross-party unity in this room is mirrored in the weekly meetings we have had in Doncaster since the crisis first began. It is important that we maintain that, and show united confidence in the future of the industry and the passion that we all have to retain those skills in our local economies. Huge praise is due to both the Minister and the Secretary of State, who understand the significance, on a social and economic level, of making sure that our communities continue to have a strong future.

I represent Skinningrove, known locally as the iron valley, where steel has been produced since 1874. The heritage runs deep, but this is very much about the future rather than the past. The huge capabilities of the British Steel special profiles division, producing bulk flats, forklift profiles, cutting-edge profiles for bulldozers and track shoes, are all capabilities that we must not lose from our economy. The fact that it is co-located with Caterpillar on the same site is a huge tribute to Anglo-American co-operation, which goes far beyond the intemperate comments of the President in recent years—this is the positive face of a union that has delivered huge benefits to our area.

The conduct of Greybull is well known, and I do not propose to elaborate on it today. It is a source of immense frustration that it has let the workforce down and that the company has been allowed to reach this sad situation. We all know that it needs to be replaced by a long-term, viable investor who is committed to the lasting success that the workforce deserve, who can deliver a profitable and successful industry. I emphasise that everybody—Government, management and the unions—stand united in pursuit of a positive outcome to the talks. Only thus can we secure a sale.

Looking beyond that, as we heard from the hon. Gentleman, we need to do more on issues such as energy costs. The average electricity price for UK steel producers this year is £65 per MWh. That compares with £43 in Germany and £31 in France. We need to take steps to allow our industry to compete on a level playing field. If the Government commit to do that, the industry has said that it will reinvest the estimated £55 million a year that it would save back into production facilities.

We need to look at boosting research and development. I place on record my profound admiration for the work of the excellent Material Processing Institute, which the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) knows all about. It submitted a bid, alongside Innovate UK, to unlock funding for issues such as the steel industry transition, the digitisation of the sector and the circular economy in rare metals. We should look to pursue all those things. I hope the Minister will touch on some of those issues in his remarks, because they confer lasting benefits to British steel.

Finally, we need to promote and celebrate our steel industry, as we touched on in Doncaster yesterday. The steel charter is immensely valuable, and it is crucial that we increase the percentage of British steel in Government contracts from its current 43%. The private sector needs to play its role, too, to make sure that it explores all available opportunities. If those longer-term opportunities can be seized, there is nothing standing in the way of British steel having a long, secure and prosperous future.

We all want to see that, and I hope over the coming weeks the Government will do everything they can to make sure we deliver that.
4.47 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is truly a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) for securing this debate, again. It is truly dispiriting to be here again to call on the Government to act to safeguard the future of British steel production. It is a vital strategic industry, yet the Government’s record on steel is one of abject failure.

Time and again Members, many of them here today, have set out in clear terms what is required. Time and again, the Government have done nothing. They have failed to take action on high energy costs that have held the industry back against its worldwide and European competitors. They have failed to take action on business rates, which penalise investment and prevent the industry from shaping its own future. They have failed to commit to favouring British-produced steel in major state infrastructure projects such as HS2. Most dammingly, they have failed to properly understand the industry, its importance and the unique challenges it faces. We find ourselves, once more, talking about thousands more workers with uncertain futures, and more communities that face having their hearts torn away.

It did not have to be like this. In Rotherham, Tata’s speciality steels division was taken over by Liberty House. While the collapse of British Steel has called into question the conduct and suitability of its owner Greybull Capital, Liberty has invested heavily in its Rotherham plant. Last year, I attended the refiring of a furnace that had been mothballed for two years. In Rotherham, steel is not losing jobs but recruiting for jobs. Yet it is reported that potential buyers of British Steel’s operations have been put off, not by the challenges common across the industry, but by our Government’s failure to commit to support investment and development in the sector.

The Government simply cannot continue to stand by and watch as the steel industry in Britain withers and dies. Promises are no longer enough. The Government and watch as the steel industry in Britain withers and dies. They must act now, in the national interest, to protect jobs in the sector.

It was the UK Government in the EU that led demands to change procurement rules within the European Union, just a few years ago, to make it easier for us to procure UK steel. Of course, those procurement rules are still a challenge for us. The Government cannot just turn around, as some people think, and say, “We are going to use UK steel in all Government contracts.” That would be illegal under UK and EU law, and—for those who think that a no-deal Brexit is the answer to all this—it would even be illegal under World Trade Organisation rules.

Having used half my speech to slightly disagree with my friend the hon. Member for Rotherham, I will say why we need the Government to act now and set out some things they need to do.

As the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) outlined, our area relies strongly on the steel industry. Scunthorpe is a steel town: north Lincolnshire is, in many ways, a steel district. Most of the workers—the lion’s share, probably—live in my constituency. We cannot underestimate the impact of steel workers on our local economy, because these are some of the best paid and most skilled jobs we have in our area. I am not prone to hyperbole—well I am, but let us pretend I am not—but to lose them would be devastating on our local economy.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Andrew Percy: Of course I will give way to my neighbour.

Martin Vickers: My hon. Friend is, as always, erudite—that is the word I was looking for. His point about the northern Lincolnshire economy is well made, as it was by the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin). Would he also acknowledge that this issue spreads far and wide? Some 150 people are employed at the port of Immingham, either by Associated British Ports or British Steel directly. Speaking as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on rail, I can say that there are impacts not just on the supply of steel but on the movement of raw materials.

Andrew Percy: Absolutely. I do not need to repeat what my hon. Friend said; all that is true and demonstrates how important the industry is not just to our sub-region or region, but to the whole UK economy.

Where are we now? I thank the Minister and the Secretary of State for the positive way in which they have engaged with local stakeholders, unions, the councils and local Members of Parliament. I genuinely believe that this Government are trying to do everything they can to secure a future for the site. This is an independent procedure through the official receiver, but locally we do not want to see a partitioning off or a selling off of different parts of the business. We want to see the business sold in its entirety. For the reasons stated by the hon. Member for Scunthorpe in relation to the strategic importance of the industry, we have to continue producing steel in Scunthorpe.
[Andrew Percy]

The Government must stand ready to do all they can financially to support the industry. There are tens of millions of pounds that were available before the liquidation, which we have been assured remain available for any new partner on a commercial basis, as required by law. Can the Minister reconfirm that today? That would be appreciated.

We have to be honest about the situation if a buyer cannot be found. We know that we are down to a shortlist—it is good that there are number of buyers who are realistic prospects to purchase the business—but as I and other colleagues have repeatedly said, we must not be closed-minded about any particular structure moving forward. Nationalisation does not get us over the problems of investment having to be on a commercial basis. That might or might not be an answer in and of itself, but it does not mean we should simply rule that option out, or the option of a public-private partnership. Every option should be considered by Government to ensure that the whole business can continue to operate.

We do not want the crumbs off the plate, as it were, and just a few hundred jobs saved if part of the business were sold separately. We want it to continue in its current form because it is so strategically important to UK plc.

4.55 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) for securing yet another debate about steel, for chairing the all-party parliamentary group on steel and metal related industries, and for being such a thoughtful and passionate advocate for our steel industry, and particularly his steel community, in difficult times. Steel workers in my constituency will be feeling for the steel workers in his constituency as we wait to hear about British Steel.

I pay tribute to steel workers and unions in my area, who have such pride in their industry and have made such sacrifices over recent years in this cyclical business. The communities of east Newport and over to Caldicott have been built on that pride. Most people have family or friends who have worked in the industry, but the current generation of steel workers live with the constant threat that their jobs are uncertain. They look towards Bridgend and what happened to Ford workers; they are understandably concerned and worried about problems in the automotive sector. That is not just because of the bonds of working in that industry, although that bond is real—Tata Steel’s Zodiac plant at Llanwern and the auto-finishing line depend on securing work from the automotive sector. We need the Government to urgently do all they can to ensure that our steel and automotive industries are open for business.

It is often said in such debates, but it worth repeating that steel is a foundation industry and a national asset. For our manufacturing industry and our economy to thrive we need our own steelmaking capacity. We must not neglect this foundation industry and end up importing our steel. My hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe reminded us in a recent debate, and again today, that the strongest economies in the world—the USA, China and Japan—have the strongest steel industries. We currently come in at number 30, and we must not fall further down the table.

I want to talk about Tata Steel’s Cogent Orb works in my constituency, which has been making steel since 1898. The 350 steel workers at Orb make electrical steel that has the potential to be used as the high-quality grain-oriented steel required to build electric vehicle motors. The automotive industry has been calling on the Government to support the production of a high volume of batteries required to support EV production in Britain and avoid the risk of importing from abroad. [ Interruption. ]

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady.

Jessica Morden: That is okay. I was just finishing.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): A Division has been called in the House. The hon. Lady has one minute and 45 seconds to finish her speech when she comes back from the Divisions. I understand that there will be multiple Divisions, so we will resume 10 minutes after the last Division.

4.57 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

5.28 pm

On resuming—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Jessica Morden has one minute and 39 seconds left.

Jessica Morden: Thank you, Mr Hollobone. I was talking about Cogent Power and the potential in the electric vehicles industry, because demand for electric vehicles is only going to grow and we have a fantastic opportunity with that company to get in on the cutting edge of that new industry and to develop a supply chain for it. But these are smaller companies and will need the Government to help to bring the supply chain together. The Orb works is the only plant in the UK capable of making the steels and is therefore a strategically important business that can support the Government’s industrial strategy in relation to electrification. We must take advantage of that new industry. I visited Orb recently and have invited the Secretary of State for Wales. I would be very keen for the Minister from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy also to visit when he is in Newport, which I think might be fairly soon. That plant must be able to take advantage of that opportunity, but we need the Government’s help for that.

As well as Llanwern and Orb, Liberty Steel is based in my constituency. Liberty bought the old Alphasteel plant in 2015, and Sanjeev Gupta has announced that it has now become one of the largest steel producers in Europe, with a global footprint employing 30,000 workers. It appreciates that steel is a cyclical business and needs investment to get it through the cycles in order to make money. It is working on a model of an exciting bright future for steel, but it too asks the Government to deliver on the industrial strategy with a delivery taskforce to support and drive the investment that we need, particularly in the green steel area.

On behalf of the steel industry and workers in my area, I will repeat the asks so often made in these debates. We have waited too long for a sector deal for steel. We need more and faster action on energy prices. We need more action on procurement. We also need
more action on dumping and on what will happen with the trade defence instruments in Europe. I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this debate. On behalf of all those who work in Llanwern and at Liberty, I hope that we can expect action and not more warm words from the Minister.

5.30 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): As always, Mr Hollobone, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) not only on securing this debate but on the last few months, when he has been such a doughty champion for his constituents and for the steel industry in this country. We are very proud of him and I know that his hard work is going to pay off.

Of course, we know why we are here today participating in this debate, which is extremely timely and important because, yet again, here we are in another steel crisis, while steelworkers sit at home, hoping and praying that they have a future and a job and a salary to continue to provide for their families. Yet again they are in a precarious situation.

To be honest, it is depressing that we are here again, because a year ago tomorrow we had a debate in Westminster Hall, this exact same Chamber, which was three years on from the 2015 steel summit and all the promises that were made then, and all the asks that we made of Government. And here we are yet again, despite having seen the devastation that my constituents bore the brunt of. We can see what happens when we fail on steel.

My constituency is still struggling. I am here today, not just to fight on behalf of the 700 British Steel workers in my constituency today but because of what happened to us three and a half years ago in Redcar. We lost 2,200 jobs immediately in SSI and another 900 in the supply chain. I always say to people, “Imagine that in London, Manchester, or Birmingham. It would be devastating. Then put that in a seaside town, or a town like Scunthorpe, and imagine the effect of that on an economy, on a society, on a community, on families and on individuals.”

We are still not recovering; we are still not there. We know the average salary of those who worked in the steelworks; we know they are good jobs. They were the highest paid jobs in my constituency. The average salary is down by £10,000 a year. Many workers have had to move away to find other employment. Some are working in British Steel on Teesside or have even gone to Scunthorpe, where yet again they find themselves back in this precarious situation.

A month ago, I met a worker who had had 13 different jobs since he lost his job at the steelworks. That is the kind of insecurity and economic disaster that happens if the Government do not step in and stand by our steel industry, and that is before we even get on to talking about the reclaiming of the site, which stands there corroding and rusting. It will cost millions to get that ready for other businesses to come in, clean it up and bring jobs. I just raise that with the Minister to say that this is what happens—this is the cost of failure.

I pay tribute to the Secretary of State, who I am sure cannot be with us today because he is probably—hopefully—travelling the world and trying to secure a deal for British Steel. I pay tribute to him, because I think he gets that. He understands and, to be fair, things are different to what they were in 2015. The Government have stepped in; they have given the indemnity to the official receiver; they brought us some time; and they have kept the workforce paid and the asset in place. So I pay tribute to him, but I have a few requests to make of him and of the Minister who is here in his absence today.

Obviously, we know that the official receiver is bound by his legal obligations. However, I will echo the sentiments that were expressed earlier today about keeping the business together. It is vital that the Government support bidders who bid for the whole business—no more cherry-picking and no more asset-strippers such as Greybull.

It is vital that we have the investment to deal with the environmental liabilities that are so important on the Redcar site, but the importance of innovation must not be forgotten either. We cannot beat China and others on price, but we can beat them on innovation, with lighter, stronger, greener steel. And I make a pledge again to—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. To be helpful to the hon. Lady, we have five minutes of Back-Bench time still to go and the remaining speaker is not here, so she can slow down rather than speed up.

[Laughter.]

Anna Turley: I am extremely grateful to the Chair, because I was barely pausing for breath. I can get back into my stride.

Innovation is crucial. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) mentioned the Materials Processing Institute, which is in my constituency. It is doing fantastic work. It has been around for 75 years; it was formed just after D-Day. It has a fantastic vision for innovation: new technologies, decarbonised steel, the digitisation of the steel and metals sector, and a circular economy for steel, alloys and rare metals. Those are really important innovations. If we do not support originations and businesses that are doing that work, I am afraid we will see more redundancies and job losses, and the loss of a huge amount of capacity and capability. Therefore, innovation must be at the cutting edge of productivity, and we must support innovation experts such as the MPI, which are at the heart of this.

Like other hon. Members, I want to highlight the importance of the long-term issues that we have raised time and time again in this place. We need action on energy prices, business rates and procurement. I hope that the long-awaited sector deal is not a figment of our imagination and that we will live to see one for the steel sector. Sector deals are as important for our sector as they are for the many other sectors that have had a response and engagement from the Government. That would send a clear signal that the Government are committed to the steel industry and want to do business with the private sector.

I will end on Brexit. The industry has been very clear that there is no Brexit deal that would bring benefits to the British steel industry. That is just a fact. Of course, the disaster of no deal cannot be underestimated. We would see 97% of our exports subject to trade restrictions, and 25% tariffs to the EU—£1 million per day for the steel industry in this country. We would lose access to...
£1.6 billion of research funds for coal and steel. As my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe said, no deal means no steel. The industry could not be clearer about that.

I pay tribute to the Secretary of State, and I am grateful to the Minister for coming to respond. I know that he gets it. I know that the Government are trying to do all they can for British steel, and that he understands the importance of this industry to our country, our defence, our manufacturing and our place in the world. Unfortunately, the future of this proud industry hangs in the balance once again. I look forward to the Minister doing his part.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench speeches, the first of which will be from the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). The guideline limits are five minutes for the SNP, five minutes for the Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister.

5.37 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) for securing this important debate and for his outstanding work as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on steel and metal-related industries.

I came into this Parliament in 2015 and almost instantly got involved in steel because my constituency used to house Ravenscraig hot strip steel mill, and now houses the Dalzell works. We have had not our troubles to seek. What has been done in Scotland and in the rest of the UK has been different in the extreme. The hon. Member for Scunthorpe—I believe it was he—said that he was looking for another UK steel summit. I was involved in the first one and the one in Scotland. The one in Scotland started proceedings by saying, “We will save both mills”—there is also Clydebridge in the neighbouring constituency. That was the focus from the minute that the summit met. The steel workforce worked tirelessly with that one aim in mind, and it succeeded by helping Liberty Steel to buy the mill from Tata, giving it as much work as possible, giving it compensation for electricity and a rates holiday, and doing all sorts of other practical tasks. It managed to do that within the EU rules and save steel in the UK.

The industry should not be lightly disregarded.

Steelworkers are a special breed, as has been said. They have taken the decision time and time again across the UK to change their terms and conditions and rates of remuneration, and they have fought to save apprenticeships—all in the teeth of a Government who do not seem to care about what happens to anything other than the financial industry. No first-world country can run an economy without manufacturing, and steel is a foundation industry for any economy that wants to have manufacturing.

I feel passionately about this issue. I am not a native of Motherwell and Wishaw; I have only been there 32 years—I always say that. However, I know how passionately steel is intertwined with the very fabric of my constituency. It was a pleasure to be there recently when the Minister from the Scottish Government signed the UK steel charter. I was in a privileged position, because I was able to be at both signings, both here and in Scotland. That commitment by the Scottish Government needs to be matched by the UK Government, because there are things that are not within the competence of the Scottish Government. We have no influence on energy prices, dealing with steel tariffs or dealing with the President of the United States, so I ask the Minister to please take this issue seriously.

Many of us who take part in these debates are sick and tired of the same debates. It has been joked that we should just pull out the speeches we made before, reword, and keep giving the same ones. There is a place for that, but we need this Government to make a commitment that we will not leave the EU with no deal and that we will save the UK steel industry in its entirety. We must save the jobs of people who have committed to the steel industry, and the unions that have worked tirelessly with management across that industry to make sure it is still here and will be here for the future and our children’s futures.

5.42 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) on having secured this debate. He is a champion for his community and the steel sector more widely, and I know he has been working hard on behalf of his constituents to press the Government for clarity during this time of crisis. I thank the steelworkers, the steel manufacturers, the trade unions—Unite, Community and GMB—and also UK Steel for their unwavering support for this fantastic industry. Such a coalition is rare, but it shows how important this issue is to our communities and our country.

On 22 May, British Steel collapsed, putting at risk 4,000 jobs directly and 20,000 jobs in the supply chain. That announcement came as a shock to thousands of steelworkers who worked against the odds to defend the company’s future, and I join the thousands waiting impatiently to hear some positive news about a new buyer. It is imperative that the Government prioritise a buyer for the whole steelworks, not parts, and I urge them to make every necessary support available so that we can secure the long-term future of the company.

For decades, the steel sector has been at the heart of communities, including mine in South Yorkshire. It has provided well-paid, well-skilled jobs, and over the years, through sheer determination and resilience, the sector has manoeuvred through some very choppy waters. When I joined the House in 2016, the steel sector was going through a severe crisis, which saw the collapse of the Redcar steelworks. My hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) has spoken eloquently many times in this House championing the steel sector, and I believe she will continue to champion it till her last breath. We must never let such a collapse happen again.

We have to collectively value and appreciate the importance of the steel sector, and although there are global and domestic challenges, including global overcapacity, there are also enormous opportunities.
Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): On that point about opportunities, my hon. Friend’s constituency was the cradle of stainless steel, and it now has ITM Power, which makes hydrogen. Does she agree that some of the hydrogen steel furnaces are part of our commitment to address climate change, and could create a whole new steel industry in the UK, leading the world?

Gill Furniss: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I absolutely agree, and I very much look forward to my home town of Sheffield taking up those opportunities, because it is well placed to lead a green industry.

As I was saying, we always need steel, which literally forms the fabric of everything we see. I sincerely worry that both contenders to be the next Prime Minister are advocating a no-deal Brexit. As UK Steel has clearly stated, that would be catastrophic for the sector. It could cost it £70 million and lead to further collapses.

The steel industry has many strengths and is able to thrive, but, for that to be achieved, we need the Government to commit to help. The future of UK steel can be bright, and the Government’s own analysis has identified a £3 billion opportunity by 2030, sustaining good jobs in the areas that need them the most. The news last week that Jaguar Land Rover will invest £1 billion in building electric cars in the UK was an enormous boost, with the company leading the way on electrifying the cars on our roads and signalling a commitment to a greener economy. The opportunities for end-to-end supply in that process—making the steel at home to support the building of those vehicles—could be enormous. That could support and encourage growth in the steel sector while spearheading a green revolution.

It is disappointing that the opportunity to secure a steel sector deal has never come to fruition. I am pleased to see the new Minister in his place, and I urge him to give that issue the greatest importance. The steel sector needs that deal for innovation, for user research and development, and to be there to take on exciting opportunities for the future. The steel industry is there and waiting to be helped with the challenges ahead and the opportunities to make it thrive.

UK steel companies pay 50% more in energy costs than their competitors in the EU. On procurement, we know that UK Government decisions are a hugely powerful policy tool to boost British steelmakers’ orders. The decision to use our steel for the royal fleet, mentioned, would be much welcomed. It would make complete sense for our national defence.

I commend the UK steel charter, which is aimed at addressing climate change, and could create a whole new steel industry in the UK, leading the world.

On business rates, the perverse inclusion of investment in machinery, which increases a company’s business rates, is patently a barrier to investment. Some British steel companies have huge disparities in their business tax bills across their plants in Europe. For example, Tata pays a business tax bill in Wales that is 10 times that of its operation in the Netherlands. Will the Government join the Labour party in our pledge to remove machinery for steel companies from business rates to ease that burden and invite more investment back into the steelworks? I am not saying it will be easy, but what is a Government for if not to support our foundation industries and encourage their growth?

Our steel industry is fabulous, innovative, flexible and resilient, and it can thrive. Please help us to make sure it stays that way.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): In calling the Minister for steel, I think we should note the presence of the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and encourage other Secretaries of State to attend debates here in Westminster Hall.

5.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) on securing the debate and the opportunity to bring everyone together on a cross-party basis to discuss this topic. As a number of his colleagues said, he is an energetic and passionate advocate for the UK steel industry and for his constituents. I am pleased that so many Members were able to attend and speak. It is clear that there is a shared understanding of the important role the steel sector plays in our communities and of its critical place as a foundation industry in the national economy. I also acknowledge that, for the first time in my memory, I am joined in Westminster Hall by a Secretary of State. I had better watch what I say.

While everyone acknowledges there are considerable challenges, we believe that great opportunities remain for the industry to secure a successful, sustainable future at the centre of British manufacturing. The announcement on 22 May that British Steel was entering insolvency has caused great concern for its employees and their families and for contractors, suppliers and customers. I understand just how important steelmaking is to the whole town of Scunthorpe and the wider area, beyond the many people with direct links to British Steel. I saw that first hand the day after the insolvency was announced, when I visited Scunthorpe with my right hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) on securing the debate and the opportunity to bring everyone together on a cross-party basis to discuss this topic. As a number of his colleagues said, he is an energetic and passionate advocate for the UK steel industry and for his constituents. I am pleased that so many Members were able to attend and speak. It is clear that there is a shared understanding of the important role the steel sector plays in our communities and of its critical place as a foundation industry in the national economy. I also acknowledge that, for the first time in my memory, I am joined in Westminster Hall by a Secretary of State. I had better watch what I say.

The Government worked intensively with British Steel, Greybull Capital and lenders to seek possible solutions to the financial challenges facing the company. That included the support we provided to help it meet its environmental obligations. We also provided the official receiver with an indemnity to ensure operations could continue while they carry out the insolvency process.

We are determined that we will leave no stone unturned in our efforts to secure a suitable buyer for British Steel, safeguarding jobs across the whole of the business, and many people have spoken passionately today about the need to find a solution for the whole business. We want to keep steel coming off the production line. The official receiver has confirmed that the level of interest shown to date is encouraging, and he is in intensive discussions with the potential new owners who have submitted the strongest bids for the whole business.
Clearly, the sales process is being run by the official receiver and his special managers, who are independent of Government. However, in parallel to those commercial negotiations, the Secretary of State is in discussion with the leading bidders to better understand their proposed business plans and explore how we can support them to realise their vision for the company. Each one of British Steel’s sites has a proud record of steelmaking excellence, and the Government are determined to do all we can to ensure that that continues.

I must also pay tribute to British Steel workers, who have responded to the uncertainty with the best response possible—by producing record levels of steel and continuing to supply its customers and to win new orders. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Scunthorpe for his tireless commitment to working with Government and other stakeholders to help secure the future of the business, both in his role as a local MP and as a member of the British Steel support group, convened by my right hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) for the positive role they have played on the British Steel support group since it was established in May.

As the hon. Members for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) said, steel is a foundation industry. It is important for any modern economy and plays a key role in many critical UK supply chains, including construction, automotive, defence and power generation. I have spoken to business leaders right across the manufacturing sector, who value having this expertise and capability here in the UK, and who—like all of us—want to see an innovative and sustainable steel sector that is able to compete with the best in the world.

The steel sector provides well-paid and skilled jobs in this country. The passion I have seen in Scunthorpe is replicated right across the industry, and I want to see the sector thrive and reward the staff, whose expertise and commitment is second to none. The Government have been working with the sector and trade unions to secure its future through difficult times, and we remain committed to working closely with the sector.

Since I took on this job, I have met UK Steel, Community, Tata and Liberty to understand their plans for the future and to explore the support they need to maximise the opportunities that are open to the sector. We are under no illusions that many challenges lie ahead for UK steel producers, but we should not forget, as the Opposition Front Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), said, that there are also many opportunities for them in the UK. We have been encouraging the UK steel sector to strengthen its engagement with all existing and potential domestic steel consumers. That will help the sector benefit from the additional £3.8 billion a year by 2030 of high-value market opportunities identified in the research we published in December 2017, and it means that demand is forecast to increase by 3.1% a year in value terms.

The construction and automotive sectors offer some of the most significant opportunities, at £2.2 billion and £300 million respectively. Future demand in those sectors is likely to be for higher grade, higher strength steels, combined with innovative production methods. That raises the need to adapt current production, invest in new capital equipment and make a step change in research and development investment. As part of the automotive sector deal, the automotive sector stated its ambition to increase the share of UK content in the automotive supply chain to 50% by 2022. We have also signed a sector deal with the construction sector, and we expect steel to play an increasing part as we seek to substantially boost that sector’s productivity.

I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect on some of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for the sector. As we have offered through the Steel Council on a number of occasions, the Government stand ready to facilitate strategic engagement with other sectors, such as the Automotive Council UK and the Construction Industry Council, to ensure that efforts in the steel industry are targeted at the right market opportunities.

Several hon. Members have talked about research and development. Investment levels in the UK have been too low for too long. The research on future opportunities that I referred to earlier states:

“If the UK steel industry wishes to access these opportunities it will require investment to meet the new capability either from completely new mills, upgrades to existing facilities or R&D in products and services.”

As a proportion of value added in the sector, R&D expenditure has been low and below the average level in the manufacturing sector. It is vital that the level of investment is significantly increased, and we are committed to working in partnership with the industry to help to bring that about.

The Government will support the transformation of our foundation industries, including steel, by providing up to £66 million, subject to industry co-funding, through the industrial strategy challenge fund to develop radical new technologies and establish innovation centres of excellence in those sectors. The aim is to kick-start projects to make those sectors internationally competitive, securing more jobs and greater growth by 2025.

Several hon. Members raised the issue of procurement. We are working hard to ensure that UK producers of steel have the best chance of competing for and winning contracts across all Government projects. As a result of EU public procurement rules in place since 2015, which we negotiated and were the first country to implement, contracts across all Government projects. As a result of EU public procurement rules in place since 2015, which we negotiated and were the first country to implement, we are now able to ensure that UK producers of steel have the best chance of competing for and winning contracts across all Government projects. As a result of EU public procurement rules in place since 2015, which we negotiated and were the first country to implement, contracts across all Government projects. As a result of EU public procurement rules in place since 2015, which we negotiated and were the first country to implement, we are now able to ensure that the UK steel industry is able to compete with the best in the world.

I was proud to sign UK Steel’s procurement charter on behalf of my Department to reaffirm our commitment to making sure that UK steel producers get a fair chance to secure public contracts. As the hon. Member for Scunthorpe said, I have written to the other Government Departments that procure steel to encourage them to do the same, on top of their existing obligations.

The charter is one element. For the first time this year, we published information from Departments and their arm’s length bodies on how much steel they have procured over the last financial year and how they have applied the steel procurement guidelines. Departments have confirmed that, where applicable, they have fully complied with the guidance when procuring steel for their major projects.
We have also published an update of the steel pipeline, which signals the upcoming steel requirements of national infrastructure projects. It shows how the Government plan to procure about 3 million tonnes of steel, worth about £500 million, over the next decade for infrastructure projects such as Hinkley Point C and the upgrade of the UK’s motorway network.

On industrial energy prices, which were mentioned by several hon. Members, I recognise the concern in the Chamber. The ability of our steel industry to compete globally and across Europe is a priority for the Government, and we will provide compensation and exemption support to maintain the UK’s reputation as an attractive location for businesses.

I fear I am running out of time, so, on the energy point, I will just say that, as many hon. Members know, we have supplied £295 million in compensation to energy-intensive industries since 2010, including £53 million in 2018. A £315 million industrial energy transformation fund has been announced, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I are keen to ensure British industry accesses and benefits from.

On international trade, it remains the express ambition of the Government to leave the European Union with a deal, as has been stated by the two candidates running for the leadership of the Conservative party. We will do everything we can to ensure that unfair trade practices do not adversely affect the industry.

I look forward to continuing to work with all hon. Members present to ensure the continued presence of a dynamic, modern and competitive steel industry in the UK. My right hon. Friend and I will continue to work with all hon. Members to secure a good future for British steel. I conclude by once again congratulating the hon. Member for Scunthorpe on securing the debate and giving us an opportunity to air these issues.

5.59 pm

Nic Dakin: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. I particularly thank the Minister for his very solid response—not that we will not continue to press him for further action, since that is our job. Steel communities observing this debate will be heartened by the level of commitment and cross-party unity of purpose: 14 MPs have spoken, and more would have done so if their diaries had not prevented the attendance from being even bigger.

In the end, we will be judged on our actions. We all need to take a lead from the Secretary of State, who has joined us at the end of our debate to put a flag in the ground and say how important the issue is not only to him personally—as the Minister who leads on this issue on behalf of the Government—but to the UK. We take a lot of encouragement from that, and we are working together behind him to ensure that we deliver for steel communities, for steel across the country and for the UK, so that the steel industry can continue to perform well into the future, as it does now and as it did in the past.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved, That this House has considered the future of the UK steel industry.

6 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 10 July 2019

[Mr Laurence Robertson in the Chair]

Universal Health Coverage

9.30 am

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered universal health coverage.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Robertson, and to be here in Westminster Hall. I am pleased to have the opportunity to say a few words about universal health coverage.

Let me begin with one or two words of thanks. First, I thank Alison Stiby-Harris and, through her, all at Save the Children, which prompted me to seek the debate. I also thank all the colleagues who supported the effort to secure it, and the various agencies and supporters who have contributed to it through their briefings. Secondly, I thank the Library for its briefing pack, which of course is distributed far and wide—for beyond our boundaries. I thank Tim Robinson, Jon Lunn and Philip Brien for their contributions to it.

I also thank my former colleagues at the Department for International Development, who I know will have prepared the Minister for the torrid time he can expect this morning, and with whom I worked so joyfully before Brexit intervened. I thank them and all those they represent, here and around the world, for the immense contribution they make, not only to this area but to all other aspects of aid and development delivery. As I frequently told them and Foreign and Commonwealth Office colleagues around the world, life may be very difficult in some of the spots where they work, but without them things would be just that bit more difficult.

I will first set out the themes of universal healthcare and why I think it is so important, and then offer a few sobering facts and figures about where the world is, and point the way, with reference to what is being done, towards opportunities for the UK to continue to lead in this field, as I hope and believe it can. It is such a vast field that I cannot cover everything.

It is rather nice to start a debate, rather than to have the eight or 10 minutes at the end and have to respond to a veritable volley of questions from Front Benchers and others—not least the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who we heard with great sadness will not be with us in the next Parliament. No doubt there will be plenty of opportunities to thank him for the contribution he has made. It is nice to have the opportunity to kick off a debate, but I will try to ensure that I do not abuse that privilege by going on until at least half-past 10, as I would love to.

Universal health coverage means that “all people and communities can use the promotive, preventive, curative, rehabilitative and palliative health services they need, of sufficient quality to be effective, while also ensuring that the use of these services does not expose the user to financial hardship.” That is the World Health Organisation definition, which embodies three related objectives. The first is equity in access to health services. Everyone who needs services, not only those who can afford to pay for them, should get them. Secondly, the quality of health services should be good enough to improve the health of those receiving services. Thirdly, people should be protected against financial risk, ensuring that the cost of using services does not put people at risk of financial harm. Universal health coverage cuts across all the health-related sustainable development goals, particularly SDG 3, and brings hope of better health and protection for the world’s poorest.

I am sure it is not difficult for us to explain to the British public why this topic has such resonance. Health is fundamental. Our nation’s commitment to a national health service, free at the point of delivery, is now such a staple of our lives that its principle needs little further emphasis. So it is around the world.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on all he has done in the positions he has held, but it is good to see him leading a debate in Westminster Hall. Tuberculosis is the world’s deadliest infectious disease, killing more people each year than HIV and malaria combined. It affects the most vulnerable and marginalised—those with less money—and both the disease and the treatment have long-lasting consequences. Does he agree that it is imperative that we prevent rather than treat TB, since the latter leads to the emergence and spread of drug resistance, which is a real danger to individuals—especially the vulnerable—and to public health more broadly?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He is a noble champion of many health causes, and of the rights of people across the world. TB is indeed a key part of the delivery of universal health coverage. I will cover it later in relation to our contribution to the Global Fund, but it is absolutely right that some of the diseases that we have begun effectively to marginalise in the United Kingdom are still a risk in many parts of the world, particularly for the poorest.

A healthy society is one in which children can fulfil their potential, mothers can give birth safely and the cruellest of preventable diseases, such as TB, can be tackled, with life and nation-changing impact, but to do this effectively, the world needs to tackle it collectively. Colleagues will know how important I hold collective multilateral activity by the world’s nations to be. As multilateralism seems under relentless threat from many quarters, universal health coverage reminds us that a common issue or threat is dealt with not by even the best-intentioned individual or bilateral action, but by pooling sovereignty and making collective effort, whether that is in vaccination, in the fight against HIV/AIDS, or in combating anti-microbial resistance. Collective effort also means creating partnerships between the public, private, and charitable and voluntary sectors, which all have a place. Efforts to exclude, or to advocate exclusivity for, one or other of those sectors need examining very carefully.

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way again, he is being most generous. On collective responses, the UN’s high-level meeting on universal health coverage must build on the success of last year’s UN high-level meeting on TB and reaffirm the commitment to diagnose and treat 40 million people with TB by...
2022. Does he agree that though our commitment to the Global Fund is a great first step by this Government and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we need others to give the same commitment?

Alistair Burt: Indeed. Once again, the hon. Gentleman anticipates something I will come to later. Our 16% uplift in relation to the Global Fund is remarkable in itself, but of course it should be an example to others.

Efforts to build sustainability and to encourage and work towards health system strengthening around the world are really important. Although there will always be a need to respond to outbreaks or emergencies, basic healthcare and steady improvement are achieved not by continual external intervention, but by dedicated work to build, train and equip those who take national responsibility for their nation’s health. A DFID brief puts it as follows:

“Countries need strong health systems if they are to achieve Global Goal 3, and ‘ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all ages’”—that is SDG 3—

“and the target of UHC aimed at reaching the most excluded and living in the most remote locations, leaving ‘no one behind’.”

That determination to ensure that responsibility for health is rightly taken by a nation itself, and our view that our role is to enable such a transition in health to take place, helps us to explain in this country why UK aid and development assistance works, and why our commitment to spending 0.7% of gross national income is so important. Few question the role the UK plays in aid and development assistance works, and why our approach to building capacities for health is rightly taken by a nation itself, and our view that our role is to enable such a transition in health to take place, helps us to explain in this country why UK aid and development assistance works, and why our commitment to spending 0.7% of gross national income is so important.

Something like 5 million refugees from the Syrian conflict are in camps in the countries around Syria. Will the right hon. Gentleman reflect on the impact on the physical and mental health of people of all ages, particularly the 1.5 million children, of being in camps, rather than in settled communities, often for many years?

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Something like 5 million refugees from the Syrian conflict are in camps in the countries around Syria. Will the right hon. Gentleman reflect on the impact on the physical and mental health of people of all ages, particularly the 1.5 million children, of being in camps, rather than in settled communities, often for many years?

Alistair Burt: We could spend another 20 minutes reflecting deeply on that. Like others in the Chamber, I have had the good fortune to visit refugees in various locations. Some are in camps. The majority in Lebanon, for example, where a quarter of the population are Syrian refugees, live on the outskirts of other communities. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct.

Although, understandably, there used to be a concentration on the basic needs—shelter, food and water—there is now a clear recognition of the damage that is done, particularly but not exclusively to children, over a longer period. Of course, one area of concern is education. It is reckoned that perhaps a third of refugee children lose primary education, and perhaps two thirds lose secondary education. There are also the limitations on their action and the impact of that on mental health. Some time ago, the UK and DFID stopped seeing mental health as a nice add-on to support and saw it as essential. We have put money, effort and support into putting workers in to protect against mental health problems.

Of course, if the wars were not occurring, such problems would not be there. That encourages us to redouble our efforts in conflict prevention and peacebuilding in the areas most at risk.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that more than 5.6 million children under the age of five die from preventable diseases every year? Does he agree that immunisation is a critical backbone of any universal health strategy?

Alistair Burt: I do, and I may say something further about vaccination in just a moment. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Alongside the health and mental health issues of young people, there is grave concern in many countries about the trafficking of children and young people in camps and outside. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree—I am sure he will—that that also needs to be addressed?

Alistair Burt: Yes, the hon. Gentleman is correct. When I was in the main camp in Cox’s Bazar—colleagues will have visited it—with those who had been there a year, protected from the atrocities in Burma, I asked, “What happens next?” I was told the biggest worries on the camp were: boredom and lack of things to do; education for the children; domestic abuse in the camp; and trafficking. That is a signal to all of us that just keeping people in a camp, protecting them from one thing but leaving them exposed to another, is a further tragedy.

Let us look at the state of the world’s health, concentrating on three areas in particular. The first is children’s health, where the picture is not all gloomy. Each day, 17,000 fewer children die than did in 1990, but more than 5 million children still die before their fifth birthday each year. Since 2000, measles vaccines have averted nearly 15.6 million deaths. Despite determined global progress, an increasing proportion of child deaths are in sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia; four out of five deaths of children under five occur in those regions. Children born into poverty are almost twice as likely to die before the age of five as those from wealthier families.

Secondly, let us look at maternal health. Maternal mortality has fallen by 37% since 2000. In eastern Asia, northern Africa and southern Asia, it has declined by about two thirds, but the maternal mortality ratio—the proportion of mothers who do not survive childbirth—in developing regions is still 14 times that of developed regions. The need for family planning is slowly being met for more women, but demand is increasing rapidly. Again, we see that in the camps, where women who, in the countries they come from, had been excluded from reproductive health advice, perhaps for religious reasons, gain rapid access to it in the camps. That again is a lesson for the future.

Thirdly, I turn to HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. In 2017, 36.9 million people globally were living with HIV, and 21.7 million people were accessing antiretroviral therapy, but 1.8 million people became newly infected with HIV and 940,000 people died from AIDS-related illnesses in that year. TB remains the leading cause of death among people living with HIV,
accounting for about one in three AIDS-related deaths. Globally, adolescent girls and young women face gender-based inequalities, exclusion, discrimination and violence, which puts them at increased risk of acquiring HIV. It is the leading cause of death for women of reproductive age worldwide, and now the leading cause of death among adolescents in Africa, and the second most common cause of death among adolescents globally.

More than 6.2 million malaria deaths were averted between 2000 and 2015, primarily of children under five years of age in sub-Saharan Africa. The global incidence of malaria has fallen by an estimated 37% and mortality by 58%.

What is DFID doing in these areas, and where are we going? The UK’s significant boost to the Global Fund, the combined effort to combat AIDS, TB and malaria, was announced by Prime Minister at the recent Japan summit. The 16% increase to our already generous contribution sets a new standard for others to follow, and I thank the Minister and all those behind him who worked on that over a long period. My friends at STOPAIDS and ONE and many others welcomed the achievement. ONE said:

“This is global Britain in action.”

There’s a phrase! It continued:

“It is fantastic to see the UK reaffirming its position as global health leader, working in partnership with other donors, countries affected by the diseases, the private sector and philanthropy to make the world a safe, and healthier place”.

However, we must ask the Minister how he plans to ensure that others follow. Will he outline any changes or developments in transition strategies, as nations take on more of their own responsibilities and work towards what, in such areas, is often a difficult process?

Let me say a few words about vaccination. Gavi, created in 2000, is a global vaccine alliance bringing together the public and private sectors with the shared goal of creating equal access to new and underused vaccines for children living in the world’s poorest countries. From 2016 to 2020, the UK is providing a quarter of Gavi’s funds. We are its largest donor, and have supported it since its inception. Gavi’s first replenishment conference was hosted by David Cameron in London in 2011.

As well as providing direct funding to Gavi, the UK was also instrumental in creating the international finance facility for immunisation, which raises funds for Gavi by issuing vaccine bonds on international capital markets. The UK also helped create the advanced market commitment for pneumococcal vaccines, which have helped protect millions of children in developing countries against the leading cause of pneumonia, as well as the matching fund, which encourages funding from the private and philanthropic sectors by doubling donations. That is my point about partnerships. It is always tempting to think that this work can be done by one sector or another alone. My experience is that that is not the case. Partnerships can contribute to the whole, but they need to be handled carefully.

Let me mention polio. As we know, it has decreased by over 99% since 1988, but transmission has never gone? The UK’s significant boost to the Global Fund, the combined effort to combat AIDS, TB and malaria, was announced by Prime Minister at the recent Japan summit. The 16% increase to our already generous contribution sets a new standard for others to follow, and I thank the Minister and all those behind him who worked on that over a long period. My friends at STOPAIDS and ONE and many others welcomed the achievement. ONE said:

“This is global Britain in action.”

There’s a phrase! It continued:

“It is fantastic to see the UK reaffirming its position as global health leader, working in partnership with other donors, countries affected by the diseases, the private sector and philanthropy to make the world a safe, and healthier place”.

However, we must ask the Minister how he plans to ensure that others follow. Will he outline any changes or developments in transition strategies, as nations take on more of their own responsibilities and work towards what, in such areas, is often a difficult process?

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Let me mention polio. As we know, it has decreased by over 99% since 1988, but transmission has never stopped in three countries: Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nigeria. There remains a risk of failure. We must thank the development and health workers who are responsible for vaccination. In particular, we recognise that in some countries they face genuine physical threats and loss of life.

In other countries, vaccination faces a threat from anti-vaccination campaigns, which are run for all sorts of reasons. It is essential that anti-science is combated by evidence of science and evidence of success. As far as I am aware, vaccination is about Edward Jenner and smallpox in the United Kingdom, and about Pasteur and others worldwide. It is not about big pharma trying to sell vaccines; it is a proven method of saving countless millions of lives. As we have learned to our cost, we might find a good argument lost for want of it not being made regularly. Let that not happen with vaccination.

Finally on polio, I must mention rotary. I am an honorary member of the Sandy rotary club—my father has been a member of the Bedford rotary club and Bury rotary club for many years—and we recognise that rotary has helped vaccinate 2.5 billion people in 122 different countries and given more than £1.8 billion over 30 years. I have met Judith Diment, the national representative, a number of times. We thank those in rotary up and down the country and abroad for their efforts and voluntary work.

Finally, on behalf of Save the Children and others who have written to me on this issue, I turn briefly to the high-level meeting. The first ever high-level meeting on universal health coverage will take place in September at the UN General Assembly. It is a critical opportunity to galvanise global momentum behind healthcare.

“The theme...is ‘Universal Health Coverage: Moving Together to Build a Healthier World.’ This...will be the last chance before 2023, the mid-point of the SDGs, to mobilise the highest political support to package the entire health agenda under the umbrella of UHC, and sustain health investments in a harmonised manner.”

I am shamefully reading out the briefing from Save the Children. I am not pretending to claim authorship of this; I am acknowledging the support we get from our remarkable partners. The high-level meeting has the potential to be a transformational moment for children everywhere, but countries need to step up their efforts to tackle the biggest challenges in global health today, from ending the scourge of preventable diseases to reigniting action on stalled global immunisation rates, for the reasons I mentioned.

I know the Minister will have been presented with a series of challenges for the high-level meeting. Perhaps I could outline them. We hope that the Secretary of State will attend the high-level meeting. The UK should champion free-at-the-point-of-use health and nutrition provision, helping to deliver on the “leave no one behind” agenda and to ensure that we reach those furthest behind; it should signal its support for domestic resource mobilisation, which is essential for encouraging more countries to work on strengthening their systems; it should champion the full integration of nutrition and immunisation into national universal health coverage plans; and it should fund UHC2030 as the main institution that can make a difference in driving the UHC agenda and on accountability, with a focus on meaningful civil society participation.

I could mention much more. Sexual and reproductive health is vital. At the 2017 summit, we announced £250 million of support over the next four years. Access to sexual and reproductive health services is under increasing threat from some developed nations. We ought to know better. It is essential that the United Kingdom follows its independent path, and is not browbeaten by any of its larger partners or friends into
offering restrictive reproductive health facilities just because somebody else does not like them, for questionable reasons.

We must continue the work on neglected tropical diseases. We are protecting some 200 million people from 2017 to 2022 with support of £360 million. I have not mentioned anti-microbial resistance and the work of Sally Davies. She moves on from her post relatively soon, and we should thank her warmly for all the vital work she has been able to do. Ultimately, it will protect us all; if we cannot find answers, that threatens us all. I thank those involved in the collaborative work that we now do internationally with the Department of Health and Social Care, and I hope the Minister will be able to take that work further.

I could mention the contribution of water sanitation and hygiene—the foundation for good health. I have seen remarkable projects that the United Kingdom is doing around the world on that. There is no point having a global health system or a national health system if there is no effective sanitation. It makes a particular difference to young women at important stages in their lives. It is absolutely essential. Nutrition, one of my favourite subjects in the Department, is much underrated. It is really vital to ensure that nutrition is correctly promoted. There is a difference between feeding people and feeding them nutritiously, as I learned in my first week in DFID.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Should we not also emphasise that vaccines will not work properly on a malnourished child? We need to see these subjects as two sides of the same coin.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady is absolutely right and speaks with great experience. A child may be physically alive, but the weaker a child becomes through lack of nutrition, or through existing on the barest rations, the more prone they are to disease, and the harder it is to ensure that preventive measures work. That is absolutely correct.

I wonder whether the Minister wants to venture an opinion on the Department for International Development remaining a stand-alone Department. It might be slightly unfair to expect an answer from him on that, but I hope that this debate will leave him in no doubt of the value that we see in an independent-minded DFID. It is always part of the Government, as I occasionally had to remind officials, but it very much has its own stand-alone processes.

I hope others will cover all those points, and that I have helped to lay the ground, and made it clear how important this House feels universal health coverage is, and how proud we are of the United Kingdom’s previous contribution and its determination to keep that up. There is a clear sense that we are a world leader, through the work of our hard-working experts. The Minister should know that he has the full backing of the House in his determination to make sure that this issue remains as important to him as it has been to me and all my predecessors.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Order. I ask hon. Members to keep Back-Bench speeches to around seven minutes. That will enable me to call everyone to speak. I call Stephen Twigg.

9.54 am

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I draw your attention to a relevant entry in the register—I visited Liberia in 2017 with the fantastic organisation, RESULTS UK, to look at Liberia’s efforts to rebuild a public health system after the Ebola crisis. I congratulate the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) on securing the debate and on his fantastic work as a Minister, and the passion and commitment that he has demonstrated once again today.

As the right hon. Gentleman said, the third of the sustainable development goals commits the world to achieving universal health coverage for all by 2030. It seeks to ensure access to a full range of essential health services based on need, not on the ability to pay. Before I became Chair of the Select Committee on International Development, in 2014 the Committee published a report, “Strengthening Health Systems in Developing Countries”, which concluded that universal health coverage cannot be achieved without properly functioning health systems. At that time—five years ago—the Committee urged the Department for International Development to grasp the opportunity and demonstrate genuine global leadership worthy of its health systems expertise.

In recent years, we have seen some serious progress, and it is worth reminding ourselves of the progress that the world has made. For example, incidences of malaria and the number of new cases of HIV have each fallen by around a third since the turn of the century and the adoption of the millennium development goals. The global child mortality rate has been cut in half since 1990. Nevertheless, half of the world’s population lacks access to essential healthcare services and, every year, around 100 million people are pushed into extreme poverty because of the cost of healthcare.

Let me say a few words about Ebola. In 2014, we saw the deadliest outbreak of Ebola in history—the first to hit epidemic levels. Three years ago, the Committee published an inquiry report on that. We said that a major factor in the Ebola outbreak reaching an unprecedented scale was the weak state of health systems in the affected countries. It is extremely concerning to see what is happening in eastern DRC at the moment, where there have been more than 2,400 Ebola cases. The International Development Secretary, on a visit to the Democratic Republic of the Congo this weekend, called for the World Health Organisation to declare the outbreak an emergency. It is crucial that the international system redoubles its efforts in response to the emergency. Health-system strengthening must surely form a core part of recovery efforts in the DRC. DFID has an opportunity to play a leading role in supporting that work.

As the right hon. Gentleman said, we are at a critical moment with this September’s high-level meeting. Here in the UK, we have the finest system of universal health coverage anywhere in the world, with our national health service. That gives us the expertise, knowledge and capacity to make a lasting impact on the global debate and to be a powerful voice in it. I support what
the right hon. Gentleman said about high-level UK representation at September’s meeting, and on supporting other countries to increase domestic resource mobilisation, ideally to see their health spending rising to 5% of gross national income. We can share policy expertise from our NHS to support other countries to increase their own domestic investment in health.

The coming year provides an unparalleled set of opportunities, with the various replenishments to which the right hon. Gentleman referred. I look forward to the Minister appearing before the International Development Committee this afternoon, as we will have an opportunity to address some of the issues in more detail. I hugely welcome the £1.4 billion pledged by the Government to the Global Fund. It is genuinely excellent news that that commitment has been made and that it has been made early. That has lessons for replenishments in other areas, such as education, but that is for another day.

Let me endorse what the right hon. Gentleman said about Gavi. The United Kingdom hosts the replenishment of Gavi next year. The Mayor of Liverpool, Joe Anderson, and I have written to the Prime Minister, bidding for Liverpool to host Gavi’s replenishment, not least because of the presence of the School of Tropical Medicine in our city. Let me also support what the right hon. Gentleman said about polio—I welcome his focus on that. As he said, we have seen remarkable progress since the establishment of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, with a 99% reduction in incidents since 1988, but it is still endemic in Nigeria, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Global Polio Eradication Initiative strategy states:

“Full implementation and financing of the GPEI Polio Endgame Strategy 2019-2023 will result in a world where no child will ever again be paralysed by any poliovirus anywhere.”

We are close to a world free of polio, but this will require one last push to end polio once and for all. I pay tribute to the groups that have come together to form the One Last Push campaign. It was a pleasure to join them at a fantastic event in Birmingham in April, which was also attended by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). We heard from campaigners from a range of non-governmental organisations, as well as British people living with polio. I learned a lot about some of the challenges facing British people living with polio in this country, and about the challenge of one last push to end polio globally.

The polio initiative is vaccinating the hardest-to-reach children. Our country can be proud that we have provided £1.3 billion to GPEI since its creation. I hope we will be able to show commitment once again to a polio-free world—we have done so with the Global Fund—with a generous financial pledge ahead of the GPEI’s upcoming replenishment in November.

Let me finish by echoing strongly what the right hon. Gentleman referred. I look forward to the Minister appearing before the International Development Committee this afternoon, as we will have an opportunity to address some of the issues in more detail. I hugely welcome the £1.4 billion pledged by the Government to the Global Fund. It is genuinely excellent news that that commitment has been made and that it has been made early. That has lessons for replenishments in other areas, such as education, but that is for another day.

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Let me finish by echoing strongly what the right hon. Gentleman said about the importance of multilateralism and our standing up for values. I will perhaps be a bit more explicit than he was. The Trump Administration are clearly standing in the way of many of the things that he talked about—not least on sexual and reproductive health. Those global health multilaterals have consistently been shown to deliver high-quality, effective channels for UK aid. The Department’s multilateral development review three years ago demonstrated that once again. Those multilaterals have at their heart the Department’s strategic objectives of reducing poverty and promoting global prosperity. That makes moral sense, which we rightly focus on, and it also makes economic sense. For every dollar invested in immunisation, it is calculated that around $16 is returned directly in reductions in healthcare costs, avoiding lost wages and lost productivity due to illness and death.

Over the next two years, let us grasp these key opportunities to make progress on health outcomes and work together towards the goal of achieving universal health coverage for all. The UK has been central to this endeavour over the past two decades, and I hope very much that we can continue to lead efforts to achieve a world where everyone can get access to healthcare based on their needs, not on their ability to pay.

10.3 am

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) on securing this important debate. I recognise that he was a great champion of these causes during his time as a Minister, and he has continued that valuable work from the Back Benches.

A key part of progress towards worldwide universal health coverage is tackling the world’s major health challenges. Only once those are under control can developing nations achieve sustainable healthcare systems and move towards universal health coverage. I am pleased that the United Kingdom is a world leader in supporting the Global Fund to tackle AIDS-related illnesses, tuberculosis and malaria, which kill around 2.5 million people a year.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) on securing this debate and opening it so well.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that TB is a perfect example of the need for universal health coverage, and that if we invest well in TB programmes with universal health care in mind, it will make a real difference to developing countries across the world?

John Lamont: I absolutely agree, which is why the UK’s role in tackling TB is so important.

As a country, we will pledge up to £1.4 billion to the latest round of the Global Fund, which will help to provide life-saving antiretroviral therapy for more than 3.3 million people living with HIV, support treatment for 2.3 million people living with tuberculosis, and distribute 92 million mosquito nets to protect children and families from malaria. The UK is the second largest donor to health aid, having contributed $5 billion over the past 30 years. I believe that is something that we as a nation should celebrate.

This global effort, which is being led by the United Kingdom, is changing the world. Child survival rates are one of the greatest success stories, with child mortality levels more than halving since 1990. However, there is still a huge distance to go. Although access to healthcare is improving globally in both developed and developing nations, progress is slow and the gap between countries with the best and worst access to healthcare shows little sign of closing. We need to address that, which is why I support calls from Save the Children for the UK to
champion a universal health coverage approach at the UN’s high-level meeting on universal health coverage in September—something my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire has already raised.

This is not about dictating to other nations how they should manage public finances. It is about explaining the benefits of investment in healthcare—not only in improving the health of local populations, but in facilitating improvements in education, poverty and long-term economic development. The UK should champion the principle of healthcare being free at the point of use, and support Governments to increase health spending to 5% of GDP and integrate nutrition and immunisation into national healthcare plans.

Access to universal health coverage needs to be as broad a principle as possible. In some areas, a little investment can make a huge difference to people's lives. Cerebral Palsy Africa is a charity based in Berwickshire in my constituency, and it provides support to enable children to attend school in Ghana and other African countries. It was set up by physiotherapist Archie Hinchcliffe, after she saw what rehabilitation could do for young cerebral palsy sufferers—the condition was simply not seen as a priority in many African nations. That is despite early intervention making a huge difference to the lives of sufferers. DFID’s small charities challenge fund recently awarded the charity £50,000, which is being used to train special needs teachers and specialist physiotherapists in Africa. We should all welcome that, and it demonstrates how funding from the United Kingdom Government can have a real impact on UK-based charities working in other parts of the world.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that DFID’s small charities fund is an excellent innovation? In fact, we should see far more resources from DFID channelled through that to support all those great initiatives in our constituencies. They often offer the best value for money.

John Lamont: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. All of these are very good examples of where UK money is invested locally but the benefits are felt all around the world. Very often, it is volunteers from the UK who ensure that funds are spent to best effect.

Although we absolutely must lead the fight against worldwide killers such as HIV and TB, supporting treatment and therapy for rarer conditions has to be part of the move towards universal healthcare coverage. Again, I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire on securing this important debate and allowing hon. Members to highlight the great work that the United Kingdom is doing around the world to improve the lives of so many people.

10.8 am

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Robertson. I declare an interest in this subject, as I travelled to Ethiopia with RESULTS UK and saw the impact of setting up vaccination services as the initial building blocks towards universal healthcare. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) for opening this debate and for his work as a DFID Minister. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on vaccination, and I really welcome the commitment he showed in giving evidence to our inquiry on the next decade of vaccines. Our report was published in January, and I thank the team he worked with at the time.

As the right hon. Gentleman said in his introduction, universal health coverage is the idea that everyone should have access to quality healthcare without ending up in financial hardship. Half the world’s population simply does not have that, while 100 million people are thrown into extreme poverty when trying to access healthcare.

The UK has absolutely been a leader in this sphere. It is the No. 1 funder of Gavi, The Vaccine Alliance, which helps to provide affordable vaccines to low-income countries, and also helps those countries to develop their own systems to deliver vaccines. I particularly welcome the £1.4 billion commitment to the Global Fund and the fact that it was made in advance of the replenishment date. The replenishment of the polio eradication initiative is coming up this November, and the UK making a pledge in advance helps to put pressure on other countries to make similar commitments. The Global Fund is particularly involved in tuberculosis, HIV and malaria, which shows that this about not just a single thing, but a combination of vaccinations, antiretroviral drugs and malaria nets. Underneath all that, there is the need for clean water, among other things.

Vaccination itself has saved 20 million lives in the last decade. In 1988, when the polio eradication team came together, there were 350,000 cases of polio a year. Last year, there were 33 cases, in a difficult area on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. There is no treatment for polio. One problem when people talk “anti-vax” and say, “I don’t believe in vaccination” is that they do not remember what these illnesses look like. When I was in Ethiopia, we pulled into a garage to get petrol, and I saw a young man of about 30 standing there with the obvious deformity of flaccid paralysis from polio. The last time that I saw someone in that situation, it hit me like a boot in the face.

On Monday, we held an event in the House for polio survivors, and I thank those hon. Members who attended to hear their stories. Many of the older polio sufferers now use wheelchairs and are not therefore as recognisable as the children with polio, who used callipers or crutches. People are complacent and have forgotten the harm that polio can do and is doing elsewhere.

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative has done an incredible job using oral drops, which are critical because the gut protection a child gains from an oral vaccine protects against the further spread of the virus. The injectable form we use here protects the individual, but protects against the further spread of the virus. The problem is that, previously, we talked as though we eradicated polio can do and is doing elsewhere.

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative has done an incredible job using oral drops, which are critical because the gut protection a child gains from an oral vaccine protects against the further spread of the virus. The injectable form we use here protects the individual, but protects against the further spread of the virus. The problem is that, previously, we talked as though we would achieve eradication—obviously, we had hoped to achieve it by next year—and then look at transition. However, much of the infrastructure, staff and funding used to eradicate polio is also holding up the basic vaccination systems in lower-income countries. In fact, people are now reluctant to take the oral vaccine. Some of them are because they say, “Here you are again, back in our village with your drops, but I can’t get my baby treated for another condition. We don’t have clean
water. My children aren’t even fully immunised.” That is why we need the transition. Universal health coverage is now critical to achieving the eradication of polio; if there are outbreaks in Nigeria or elsewhere, it is because the routine levels of immunisation are simply not high enough.

Seth Berkley, the head of Gavi, pointed out a shocking figure to us when we set up the APPG. He said that although we think we are doing a great job, 85% of children in low-income countries are vaccinated only with DTP3—one of the very basic vaccines—and we put a tick next to them. However, only 7% of children in those countries are fully vaccinated and receive all 11 vaccines recommended by the WHO. More than 90% of children are still vulnerable to disease, and 15% have had no vaccinations at all, so we still have a lot of work to do.

I commend the UK for the 0.7% commitment to aid, which must be maintained. DFID must be maintained as a separate Department, not just for its function, but to show that commitment and drive. If our constituents say, “Charity begins at home, so why on earth are we bothering to spend money miles and miles away?” we should remember the Ebola outbreak and the fear over bothering to spend money miles and miles away? “We should be supporting GPs such as those at the Glebe Practice, not punishing the public by reducing their access to healthcare.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) for securing the debate.

When our NHS was created, it was the first time in history that healthcare was made available on the basis of citizenship rather than insurance or payment. We are all proud, across parties, of that achievement. The prioritisation of public health has been the bedrock of our country’s success ever since, with a healthcare system that treats all of its patients as equals, not as potential customers. As a frontline nurse for almost 15 years, I that that has nothing to do with the dedication, commitment and hard work of the staff there.

The pressures at regional level are being passed on to local healthcare in Lincoln. The doctor’s surgery in Skellingthorpe, run by the Glebe Practice, has announced that it intends to close because of recruitment issues.

Karen Lee: Let me just make a point about the Glebe Practice. This is what I was saying. I heard the Minister to assess the implications of closing Skellingthorpe, run by the Glebe Practice, has announced that it intends to close because of recruitment issues. That will be consulted on, but services will be centralised in Saxilby, 4.3 miles away. That does not sound far, but it is very difficult to get to. The doctor’s surgery serves a majority of the community and is highly regarded by local residents. Some 82% of patients who responded to the national patient survey felt that their overall experience was good or very good, so this is not a reflection on the GPs at the practice. If the surgery closes, my constituents’ access to care will be downgraded and their right to free care at the point of need will be undermined.

In June, I held a public meeting in Skellingthorpe, to listen to local residents’ concerns. As it is such a sleepy little village, I thought, “We might get six people, or we might get 26.” We actually saw 80 people over three hours—it was a really busy and lively meeting. They all had the same concerns. There are infrequent public transport links, and not everyone can access the new location by car—either they have not got a car or they are too old or ill to drive. They talked about age, illness and poor mobility—if they take the bus, it does not go near the the GP surgery. Surely, all my constituents should be able to see a GP without worrying about a long or expensive journey; that is the last thing they need when they are ill.

I completely acknowledge that the Glebe Practice is struggling to recruit clinicians in a rural Lincolnshire village. That reflects the national picture, as the NHS is short of more than 100,000 staff, including 41,000 nurses and 10,000 doctors. I was at a meeting yesterday, and the withdrawal of the nursing bursary has contributed hugely to the fact that we are so short of staff in the NHS.

What concerns me most of all is that, in places such as Lincoln, which are suffering from the Government’s mismanagement, the situation does not seem to be improving; instead, it is getting worse. As the co-authored report from the Nuffield Trust, the King’s Fund and the Health Foundation found, the NHS could be short of 7,000 GPs within five years. Rural areas are already suffering from undertraining and underfunding. I urge the Minister to assess the implications of closing Skellingthorpe health centre for the health provision of my constituents, and to implement an effective national programme to incentivise GP recruitment in rural areas. We can all talk about the problems of recruiting GPs, but, come on, the Government have had nine years to get this sorted out—they should have been looking at this. We should be supporting GPs such as those at the Glebe Practice, not punishing the public by reducing their access to healthcare.
[Karen Lee]

Before I sit down, I want to say something about the comments we’ve heard about nutrition and healthcare. As a nurse, I obviously appreciate the links between nutrition and healthcare—I remember the dieticians coming on the ward—but, in a country with the wealth that we have, to see food banks at the level we have is appalling. When we talk about healthcare in this country, we ought to ask whether people really should have to access food banks because they are starving and that is the only way to get food.

10.21 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Robertson.

I, too, congratulate the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) on securing this important debate and pay tribute to him. In my experience—even though I have been here only two years—he was one of the most thoughtful members of the Government, and it is a pity to see him on the Back Benches.

The debate is timely, given the year of opportunity ahead of us, with the high-level meeting in September and the various health financing moments between now and the end of 2020. The concept of universal health coverage is so valuable because it recognises how all health interventions interlink.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) said, a strong immune system can only be developed with good nutrition. Without a strong immune system, vaccines and medicines are far less effective, and people are more vulnerable to disease. People living with diseases such as HIV or diabetes are more susceptible to developing other diseases, such as tuberculosis. At this juncture, I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. It was a pleasure to join my hon. Friend out in Geneva last month.

I will focus the majority of my remarks on nutrition, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on nutrition for growth. I will reflect on our recent visit to agencies of the Geneva-based World Health Organisation and the Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organisation to discuss universal health coverage and the various challenges faced by Governments and civil society in achieving it. It was fascinating to see the steps being taken to achieve universal health coverage, but I was struck by the number of challenges.

One significant challenge to overcome is political ownership of health interventions. Here in the UK—the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) touched on this—where parties jostle and compete at election time to express their support for and admiration of the NHS, it is easy to forget that in many parts of the world healthcare remains politically sensitive. Even more politically sensitive are investments in preventive measures such as nutrition, which, if done right, reduce the burden on health systems and so, in the long run, the funding that they require.

Despite that, the deputy director-general of the World Health Organisation told us that 95% to 97% of health budgets are still spent on institutions such as hospitals. Through the high-level meeting, the UK Government have an opportunity to encourage Governments around the world to invest more and smarter in preventive health measures such as nutrition. Will the Minister do what he can to ensure that strong wording to that effect is woven through the political declaration of the high-level meeting?

Another challenge is the siloed approach to healthcare that we see even in this Chamber, with different Members, including me, focusing on different areas of interest. A degree of siloing is perhaps inevitable, but the Government can help to break down the silos in a number of ways. First, DFID should use its position of leadership at various health multilaterals, such as Gavi, the Global Fund and the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, to encourage organisations to work together and to add nutrition elements to their programmes. DFID should also take steps to embed nutrition more effectively across its portfolio. Nutrition elements should be woven into the fabric of all DFID’s health programmes in order to gain maximum impact from each intervention.

Lastly, the UK Government should apply that holistic view of healthcare to their own investments.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, there will be multiple health financing moments over the course of the next year. Politically, it is vital at the moment, despite the turmoil and a lot of changes, that every single Member of this House gets behind that, so that health does not become a political football. I hope that it does not.

Globally co-ordinated initiatives such as Nutrition for Growth, and multilaterals such as the Global Fund, Gavi and the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, are proven to be highly effective, and they offer value for money for the UK taxpayer. All those investments complement each other, and are the building blocks to achieving universal health coverage. Likewise, failure to invest in any one block compromises the effectiveness of the others. DFID should invest ambitiously and equitably as each of those moments comes up—as it already has done for the Global Fund—and encourage others to do likewise.

As the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) said, the UK is well respected as a major donor when it comes to global health, and it should not shy away from wielding that influence to encourage others to step up in the campaign for universal health coverage. I hope that the Minister will take on board my recommendations, and I look forward to his response.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Before I call the first Front-Bench spokesperson, I will say that I would like to leave two minutes at the end for the mover of the motion to wind up.

10.26 am

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) for securing this debate, for his great work as a Minister, and for championing the need for a separate Department for International Development.

Sustainable development goal 3 aims to “Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages”, and target 3.8 looks to “Achieve universal health coverage”, which is something that all of us in this House and across these islands have taken for granted since the
establishment of the NHS in the 1940s. Everyone here already knows that implementing universal health coverage ensures that everyone receives quality healthcare without financial cost. We know that that reduces the risk of people being pushed into poverty, drives inclusive growth, builds more trust in health systems, and is more sustainable than simply responding to global health security threats.

Globally, it is important to note that access to healthcare has been increasing fairly steadily over the past 35 years. The healthcare access and quality index shows that almost all countries have seen at least some improvement during that time. However, we still have a long way to go if we are to meet sustainable development goal 3 by 2030. While access to healthcare has been increasing, the countries with the worst healthcare are still a long way behind those with the best, and that gap shows little sign of closing.

At least half the world’s population still do not have full coverage of essential health services, with one in eight people in the world spending at least 10% of their household budgets to pay for healthcare. As a result, about 100 million people are still being pushed into extreme poverty because they have to pay for their healthcare. Furthermore, the World Bank has identified that low-income developing countries are starting to face the challenges of ageing populations, and of increases in chronic, non-communicable diseases. That will only exacerbate the funding gap between what those countries have and what they need to provide universal health care. Aid spending on health is just as important now as it has ever been.

To turn my attention to the UK’s impact on universal health coverage, it is important to remind ourselves that of the $58 billion spent on health aid between 1990 and 2017, the UK spent $5 billion, and is the second largest national donor after the US—something we should all be proud of. Is it not ironic that the birthplace of national healthcare is second to a country that does not provide that for its citizens? Indeed, regressive attempts have been made by the US Administration to roll back the progress made under Obamacare.

The Department for International Development states that it is committed to supporting progress towards sustainable development goal 3, and aid spending on health is generally higher now than in previous years, representing 10.5% of all bilateral aid. That has to be welcomed. Last month, the UK increased its pledge to the Global Fund by 16%, in advance of the time of replenishment. That is a total of £1.4 billion.

We cannot be complacent about our past or current successes. The pathway to universal health coverage will be long and winding with no quick fix, and the UK Government need to maintain their commitments in that area. All hon. Members in the debate have shown they are fully committed to that. However, there are possible changes ahead. In two weeks’ time we will have a new Prime Minister. The leading candidate has stated:

“We could make sure that 0.7% is spent more in line with Britain’s political commercial and diplomatic interests”.

Let me be crystal clear: the SNP is unequivocal about the fact that trade and development are two different areas and must not be forced together at the expense of the world’s most vulnerable. Will we respond to an Ebola outbreak only if that is in the UK’s commercial interest? Who will judge if it is in our political interest to distribute mosquito nets to prevent the spread of malaria? Will children be vaccinated only in countries with whom the UK is on good diplomatic terms? Those questions may need to be answered. We should consider seriously the comments that have been made—they should send a shiver down our spines.

The same lead candidate has said:

“We can’t keep spending huge sums of British taxpayers’ money as though we were some independent Scandinavian NGO. The present system is leading to inevitable waste as money is shoveled out of the door in order to meet the 0.7 per cent target”.

Let us examine that ludicrous statement. Of course, the UK is not some independent Scandinavian NGO, but one of the largest economies in the world. It has both a legal and moral duty to commit to 0.7% aid spending, and to assist in the fight against the diseases we have heard about in the debate. That is not inevitable waste or shoving money out the door; it is exactly what the UK should spend its money on while meeting the 0.7% target.

Let us look at an alternative approach in these islands. Ben Macpherson, the Scottish Government’s Minister for Europe, Migration and International Development, has given the following pledge for the Scottish Government: “international development should be in the national interests of our partner countries and not in Scotland’s national interest.”

We should all agree that that is what international development means. We firmly believe that spending that must be focused on helping the poorest and most vulnerable, and on alleviating global poverty.

The SNP Scottish Government are playing their part in tackling global challenges, including epidemics and health inequalities. For example, as part of Scotland’s global goals partnership agreement with Malawi, the Scottish Government have pledged to strengthen the prevention and management of infectious diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. The Scottish Government respond to humanitarian crises through the humanitarian emergency fund, which includes provision to ensure the containment of diseases at times of crisis. While the challenges are fewer at home than abroad, the SNP is committed to defending the NHS, and to ensuring access to universal healthcare domestically; health spending is £185 higher per person in Scotland than in England.

To deliver universal health coverage, all countries must strive to provide quality healthcare at home. Those who are able to do that have a responsibility to support the same abroad. With a Department committed to international development and a 0.7% aid target, the UK already plays a significant role in doing so, and should never lose sight of that. The likely next Prime Minister talks about the UK walking away from its aid commitments, but it is imperative that the UK instead uses the opportunity of the universal healthcare agreement, which is due to be signed at the UN General Assembly in September, to refocus and renew efforts, for many years to come, to ensure universal health coverage.

10.34 am

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson.

I thank the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) for securing this debate, and for his work in his previous role at the Department
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Preet Kaur Gill

for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; I know he is well respected by the whole House for his contributions and openness. He spoke compellingly about the importance of universal health coverage, and passionately about the strides made. He coined the term “Global Britain in action” in respect of our commitment to the Global Fund. He referenced, as many Members did, the high-level meeting in September on universal health coverage, and the UK’s role in that and our ongoing commitments. Finally, he made the point that DFID should remain a stand-alone Department.

As chair of the International Development Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) has made a vast contribution, and it will be a huge loss when he leaves that role. I thank him for raising the serious concerns about Ebola in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Secretary of State’s declaration of an emergency. He spoke passionately about the One Last Push campaign to end polio globally.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) spoke of the small charities fund in the UK, and the impact it can have in supporting DFID’s work. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), chair of the all-party parliamentary group on vaccinations for all, spoke of how vaccinations have saved 20 million lives, but that must be in the context of access to universal health coverage. My hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) and the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) talked about the importance of incorporating nutrition in UHC.

Last week, the national health service celebrated its 71st birthday. The NHS has rightly become nothing short of a national treasure in the UK. It has allowed us all to access quality healthcare free at the point of use, regardless of our income. But for too many people across the world, their right to quality healthcare is far from realised. Despite the global commitment to sustainable development goal 3—to “Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all”—some 3.6 billion people do not receive the most essential health services they need, and 100 million are pushed into poverty from paying out-of-pocket for health services. It is right that securing health for all is a top priority for our international development work. It is essential that we take seriously this year’s UN high-level meeting in September, at which a universal health coverage agreement will be declared. I am delighted that this debate has been called, so that we can discuss how to achieve healthcare for all and what needs to be included in that declaration.

I will use my short time to cover four priority areas, starting with the need for public health systems. I mentioned the NHS; we know from our own experience that having a publicly provided universal health system, funded through progressive taxation and free at the point of delivery, is crucial to ensuring everyone can access the healthcare they need. It is only through putting people, rather than profit, at the heart of the agenda that we will ensure truly universal access to healthcare and meet the SDGs. After all, universal health coverage is about the social contract between the state and the population.

Country Governments are accountable to their population for delivering the right to healthcare. The NHS has provided us with a wealth of experience and expertise in universal health systems. That means the UK is well positioned to work with Governments, civil society groups and other stakeholders across the world to support the development of public health systems. Labour has committed to establishing, when it comes into government, a new dedicated unit for public services in DFID for that very purpose. We know that is crucial to gender equality. Women bear a greater burden of unpaid care work, so when a fully functioning health system is in place, women are freed up to engage in paid work opportunities, political decision making, education and other aspects of life.

Rather than strengthening public health systems, this Government have too often undermined them through their support for privatised forms of healthcare. Promoting public-private partnerships and private health facilities is not the way to achieve health for all. Health should never be commodified and turned into a profitable commercial venture, because that is a recipe for leaving the poorest without healthcare. Will the Minister inform us of the steps he is taking to ensure that we strengthen, not weaken, public health systems across the global south? Will the Government ensure that a strong focus on public health systems is included in the UN declaration?

Secondly, let me talk about health financing. Researchers at the World Health Organisation have estimated that the annual cost to poor countries of meeting the SDG target on healthcare for all by 2030 would be $112 per person. That is a significant increase on previous estimates, and would leave low-income countries facing an annual funding gap of up to $35 billion. The WHO estimates that poor countries will need to spend up to 20% of GDP on health to bridge that gap—clearly an impossible ask. If low-income countries are to have any chance of making up even part of the shortfall, Governments of rich countries and international institutions urgently need to address their role in creating global poverty and inequality, including through enabling unjust global tax and trade rules, demanding unsustainable debt repayments, failing to regulate their corporations properly, and imposing costs on poor countries through their contributions to climate change. I hope the Government will use their leadership position at the UN meeting in September to ensure that there is honest recognition of their responsibilities and the reasons why many poor countries do not have the domestic resources necessary to fund public health systems.

My third point is on access to medicines. We will never achieve healthcare for all without access to affordable medicines, vaccines and diagnostics. According to the STOPAIDS coalition, the price of new medicines worldwide is rising year on year. Due to a lack of transparency in drug pricing, too often we are left in the dark by pharmaceutical companies, which are free to set their own prices. As a result, treating a number of diseases remains unaffordable for both individuals and national health systems. Will the Minister ensure that improved affordability and access to medicines is championed in the declaration agreed at the UN meeting in September?

Fourthly and finally, I raise an important point about the “leave no one behind” agenda. At the launch of the SDGs, the Government pledged to ensure that “every person counts and will be counted”,

[Dr Whitford, chair of the all-party parliamentary group on vaccinations for all]
and that the
“people who are furthest behind, who have the least opportunity and who are the most excluded, will be prioritised.”

Five years on from the SDGs being agreed, too often the most marginalised are still being left behind. An important piece of research by the UN’s population fund, and the UK non-governmental organisations Health Poverty Action and the Minority Rights Group, found that women from indigenous and ethnic minority communities experience far worse maternal health outcomes than the majority population in all 16 countries that they studied.

In the light of this evidence, do the Government agree that including data on ethnicity is a vital part of ensuring that we can keep track of inclusion in health systems? Will the Minister explain why ethnicity continues to be neglected in DFID’s inclusive data charter action plan? When do the Government intend to meet their commitment under the SDGs by disaggregating data by ethnicity? Can the Minister assure us that the most marginalised ethnic groups will be counted and included in the high-level discussions in September?

I conclude by saying a few words about the Government’s record on universal health coverage to date. It has been five years since the International Development Committee urged the Government to formulate a strategy for its approach to health systems strengthening. The Government accepted this recommendation, yet nearly five years on, there is still no sign of the strategy. It is true that there have been promises of imminent publication, most recently last December, but there is still nothing. I hope the Government will tell us why there has been such a delay to this most important document. After all, strengthening public health and health systems is the most important step we can take towards achieving health for all.

10.41 am

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Dr Andrew Murrison): I congratulate all involved today on an excellent debate. It is timely because on 23 September we will be discussing universal health coverage at the high-level meeting in New York.

I am pleased to have heard almost universal praise from across the House for the advance declaration that the UK has made in relation to the Global Fund. I am proud of that, and I hope everybody here is proud of it too. Not only is it a significant sum of money and an uplift to what we were spending before, but when taken with the other Global Funds, it propels us to the top of the league table of international development, particularly relating to healthcare.

It is more important still because it is advance notification. The whole point is to encourage others to pledge and commit—the two are slightly different—generous funds aimed at dealing with the healthcare issues we all struggle with, because we are all in this together, particularly in relation to infectious disease. That point has been made by a number of right hon. and hon. Members, because infectious diseases respect no borders.

Having started on a positive note, may I introduce an element of gloom? Strategic development goal 3 and the 17 development goals related to it are not on track to be successfully rolled out. Universal health coverage is an aspiration, but it is not secure; the glass is indeed half empty.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt). It is ironic that I am here potentially answering for decisions that he made in Government.

Alistair Burt: All good ones.

Dr Murrison: I was about to say that I am really comfortable to do so, because the decisions he made, and those he is associated with vicariously, are good ones. I am happy to have inherited his portfolio, but he is a difficult act to follow, that is for sure.

My right hon. Friend identified all the issues in his contribution, as I would expect him to do. He started by highlighting universal health coverage and its contribution to SDG 3, but he also made the point that universal health coverage touches on the other SDGs as well. In advance of the high-level meeting on 23 September, he was right to ask about the aims and ambitions the UK Government have for that meeting. They are encapsulated in getting more money—obviously—and getting better quality and integrated healthcare. That is something many of the contributions have touched on one way or another. I have been struck by the level of support for an holistic approach to delivering universal healthcare.

We have talked about immunisation and about the mistake we would be making if we simply imagined that going around the world offering people vaccinations and inoculations would be “job done”. It really would not be. Those interventions would be treated with a great deal of suspicion by communities, as they are at the moment, if that were all we were offering. It has to be much more than that; it truly has to be integrated. I look forward to making this point loud and clear in September in New York.

On a broader theme, as I have gone around the world, I have been struck by the roll-out of healthcare systems. Very often, there is a temptation for politicians to roll out shiny things that they can demonstrate to their constituents. That generally means hospitals, and hospitals are great things, but they may not be the right thing in low and middle-income countries.

Dr Whitford: In the four health systems across the UK, we are trying to address our obsession with hospitals and tertiary centres, realising we have not got enough resources in primary care, and certainly not in prevention. We need to share that knowledge with developing countries.

Dr Murrison: I agree with the hon. Lady. In the context of low and middle-income countries, my focus would be on primary healthcare and public healthcare, by which I understand something slightly different from public healthcare in the context introduced by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), who speaks for the Opposition, and I will come to that in a minute. The focus needs to be on prevention and on things that deal with the problems that the poor are exposed to, first and foremost. The difficulty with shiny stuff—electorally obliging though that might be—is that it risks exacerbating health inequality; shiny things tend to be in urban centres and accessed more easily by the better-off, rather than the poor, and particularly the rural poor. We need to be very careful about that.
[Dr Murrison]

We need to introduce the notion that countries themselves must grow their healthcare systems, and a number of contributions touched on that. That means addressing unpleasant things such as taxation. In addressing universal health coverage, we need to ensure that we encourage Governments to establish proper mechanisms for raising taxation, so that countries can ultimately stand on their own feet. I am pleased that the UK has introduced some trailblazers in that respect—the four in Africa are Rwanda, Ethiopia, Ghana and Uganda, and the other is Pakistan—where we will be assisting Governments to build structures that will make their healthcare systems sustainable in the longer term.

A number of contributions touched on polio. I know that will be the subject of my grilling later by the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg)—I will say lots of nice things about him in anticipation that he will give me an easy ride this afternoon. I am sorry that he is standing down; it will be a great loss to the House, and I urge him to think again. Polio is on the cusp of being defeated. There were 33 cases last year, from only three countries—only two countries, really. We must make sure the boot remains on the carotid because there is a real risk that, if we are tempted to divert funds from this, we will be back to square one. That would be a tragedy because of the lives that would be lost, and because, at some point, we would have to pick up the pieces. It makes no sense, in raw economic terms, to relieve the pressure on that particular nasty at this point. I hope we will make sure in September that the pressure stays on that particular one of the “Captains of the Men of Death”.

I appreciated the comments made by right hon. and hon. Members about nutrition; they were absolutely right. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) rightly said in an intervention that there is no point vaccinating people if they are undernourished. It is nonsense epidemiologically and in public health terms to do so, and we must adopt an integrated, holistic approach to universal health coverage. If we can get that across to people in New York in September, we will have done the world a great service.

I am proud to be a member of a Government who are fully committed to not just the Global Fund but other funds that require replenishment. Our leadership has been salutary over many years—not just under the present Government, although I am pleased about the commitment they have made to the Global Fund—and I am confident, whoever wins in two weeks’ time, to answer the point made by the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), that that process will continue.

10.50 am

Alistair Burt: It is a pleasure to briefly conclude the debate and to thank all those who took part for the contributions they made in a variety of ways. The hon. Members for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) and for Dundee West (Chris Law), speaking from the Front Bench, ensured that I was not far wrong when I spoke about the Minister having a torrid time. Theirs were thoughtful contributions that will remind the Minister that his post is not an easy wicket all the time. There are serious questions to be asked about development, and they were well asked, as always. My right hon. Friend responded very well. I thank him for his generous remarks and his response to the debate. We can all feel that the matter is in good hands.

I thank colleagues—the hon. Members for Glasgow East (David Linden), for Lincoln (Karen Lee) and for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford)—for the variety of contributions they made. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire always speaks with great authority in such debates, and she reminded us about complacency and how things that we take for granted can easily be lost. My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) reminded us of the efficacy of small charities, and he was ably supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who is quite a champion of their work in many parts of the world. He speaks with great knowledge about that.

We shall miss the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who is a thoughtful critic. He is always good at supporting the good things that the United Kingdom does, but keen to press the point where things are not right and to move us in the right direction. He has made a significant contribution, and his reputation across the House and beyond is well deserved. However long we are all here, I know he will continue to add to that.

I want to say a brief word about the conundrum that is the United States. On the one hand, it is the most extraordinarily generous contributor to the world—billions of dollars flow from it. There is a great risk of confusing the United States in general with elements of the Administration, and that would be unfair. We all work with colleagues in America who are the most generous and gifted of individuals. There will be the odd clash with an Administration of any sort, particularly at the moment. We have to be careful. The American Government are themselves a significant donor. There is a conundrum, and there are areas where we will challenge, but we must be careful that that does not tip over into unwarranted criticism.

In relation to partnerships that need to be created—I noticed the emphasis placed by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston on public systems—medicine and health cannot work without a partnership between the private, the public and philanthropy. With the sheer scale of what is available, and the ability of the private sector to make a contribution, the skill is to use that effectively to ensure that the poorest, and those in the most difficult locations and with neglected conditions, are still brought in. That is where political skills can be exercised. We have a role to play.

The gist of the debate was about focusing on what is meant by universal health coverage and about looking ahead to the meeting in September. If there is any part of my former role that I miss, it is UNGA week. I did 60 engagements in four days; that was my best. I sincerely hope that the Minister will be well used and well worked. It is an opportunity for him to see all the people involved and to make the contributions he needs to, and for the UK to lead by example. Because he represents DFID, he will find, as I did, that he is received everywhere he goes—he will be standing on the shoulders of all those who work for DFID—in a way that would warm anyone’s heart.

This is about a partnership, with people in the UK working hard for something that DFID and Ministers deliver at top level. As we head towards the high-level
meeting, I know the Minister will be determined to ensure that the global leadership continues, and that the example is set. We will all do our best to contribute to the good things, to mount challenges when that is needed, and to give praise when it is deserved. We need to stay in the forefront in relation to what the world needs. We know that the problems are not going away, and that the challenge, and the need for determination, will continue for some time.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered universal health coverage.

Drone Users: Registration

10.56 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con):

I beg to move,

That this House has considered a registration scheme for drone users.

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this issue. I recognise that it may appear to be something of a specialist subject, but I was rather swamped—or perhaps I should say swarmed—with a barrage of emails and letters from drone-operating constituents in May and June. That coincided with the Civil Aviation Authority’s consultation document on the charge proposal for a drone registration scheme. The consultation closed on 7 June and the Government’s response is awaited. It would be useful to hear from the Minister when a response is likely, given that the intention was that the registration scheme should open on 1 October, a date that is not far away.

I suspect that many other hon. Members will have been approached about the CAA proposals, because the activity in question is quite big. I have met a number of constituents who are involved, and I had not appreciated the magnitude of involvement in operating drones and model aircraft. There are an estimated 170,000 operators in the UK, including 600,000 model aircraft operated by 40,000 members of the four main UK model flying associations, the British Model Flying Association, the Large Model Association, the Scottish Aeromodellers Association and FPV UK—the association for radio-controlled model and drone flying. I fear we may get lost in acronyms as we continue. As I have said, it is a big activity, and the numbers involved compare with just 20,000 manned aircraft on the UK aircraft register. A lot more people fly model aircraft than real ones, and the figure is likely to grow.

The number of drones has risen exponentially because of the greater availability and easier affordability of multi-rotor drones over the past six years or so. You and I, Mr Robertson, can go into high street shops and buy one of those craft for under £100. Whether we would know how to operate the thing is another matter—which is what I want to come on to discuss.

The activity generally has a good safety record and largely responsible memberships affiliated to the various clubs; indeed, the most recent fatal accident involving a model aircraft occurred way back in 2003. The evidence given to the Science and Technology Committee on 26 June by Andy Sage of NATS, who categorised drone operators as “clueless, careless and criminal”, was unfair, inaccurate and insulting. I am pleased that he subsequently apologised for those comments. This is a growing and legitimate activity, and we need to be able to accommodate it. However, at the same time, I think we all recognise that it brings with it criminal or potentially damaging and intrusive opportunities, of which a small minority will take advantage, and are doing so.

The most high-profile issues around drone usage arose last year, in my neck of the woods at Gatwick airport, which was shut down for several days before Christmas because of sightings of drones that might have interfered with passenger aircraft. It remains something of a mystery as to exactly what drones were involved; nobody was prosecuted. More recently, we have heard...
from direct action groups such as Extinction Rebellion, which I have to say I get on well with in my constituency, about using drones to disrupt flights. I certainly condemn that, but it is an issue that we have to take into account.

There is a growing problem of drones flying drugs and other illicit goods into prisons, and just last week we heard that Wimbledon has had to team up with a technology company to prevent drones from flying overhead and disrupting play, which is becoming a common challenge for many other major sporting events. There is also potentially a nuisance problem of certain drones invading people’s privacy in residential areas, creating noise and flying dangerously close to crowds.

Drones are subject to existing laws, such as the Air Navigation Order 2016, but there are few prosecutions. I think that most people acknowledge the need to bring in more robust rules to regulate the use of drones, but how should those rules work? They need to be fair and proportionate, which is why many of my constituents quite rightly have concerns, and I share those concerns.

**Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab) rose—**

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

**Tim Loughton:** I will give way to the hon. Lady first, and then to the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman.

**Stephanie Peacock:** I am grateful, and I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. On those concerns, does he agree with my constituent, a model airplane enthusiast who is concerned that, while the regulation around drone usage and the problems it can cause should be tackled, people who fly model airplanes should not be caught up in this and are now being asked to pay £16 a year? Perhaps we should look at an exemption for model airplane use.

**Tim Loughton:** I agree. If the hon. Lady bears with me, I will come on to exactly that point. However, it is £16.50, not £16, just to be percnickety.

**Dr Drew:** To build on that point, people who fly radio-controlled model airplanes feel that the way this has been handled has ignored them, and that they were only brought in at the last moment. I hope the hon. Gentleman will talk about why they should be handled only brought in at the last moment. I hope the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) said, proposes an annual £16.50 charge per operator, supposedly to cover the cost of running the scheme. That is based on an estimated 170,000 assumed registrations, which would raise something like £2.8 million—not a small sum. The CAA claims that it needs to cover the costs of the IT service hosting the system, IT security packages, a major national drone safety and registration requirement campaign, variable costs linked to user volumes and the ongoing upgrade of drone registration services, although there is not a lot of detail on those ongoing costs and why such a large amount of money is required.

I agree with the hon. Lady. One of my constituents’ main concerns is why the charge is £16.50, and why it is levied every year. Why not just an up-front registration fee, without the need to re-register? The United States scheme costs just $5 for three years, in Ireland it is €5 for three years, and France brought in a free scheme, so £16.50 seems disproportionate, given the experiences of comparable countries. Why is it as much as £16.50? Why not a one-off fee? What are the ongoing costs? Will it go up from £16.50? These things have a curious habit of going up but never going down when schemes begin. Is it fair to charge a teenager £16.50 for using a drone when Amazon, which in years to come will probably operate fleets of hundreds of drones to deliver goodies to everybody, will also be charged £16.50? Those are my first questions to the Minister.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Tim Loughton:** Of course. It would not be a debate without someone giving way to the hon. Gentleman.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Gentleman is most kind. I congratulate him on introducing the debate. He, I and others in the Chamber recognise that drone use has led to contraband being taken into prisons; it comes up in Justice Questions nearly every month. Does he recognise the real need to register and approve all drone users to stop contraband going into prisons? It is important that we deal with criminality and those who use drones for criminal purposes.

**Tim Loughton:** I completely agree, which is why I said I think we all agree that we need more robust regulations and a registration scheme. I think most users do not dispute that but they do dispute the proportionality and cost. The scheme needs to be effective, because there is criminal activity in prisons—terrorism and other things, as I mentioned. How it will do anything to deter people who use drones to drop drugs and other illicit goods into prisons is not clear. A small minority misuse drone technology, and if we are going to operate a scheme it should not penalise the vast majority who operate legitimately but should be quite clear about how it will clamp down on criminals using drones for completely illegitimate activities.

What does registration actually offer to the operator, other than a confirmation of compliance? Membership of the British Model Flying Association, through the
various recognised clubs, usually includes public liability insurance cover and proper training and oversight from qualified instructors, and clubs tend to police their own members because they want everybody to operate responsibly and within the law. Why is the CAA effectively trying to reinvent the wheel when the current membership scheme works well in the existing clubs? It could just oblige all operators to register through a club, rather than through the CAA-run scheme.

The scheme could also be operated by the police, who could choose to contract it out to local clubs, when clubs prepared to take that on are available. Where they are not available, the police could operate it themselves, or through somebody else. That is how they do driving awareness classes and similar schemes in various parts of the country. The model is already there.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I am delighted that my hon. Friend has taken the opportunity to raise this issue, which is of considerable importance to a relatively small number of people. All Members have constituents who are highly reputable model aircraft operators who have carried out their hobby for years and years without any problems whatsoever. We now face a completely different animal, the drone, which he rightly says is used for commercial as well as nefarious purposes. There surely has to be some way of separating those two. My gut feeling, as I think is his, is that members of reputable clubs ought to have some kind of different treatment.

Tim Loughton: I have some sympathy with that and it is the thrust of what I am coming to. The scheme as it stands will put everybody in the same pot, treat everybody in the same way, when actually the activity is already policing itself, with existing members of model clubs, very well. How can we expand that expertise and build on what we already have, rather than trying to come up with something completely new? That is the thrust of my argument.

Under European Aviation Safety Agency rules in France, for example, there are powers to delegate registration and regulation to recognised local model flying clubs. We would likely want to go down the same route in a few years’ time, so why not start on that basis now? Surely we should be running a complementary scheme to that of other European countries. In the UK, the CAA already delegates powers to the British Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association, the Light Aircraft Association and the British Gliding Association, among others, so there are already precedents.

The various flying associations had been working constructively with the CAA and the Department for Transport, but they now claim that they have been rather stonewalled, as they put it, by both those parties, particularly since the beginning of this year and post the Gatwick episode. That is unfortunate. They believe, as the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) said, that the model flying community is being unfairly vilified for the actions of a small handful of unlawful drone operators. It is easy to see why they believe that; I have a great deal of sympathy with that view.

Other concerns have been raised. The online test is a simple, multiple-choice static test. It is not really a competence test, whereas if it were carried out by clubs, they could ensure that it was a proper test. They could be there in person to see that the operators really did know what they were doing. There are many grey areas in the law about flying over private property or public land and about enforcement of the law about flying too close to crowds. Again, proper instruction and tips and recommendations from flying clubs seem to be a good way of ensuring that we have responsible operators.

Should there be differentiation between commercial operators and private hobby operators? As I have said, Amazon is likely to be operating loads of drones commercially in future. Surely it should be subject to a higher and more expensive level of regulation. I recently saw the first unmanned air taxi being trialled in Dubai. I am sure that use of such vehicles will become the norm before long. It looks a little scary at the moment, but anyway, that is the speed at which technology is advancing.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I am very glad that my hon. Friend has raised this matter. In 2017, I led a debate in this place on drones and airprox incidents with drones, which had risen from three in 2015 to about 70 in 2017. Can my hon. Friend confirm that those were nothing to do with model aircraft, but were all to do with drones? The safety record of model aircraft is completely different and therefore they should be put in a different category or, as he says, dealt with through the reputable clubs, of which my constituents are also members.

Tim Loughton: To an extent. The exact statistics are that out of 55 airprox incidents—near misses—in the six months to May 2019 in the consolidated drone, balloon and model category, drones accounted for 49, unknown objects—Martians or whatever else—for five, and balloons for one, so model aircraft were not anywhere near the level that drones were at. It is therefore clear why most model aircraft flyers, who do not class themselves as drone operators but will be caught up in the new system, feel particularly aggrieved.

There are concerns about STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—education, because model flying and drone flying can be the gateway to STEM skills, providing a bottom rung to aviation by which young people can be inspired to pursue technical careers. I have been round many schools, and in my constituency I have Shoreham airport, which is working with schools on some of the skills in relation to aircraft, model aircraft and so on. We want to encourage that.

There is some inconsistency in relation to age criteria for licences for various activities. In this country, people have to be 16 to get a motorcycle racing licence; only eight to get a level 1 powerboat licence, and 14 to be a solo glider. It is unclear how the 18 limit originally suggested in this case will work. Who will be responsible for a minor if damage is caused when they are operating a drone uninsured, for example?

There is quite a debate in the industry about the potential impact of a single drone colliding with a passenger aircraft—that is a different debate for another day—and the various options of interfering with radio signals for potential terrorist activity and so on.

There is the issue of geofencing, which means having a capability to receive and transmit a GPS signal to show where a drone is, so that it would appear on the radar of anyone seeking to detect illicit drone use.
[Tim Loughton]

However, the mass technology is not available on a viable commercial basis for that just yet. The issue is whether the new scheme is proportionate, affordable and effective in supporting the legitimate model aircraft and drone operating community, while isolating and facilitating better policing against a small number of unlawful drone operators and those determined to use drones for various forms of criminal activity.

There still seems to be a divide between that view and the CAA and the Department. A letter—curiously, it was not signed, but was written by “The Drones Team” from the Department for Transport—sent in reply to one of my constituents, who made many of the points that I have made, said that

“the principle that the Government set out in our January consultation response still stands. Any alternative approach for model flyers must be achieved without imposing undue burden on the state and the taxpayer, whilst also being efficient and enforceable, without compromising the integrity of the policy. A blanket exemption from registration and competency tests or having the associations register their members into the registration system, as suggested in many of the consultation responses submitted by model fliers, will not meet these criteria.”

That is unfortunate because certainly the industry will say that it can meet those criteria and it is prepared to be flexible.

The chief executive of the Association of Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems, whom I met earlier this week, has said:

“We support registration, e-conspicuity and the requirement for airspace management...This will become increasingly important over the coming years as the use of drone technology increases and it is embedded into roles across multiple sectors. Drones will be acknowledged as delivering substantial benefits in the emergency services, environmental services and the commercial environment as well as providing a great recreational pastime enjoyed by many thousands of users.

The issues we have are not with the concept of Registration but the quality, cost and therefore value for money that the current registration proposal appears to deliver to government and to the users required to register.”

I agree with that. It does seem that the DFT and the CAA are trying to reinvent the wheel and failing to harness the huge experience and network capability of existing legitimate, respected and experienced model flying aircraft operators. It seems a no-brainer to me that they should be talking with them much more closely and using what is there already, rather than coming up with a completely new and, on the face of it, rather bureaucratic and disproportionate and costly scheme.

I have posed several questions to the Minister. I hope that we can come up with a proportionate and workable system, so that this legitimate activity can continue safely. I hope that, while respecting the rights and safety record of those legitimately involved, a new system can show how it will be easier to clamp down on just the sorts of criminals that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned and others who would use technology with malign intent. We should not let the illegitimate activities of the very few spoil what has become a widespread and enjoyable recreation and a technological advance that many people will be using for good in years to come.
safety is protected, must be at the forefront of any regulatory regime. That is the case for our maritime and road regimes, and it must be the case for unmanned aircraft.

That is why the Government took forward a package of measures, following the 2016 consultation, at the heart of which was accountability on the part of the operator of the unmanned aircraft. Those include: a requirement for all operators of unmanned aircraft between 250 grams and 20 kg to register themselves with the Civil Aviation Authority; mandatory competency testing for remote pilots of unmanned aircraft between 250 grams and 20 kg; tighter rules on where unmanned aircraft can be flown, which include a flight restriction zone around airports; and further restrictions on flying small unmanned aircraft above 400 feet without permission from the CAA. Those measures were legislated for through an amendment to the Air Navigation Order in 2018.

The disruption caused at Gatwick and Heathrow airports by drone incursions in December 2018 highlighted the need for better protection around aerodromes. Flying drones near an airport is a serious criminal offence. Using drones deliberately to put people’s safety at risk carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. Following the 2018 consultation, the Government legislated earlier this year to extend the flight restriction zone around aerodromes, to better protect, in particular, aircraft on approach and take-off.

In the limited time remaining, I want to focus on the requirements for unmanned aircraft operators to register with the CAA, and for remote pilots to undertake a competency test. The requirements for registration and competency testing will come into force on 30 November 2019. These requirements will make unmanned aircraft users within UK airspace more accountable for their activity.

The CAA is setting up an unmanned aircraft registration and education service, which is expected to go live in October 2019, ahead of the legal requirements coming into force. That will include a competency test and a registration scheme. The test aims to ensure that remote pilots understand how to fly their unmanned aircraft responsibly and are aware of the rules. It will cover subjects such as air safety, airspace restrictions, general knowledge about unmanned aircraft, limitations to human performance, and relevant privacy and security considerations.

The registration scheme will ensure that unmanned aircraft operators are easily identifiable, and that aircraft are traceable back to their operator in the event of an accident. I do not think that is an unreasonable requirement. We need to be able to trace operators where an offence has been committed, as we do with other modes of transport. The development of the registration scheme and competency test is well under way. The CAA is testing it with users throughout the process to make it as user-friendly as possible.

As a statutory body, the CAA is required to recover its cost from those it regulates, meaning that the unmanned aircraft operator registration and education system, which is required under statute, must not impose an undue burden on the state and the taxpayer. The CAA’s consultation on charging for the scheme, which ran from 26 April to 7 June 2019, committed to keeping the charge for registration as low as possible, while ensuring that the scheme funds itself from 1 October 2019. It would not be fair for the public to fund the scheme through the CAA. The CAA is analysing the responses, which will inform its final decision on the cost. It is important to highlight that, whatever the final cost, the charge will be per operator. This means that one operator may register several unmanned aircraft at no additional cost. Amazon and similar commercial operations will have additional, more stringent requirements and costs.

I want to emphasise that the Government recognise that the majority of unmanned aircraft users already fly responsibly and within the law. We are particularly aware of the strong safety culture fostered by the majority of model aircraft flyers and clubs, and the Government support their hobby. However, all unmanned aircraft have the potential to pose a safety and security threat, either deliberately or accidentally. There have been instances of model aircraft being flown illegally, for example within restricted areas around airports. The registration and education scheme must reflect the reality of the risk by including all users.

Stephanie Peacock: Will the Minister address the point made by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) about the cost comparison with other countries, and say why there is a cost each year?

Michael Ellis: Other countries have different schemes and regulations, which may operate more centrally. We have a system under the CAA, which is a statutory body and is regulated in such a way that it is under a duty to recover its reasonable costs. Many model aircraft and drones cost a substantial sum of money. The £16.50 cost is not unreasonable in those circumstances.

In summary, this Government are committed to maximising the benefits of emerging technologies, such as drones, to the UK’s economy and to individuals for industrial, commercial and leisure use, but we must do so in a way that protects people’s safety, security and privacy. The unmanned aircraft registration and education requirements are an essential element of our programme to do that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered a registration scheme for drone users.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
Retail Strategy

[SIR DAVID CRAUSBY in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the development of a retail strategy for the future.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship in this important debate, Sir David. Nearly a quarter of jobs in my constituency are in retail, so it is important to me that the retail sector is strong and vibrant. The fact that it provides 8,000 jobs, or 23% of the total—the highest in any constituency—is perhaps hardly surprising, given that Blaydon has Metrocentre, which is still the largest indoor shopping centre in the UK. However, there are also many local high streets in villages, towns and communities across my constituency, with small businesses that have to face huge challenges to survive, particularly given the closure of bank branches and the loss of footfall that that brings.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way so early in her speech. Does she agree that, with online banking, online retail and edge-of-town and out-of-town shopping, the high street has seen a radical transformation in the past few years, and not for good? We need a comprehensive strategy to save the high street in the next five to 10 years; otherwise, we will all be the worse, including future generations.

Liz Twist: I most certainly agree that we are seeing a radical transformation and that we need a vision for the future. Our strategy must do more than just deal with short-term problems; it must look at the longer term. That will be the burden of my speech.

Since I became the Member of Parliament for Blaydon just over two years ago, it has been my sad lot to visit stores and talk to too many staff who face store closures, including at Toys R Us, Homebase and House of Fraser. Thankfully, some of those stores, such as the House of Fraser store in Metrocentre, have had a respite, but their future remains uncertain.

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): I am happy my hon. Friend has secured this important debate, and I congratulate her on doing so; she is making an excellent case. Some 74,000 retail jobs were lost in 2018, and the town centre vacancy rate in April 2019 was 10.2%—the highest ever. Does she agree that the UK retail industry is in crisis and needs immediate, comprehensive and radical action?

Liz Twist: I most certainly agree that radical action is needed so that we can stop the situation teetering into crisis and think of a plan that will allow the sector to remain vibrant and become stronger. As my hon. Friend points out, there are some really challenging facts.

I have visited larger stores and talked to staff, but I know—because people tell me when I go on social media—that many other stores, which may be smaller or less high-profile, have had to give up the struggle, although I did not know about them until later, which is very sad. I am keen to do all I can to support the retail sector in my constituency.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Part of the solution has to be business rates; that is what is fed back to me in my community. We have had grand talk and some baby steps forward from the Government, but is it not now time for radical reform to bring in investment and protect enterprise?

Liz Twist: Business rates certainly feature strongly in the study by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, of which I was a member until recently, and in submissions to me by organisations such as the British Retail Consortium and by individual stores. We certainly need to look at that issue, which I will return to.

As I said, I have visited different places, and there are more closures that I do not know about. It is not just about jobs, although they are hugely important, and nor is it just about empty shops; it is about the impact on our local communities, especially those such as Blaydon that are made up of several smaller towns. Shops are such a central part of our high streets; from Crawcrook to Chopwell, from Birtley to Blaydon, and everywhere else in my constituency, they are a really important part of making our high streets vibrant.

A few weeks ago, I had the pleasure of visiting a shop in Birtley called High Street Quilting—a real Aladdin’s cave that stocks every imaginable thread, fabric, tool and design for quilters and embroiderers. People in one of the back rooms were getting guidance on developing their dressmaking and upholstery skills, and the shop was due the very next day to have an embroidery class, which was hugely well subscribed. Such shops create real variety and focus for our high street, but the owner told me about the difficulties she faces as a small business owner in making ends meet, even with the small business rates relief, and in ensuring that she can continue to employ people and move forward. We must not forget the small businesses when we talk about the bigger picture.

We face a changing external environment as a result of online shopping and of failures in strategy that have led to venture capital taking over stores, with scant regard for retail. The British Home Stores closures happened before my time as a Member of Parliament, but I know from talking on the doorstep to people who worked for BHS what a traumatic experience that was.

Nationally, retail employs 3 million people, with an additional 1.5 million jobs dependent on the success of the retail industry. Retail produces 11% of the UK’s economic output and approximately £7 billion in business rates, which is far higher than any other industry. It is the largest private sector employer in the UK and the second largest contributor of tax. The British Retail Consortium estimates that 74,000 retail jobs were lost in 2018, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) noted. Sadly, that trend is expected to increase in future years. We should remember that the workforce are predominantly women, and many of their jobs are part-time, so the situation has a disproportionate effect on some of our constituents.

I am disappointed that the Government’s industrial strategy has so little to say about the retail sector. Given that 9% of jobs across the country are in retail, it is really disappointing to see the sector being given such scant focus.
Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Like many hon. Members present, I have seen my main retail high street, Fishergate in Preston city centre, lose many top brands. They are being replaced by charity shops, betting shops, tattoo parlours and vaping shops. I recently met the leader of Preston City Council and impressed on him the need for a retail strategy in Preston. That needs to happen in councils up and down the country; as my hon. Friend points out, the Government are not going to do it for them. I really fear for the future of our towns and centres and for their ability to retain retail.

Liz Twist: Indeed. One of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee’s findings was that local authorities have an important part to play in ensuring the future of our high streets. I very much welcome my hon. Friend’s engagement with his local authority to ensure that it takes measures to improve what will be a changing high street, but a lively one.

Returning to the industrial strategy, I do not believe that retail has been given enough focus. I am aware that the Retail Sector Council has been set up, with representatives from the industry liaising with the Government, and that a number of workstreams have been drawn up and are already producing work. However, I fear that what we are doing in those workstreams is looking at the detail of current problems, rather than doing what we need to do, which is to produce a longer term strategy and vision to build and strengthen the retail sector, addressing the challenges we know about and those that may yet come, which we need to scan the horizon for.

There have been some examinations recently of the situation faced by high streets in particular—of course, high streets are one part of the retail sector, but not the whole part. I have already referred to the report by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, which is called “High streets and town centres in 2030”. As we have heard today, many such reports have identified the current business rates system as a real problem and noted the huge disparity in costs between online businesses and shops, including the rents that shops pay. Clearly, that is not the only issue, but when many of us heard about the online tax in the Chancellor’s last Budget statement, we thought it would be a means of addressing this problem of the disparity between online businesses and physically present businesses and shops.

Faisal Rashid: Will my hon. Friend join me in urging the Government to heed the call by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers to take urgent action to save our shops by implementing a comprehensive industrial strategy for the sector?

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He could have been reading my mind.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): All our minds.

Liz Twist: Yes, indeed. I was going on to say that I was really pleased that USDAW, the shop workers union, launched its industrial strategy for retail last month to a packed room. I was really impressed by the work that had gone into developing that strategy and by the outcomes it wants to achieve, which are presented under three helpful headings: “Economy and Community”, “People and Productivity” and “Changing Perceptions—Retail Jobs are Real Jobs”. Even in the opening speech of a debate where I was not so restricted for time as other speakers might be, I do not have enough time to cover all the detail in those three areas of the report. However, I certainly commend it to the Minister, if she has not seen it already; she should look at it, because it has a wealth of positive points and positive ways forward.

What is USDAW calling for? Under the “Economy and Community” heading, it is calling, as others have, for a fundamental reform of business rates; a review of town/city centre parking charges and other transport issues; reform of the tax laws to ensure that companies pay their fair share of tax—for example, by preventing the avoidance of corporation tax—and to create more of a level playing field between online and bricks-and-mortar retailers, which I have already touched on; closing the pay gap between chief executive officers and the lowest paid workers; stronger corporate governance rules to curb asset stripping, which has been one of the issues the retail sector has faced; ensuring that business failure cannot be rewarded with excessive bonuses and pay-outs, as was the case with British Home Stores; and a review of the role and functions of the Competition and Markets Authority, in light of the increase in proposed mergers within the sector—USDAW is really encouraging us to consider the CMA’s role to see whether it reflects the changing retail environment.

Under the heading “People and Productivity”, USDAW is calling for a minimum pay rate of £10 per hour for all workers, irrespective of age; the introduction of legislation to tackle underemployment and insecure work by providing a minimum contract of 16 hours a week for those who want to work that long; contracts that reflect the actual hours that people work and not the hours on their paper contract, which are often exceeded; and legislation to ensure that workers have guaranteed seats on the boards of large companies, with the same duties and responsibilities as other directors, and with measures put in place to ensure that those in such seats reflect the gender breakdown of staff across the company.

The third area is “Changing Perceptions—Retail Jobs are Real Jobs”. That is something that is really close to my heart, having met so many shop workers over the years; in fact, my mum was a shop worker for many years, so it really is dear to my heart. USDAW is calling for an increased focus on retail across Government policy and decision-making mechanisms, to reflect the importance of the sector; promotion and recognition of the benefits of working in retail, to help to develop talent and increase retention levels, because retail offers employees greater flexibility than most sectors, and often allows them to work around their family/caring commitments or studies; and a challenge to the overt perception that women simply work in retail for “pin money”, or that retail is just a stopgap.

A key part of challenging those perceptions is the skills agenda, which means recognising that retail jobs are not just jobs that anyone can do. Dealing with customers day in, day out is a hugely important skill. First, it is a contribution to the social environment that all of us live in; indeed, for many people, it may be the only contact they have with another person. Also, it is a huge skill to deal politely and kindly with other people, and that needs to be recognised. However, further skills will also need to be developed in the future. As we have
hearing, retail is changing, and different skills are needed, for example in IT and other areas. Therefore, there needs to be some kind of clear path for career progression, to increase both productivity and job satisfaction. I was going off the USDA W script a bit there, but I feel very strongly about that.

I will return to the Government’s industrial strategy. I have already said it is lacking in detail, given the size and importance of the retail sector. The Retail Sector Council brings together Government and industry to “seek to encourage growth and positive change in the sector as it adapts to rapidly changing consumer habits”.

The workstreams for the Retail Sector Council include business costs; skills and lifelong learning, which I have just touched on; the industrial strategy; employment: the circular economy, which I am told is the environment, wrapping and things such as that; and consumer protection. From the council’s website, I understand that its work will feed into the work of Government Departments, where appropriate, to contribute to and inspire initiatives that support the council’s objectives. It will work, for example, with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government around high streets and communities.

One thing I would stress, as members of the British Retail Consortium have already stressed, is the need for much greater co-ordination between Government Departments, to ensure that when a decision is made by one Department, the knock-on effects are not felt by another. The kind of petty example I refer to quite often is the need, when we talk about, and perhaps reform, business rates, to consider the impact on local government. We must seek to ensure that that longer-term issue is not just passed to someone else.

However, there are other issues to consider as well. Clearly, there are issues about benefits, and particularly in-work benefits, which will also affect the economy, as well as decisions by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We all know that it is complex to achieve such co-ordination, but it needs to happen. We also need a retail sector deal, to put retail on a par with other sectors that have already launched such initiatives. As I say, with 11% of the workforce in retail, we really need that deal.

I have a couple of specific things to ask of the Minister. The first is to urge her to look at USDA W’s industrial strategy for retail. It contains a huge amount of detail—I have just touched on some of it—and looks at the growth and development of the retail sector in the future. I very much hope that she and her officials will meet USDA W to go through its report, which is an important document, and will look at its proposals. Secondly, the Minister should look to establish a real vision for retail, not just by tackling known problems, but by developing a vision for the future and setting up a retail sector deal to give retail its due importance alongside other sectors.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. There are six Members standing to speak. I want to call the Front-Bench spokespeople at 3.30 pm. If Members could keep contributions to around six minutes, everybody should be able to get in. I call John Howell.

2.50 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). She has highlighted the structural changes that are occurring in our high streets. She is right to point out that the retail sector employs a lot of people and is therefore extremely important. It is also fair to point out that rent and rates play their part.

I want to stress the structural changes, which the hon. Lady hinted at, and the move away from face-to-face to online shopping, which we are all doing. In those circumstances, a retail strategy is very difficult to bottom out. It is very difficult to come to a view on how an overall strategy should be managed, because the decline that is occurring takes place in different ways in different businesses. I will illustrate that in a moment.

I want to make some general points about things that might help. To start with, I welcome the future high streets fund. It is a much better way of facing the future, rather than harking back to the past and “how things always were”. If we look around the country, there are a number of different councils that are doing things in different ways. Great Yarmouth, for example, is developing cultural quarters as a way of encouraging businesses and people into the centre of town. It is all about the creation of place. Others, including Henley, see themselves more as events destinations; the Henley regatta has just finished. It is interesting to note that shopkeepers in Henley always have a difficult view on the regatta; they claim that when it is on, they lose business because young people are all tied up in the regatta and cannot go shopping.

Sir Mark Hendrick: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that city centres have to look at other offers as well as retail to help enliven them. Preston has tried to do that through leisure. Unfortunately, the major business interest that was driving the leisure offer has just gone bankrupt. On the future high streets fund, Preston, a city that is much in need, has just had its bid rejected. That is not good enough. These little pots of money are put there much in need, has just had its bid rejected. That is not
go good enough. These little pots of money are put there to act as sticking plaster for town centres.

John Howell: The future high streets fund is looking at how high streets can be transformed for the future, not harking back to how things were done in the past. It is looking at imaginative schemes to take things forward. Two things that the future high streets fund grants funding for are improving transport access to town centres, which is absolutely crucial—if people cannot get in and out, the town centre is likely to die—and increasing vehicle and pedestrian flows, which follows on from that. That is a major improvement for the functioning of our town centres.

I have two examples of different types of business that are handled in different ways. The first is pubs. The reduction in the number of pubs has been going on for a number of years, for many reasons—we all seem to want to reduce our alcohol consumption for health reasons; there are the changes in the law on smoking, although they have largely worked their way out; there is a case for saying that many pubs have not got over the recession and are still struggling; and there is also the pricing of alcohol, which means it is often much cheaper to drink at home than in the pub. Alongside that,
however, employment in pubs and bars has remained quite steady, and has even increased slightly, which needs to be considered in parallel.

My second example is banks. The decline in banks has been going on for 30 years. It is even more significant now with the rise in online banking. I have probably not visited a bank in two or three years—I do all my banking online because it is much more convenient to do that.

My final point is about the integration of housing in the mix. It is important to try to get people to live in the centre of our towns again, so that there is a mix of retail and living accommodation. In my role as Government champion for neighbourhood planning, I will give an example. The town of Thame had about 700 houses earmarked in its neighbourhood plan. It deliberately chose to spread them around the outskirts of the city rather than to have a big development at one end of the town, which would have meant creating a new area and a new shopping area. The reason it spread that housing all round the town was to increase the flow into the centre of town. That is a very good example, which I would endorse, to everyone who is looking to sort out how their towns are organised for the future.

2.57 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on opening the debate this afternoon. I declare an interest as chair of the USDAW group of Members of Parliament and as a member of USDAW, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers. I am particularly pleased to take part in this debate. It is very important to send a message to the Minister that we think that the retail sector is an important contributor to the UK economy. It employs millions of people and is key to the regeneration of our local towns and communities, and also key to the employment across the country of many people. Three million people are directly employed in retail; 1.5 million work in related activity that depends on the success of our high streets. Our high streets are the fabric of our communities and we need to look at what we can do to protect them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon and the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) have raised some of the challenges on our high streets at the moment. Disposable income is falling for many people. There are real challenges in the economy as a whole, which means less money is spent locally. The issue of online sales is a particularly big challenge. I have bought things online, and I do all my banking online because it is much more convenient to do that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon mentioned, some big key employers in many of our areas are folding. I want the Government to recognise that shops are a generator of economic value, so we need to look at what we can do to support them. My hon. Friend mentioned the USDAW’s “Industrial Strategy for Retail”, a blueprint of ideas that are worth discussion. I hope the Minister will focus on some of those ideas, and see whether they are applicable to Government and the devolved Administrations.

I have a couple of points that I want to throw into the mix. First, we need to look at how we can support the maintenance of key drivers of footfall in town centres. That means the Government need to look at supporting post offices, Government businesses and doctors’ and dentists’ surgeries in town centres. They need to ensure that we have an offer in town centres that brings people into the town, because as has been said, town centres have to be places of destination as well as places of shopping. We can do that by anchoring key Government facilities in town centres and by adding value to town centres through local council and local government support. For example, we can improve the built environment and plant trees and bushes. If shops are empty, finding ways in which the local council and others can use exhibition and display space to bring people in to make them places of venture is particularly important.

Like the hon. Member for Henley, I want to see integrated issues on planning and look at whether we can find ways to bring houses as well as shops into town centres. When I was honoured to be a Minister in Northern Ireland, I oversaw a scheme whereby we used space above shops for single people and newly married couples to live, ensuring they could use the town centre while also filling empty premises.

The USDAW strategy suggests looking at the online shopping tax. Tesco’s chief executive has indicated he wants to look at the potential for a shop tax. An online tax might be a 1% or 2% levy on online transactions, which could help to balance the initiative towards people buying in retail. I do not want to put the cost up for consumers, but it is worthy of consideration.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon mentioned car parking and transport links, which are extremely important, as is the issue of business rates. In my part of the world in Wales, we have a small business rate relief scheme that provides rate relief for businesses up to £6,000 of rateable value with 100% relief, and we have a high street relief scheme that supplies £23.6 million of rate relief for shops in town centres. That helps anchor and keep businesses in those town centres.

Finally, I will give some examples. In Holywell in my constituency, we recently lost all of the banks bar one, but, with the help of a company called Square, we had...
some potential in the town centre, where we enabled people to use machines for online transactions. That was provided free by Square to help support retailers in the town. We have had support through a range of activities, festivals, theatre and art groups trying to bring footfall into the towns. All of that is part of a retail strategy. It requires not just the shops but local councils, Government and private sector organisations trying to support a focus on retail, and not a drawing away from retail. I commend USDAW’s industrial strategy and support a focus on retail, and not a drawing away from Government and private sector organisations trying to bring footfall into the towns. All of that is part of a retail activities, festivals, theatre and art groups trying to bring the town. We have had support through a range of

Bill Grant: As someone whose mother worked in the pit canteen and made beds at Butlin’s on a Saturday, I fully agree that those who provide such services deserve better pay. We need to recognise those in hospitality and eateries, and the value of those who prepare and serve the food. As a nation, for decades and generations we have undervalued those people, so I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman, and the price has to be passed on to the consumer.

Employees—dare I say the next line? The hon. Gentleman must have been looking over my shoulder—should receive fair pay for work undertaken, and should have security of tenure in their job. Customers should feel involved in the purchase, and should engage with the sales assistant. It should not be a beat-the-clock exercise, in which people have to hurry to return to their vehicle before they receive a fine for overstaying their welcome. Nor should there be an additional cost burden on retailers if their staff wish to park in the vicinity of their place of work; in certain cities, retailers are being asked for £500 or thereabouts per annum per member of staff who wishes to do that.

Recently it has been announced that in Glasgow city centre, parking restrictions and charges will now apply on the Sabbath—one on Sundays. Business representatives have already taken to the media to express their concern that the move will lead to shoppers deserting the city centre on a Sunday in favour of large out-of-town shopping centres, which, as we are all aware, generally have free parking. As a business person once said, “When you can’t change the direction of the wind, adjust your sail”. We should manage the change. We need to encourage a steady footfall for the future, and stop what appears to be a stampeding exodus of high street shoppers to out-of-town retail centres or online facilities. In Scotland, that may mean the Scottish Government and councils working together, and reconsidering their planning and roads legislation, and policies that affect town centres.

Certainly, in my constituency the main towns are, for want of a better word, hurting. They have not hurt as much in their whole existence, and in many cases they have lost their dignity, which they richly deserve to have returned to them. However, the centre of Cumnock is indeed an exception, as a small town that has recently been sympathetically revitalised by the introduction of a small new build retail facility that blends into the streetscape. The principal occupier, a prominent food retailer, appears to complement the existing, varied retailers—so well done to East Ayrshire Council. Local chambers of commerce and industry, such as the Ayrshire chamber of commerce, are to be commended for their encouragement of local enterprise and excellence.

Inevitably some businesses in the UK will, regretfully, fail, for one or more of the reasons I have indicated. The Government need to consider taking appropriate measures to ensure that the auditing of retail businesses is robust;
that any asset stripping, particularly by big businesses, will be better regulated in the future, for the protection of employees and shareholders; and that a review—and, if it is deemed appropriate, reform—is carried out with respect to company voluntary arrangements. There is also a need to look at business rates and taxes.

Our future is created by what we do while we are living for today, so I hope that as a result of the contributions to the debate, the Minister will be encouraged to reflect on the Government’s planning for tomorrow. We need more practical measures like the future high streets fund, which was introduced in the 2018 Budget. It is an excellent boost to high streets, despite the failures mentioned earlier. Hopefully those who reapply will be successful next time. I ask the Minister to bring forward further measures to secure our local retail trade and help to re-energise high streets throughout the UK, while remembering that high streets are no longer a cash cow to be financially milked by an outdated business rating system that needs grassroots reform.

3.12 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I extend my thanks to the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for obtaining the debate and introducing it so well, and to the other hon. Members who have taken part. I shall probably echo their comments, although obviously I will give mine a flavour of Northern Ireland, because I always do—or, specifically, of my constituency’s main town of Newtownards.

At a time when it is easier and quicker to buy online, I am thankful that the high street in Newtownards is bucking the trend and thriving. That is due in large part to a council that wants to be involved and helpful. It co-operates with the local chamber of trade, which is forward thinking and absolutely invested in the future of the high street. Rather than staying the same and trying to hold on to what is there, it is focused on moving with the times. The benefits are clear. I had the opportunity of a meeting with the chamber of trade about six weeks ago. The members have an interesting vision for the high street; it is about the shopping experience. It is more than just shopping online as some people do, but it is also more than just going to the high street.

In my constituency, those over 55 have a certain level of disposable income, so the high street and traditional shops are well utilised; but the chamber of trade vision is that there should, at the same time, be a shopping experience for families. The right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) mentioned that idea. The vision is about having somewhere for the children to go, green and attractive areas in the town, and a bit of coffee culture. All those things make the experience of going shopping more than it would have been in the past, in my younger days. What is exciting is that the chamber of trade and Ards and North Down Borough Council have the same vision. It is important to encourage that when we can.

There are shops that have a face on the high street and an online service as well. We must look at different ways of doing things. An advantage for some of the shops on my high street is that they do probably 60% of their trade on the high street and 40% online. They do business across the whole world—in the United States, the far east, Canada and Africa. Their products are attractive in those places, and they find avenues to sell and be promoted there.

People have busy lives. My parliamentary aide works until 5, collects her children and brings them home to begin to make their dinner at 5.30. They eat their dinner, have story time and their bath, and then they are in bed for 7.30. She then is faced with the dilemma of whether to go to the shopping centre and run into Asda, or to sit in the comfort of her home and order things online. Late-night opening in shopping centres used to be busy, but now people have an option. Local businesses miss out when busy people go for the easy option of shopping online and ordering from Tesco or Asda. All those shops now do home deliveries.

The easy option may not be safest option. As the debate on electrical safety yesterday highlighted, online retailers do not have the same safety scrutiny as physical shops. That should be a consideration in any retail strategy, as was emphasised in the half-hour debate yesterday led by the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). We need to remind people that going down to the high street on Saturday can be much more fulfilling than scrolling down an online list. As trade changes, with more online sales, it is great to see the plans for our local high street to adapt. I have invited the Minister—I think we are waiting for a date to be confirmed—to come and see all the good things I have been telling her about Newtownards. We look forward to meeting the hon. Lady on that day.

What does the shop in the high street need? It is important to have a better and quicker planning system for improvements, and to support fresh looks and entice more people. We are fortunate as we have had a Saturday market for 20 or 30 years, which attracts many people to Newtownards and its traditional shops. Newtownards is one of the better towns in Northern Ireland when it comes to choice, variety and cost—and all the things that are important in shopping. A mix of shopping and accommodation would be helpful for the evening and coffee culture. Indeed, in the past we had a scheme, the living over the shop scheme, that supported the provision of accommodation on the high street. The right hon. Member for Delyn mentioned it; I did not know he had been the Minister responsible, but I am pleased that it was his initiative, and I am deeply grateful to him. I promoted it over and over in my time on the council and on the Assembly—and only today do I know that he was the man who brought it forward. I thank him on behalf of my constituency. It is so important that empty space is used in a good way, and that was a way to utilise it very well.

The business rates have to be revised. Many stores in the town need assistance, as their rates are truly a significant part of their bills. The ministerial visit will enable the shopkeepers in the town of Ards to highlight the wonderful things that are being done, and to make some input into how Government can restore the high street and encourage online businesses to have a face on the high street. We are indeed fortunate in Ards that the centre of town has wide variety, with many different types of businesses from clothes and shoes to opticians and solicitors. There are areas of redevelopment such as the South Street Precinct, which is providing approximately 100 jobs. That is among the things I would like the Minister to see.

Many stores in our town centre are doing a great trade online. Ards is holding its own, but now is the time to take steps forward and to secure the future of
the town by adapting and moving with the times. Retail strategy needs to include all of the things I have outlined. I believe that we are on the precipice of greatness, with many high street businesses wanting to keep their footprint, but moving online. Now is the time to make some input into the situation, with a fit-for-purpose UK-wide retail strategy.

3.18 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for securing this important debate. We have already heard powerful contributions on both sides of the Chamber about how the Government’s lack of a clear, coherent and holistic retail strategy is damaging our high streets and shopping centres, not to mention the livelihoods of those trying to make a living in the sector.

I will begin by recounting a couple of conversations I had with business owners in Batley and Spen. A couple of months ago in Batley, I called into a restaurant called Mi Nonnas. It is a really nice coffee shop and lunch destination. The owner showed me painful statistics demonstrating the fall in his revenue due to the controversial changes to our bus routes, which have completely decimated his restaurant’s footfall. He told me that he has not taken a wage, and that the situation is really stressful for him and his family. His is not the only local business affected by those changes. Sadly, since 2010, we have lost 3,000 bus routes nationally, and central Government cuts have seemingly little regard for the wider consequences for retailers.

The second conversation I had was at a lovely needlework and wool shop in Heckmondwike. The owner told me that footfall had really reduced because the last bank had left the community. The people who use her shop are often older people who knit and sew. They are less likely to take a longer journey to go to a bank, so they take their business elsewhere; considering that the UK has lost almost two thirds of its banks and building societies over the past 30 years, that will not change any time soon. A fifth of the population are 2 miles adrift from their nearest branch, likely with a substandard bus route to boot.

The massive hike in business rates announced last year is another issue that constituents mention to me regularly. In an age when people shop online, our local independent retailers need a leg up. They need vision and creative thinking. They are hamstrung by antiquated rates systems, which price too many independent retailers out of the market. Although I welcome the short-term rate relief for some businesses announced in last year’s Budget, it is nothing more than a sticking plaster. While our high streets are increasingly dotted with vacant shops, the big supermarkets get a cut in rates and online giants such as Amazon pay a fraction of their multibillion-pound turnover. That does not make sense to me. With the collapse of big brands such as Toys R Us, which had a store at Centre 27 retail park in my constituency, it is clear that these issues go way beyond our high streets.

The retail sector accounts for more than 3 million jobs in the UK, yet it is often overlooked. The British Retail Consortium warns that 74,000 jobs were lost last year, and that up to 900,000 will be lost by 2025. That would be a staggering blow to the sector. We need a clear retail strategy. The fact that the Government’s industrial strategy, which was unveiled almost two years ago, has yet to create a sector deal for retail speaks volumes. The Government’s Retail Sector Council, which was designed to address key challenges facing the sector, meets a paltry three times a year. That is not good enough. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid), who is no longer in his place, local authorities have to bid against one another for money from the future high streets fund. There is no guarantee of success, and the fund goes nowhere near far enough to address the myriad issues that have been raised in the debate.

How do we move forward? Let us start with the basics. We need to ensure that people can access our businesses. Public transport is crucial. We need to invest in buses and trains to end this downward spiral. We must not have communities where there are no banks left. I applaud NatWest, which has a pilot scheme to bring a number of banks under one roof and offer a limited service to businesses. We need to escalate such opportunities, and perhaps Government should drive them.

I am delighted that the Labour party recently committed to introducing a network of post banks based in post offices in the hearts of our communities. It is really important for older people in particular to be able to access their money, and that business owners do not have to travel too far with cash in their pockets, or put their workforce at risk by asking them to carry large amounts of money around on buses and elsewhere. Our business rates system also needs fixing. Nothing but a comprehensive review and overhaul of the system will suffice, so I am pleased that the Labour party is committed to doing exactly that, along with taxing online retailers, implementing free wi-fi and banning ATM charges. Like colleagues, I commend USDAW’s brilliant Save Our Shops campaign, which focuses on levelling the playing field between traditional and online retailers, improving pay and conditions, and changing perceptions of retail jobs.

We are just not having the conversations that matter with policy makers. It is down to us as Members of Parliament, and to trade unions, to try to get those conversations going. I do not think policy makers understand the myriad challenges for villages such as Birstall, or bigger communities such as Cleckheaton and Heckmondwike. Having short-term fixes and Departments working in silos certainly is not cutting it.

A clear retail strategy that looks at the whole picture is overdue. We need great ideas for making our high streets more community focused, tackling loneliness and introducing flexible workplaces and leisure opportunities, and for bringing culture—buskers, art and so on—to our high streets and greening them. We need to ensure that our retail survives and can transform our towns and villages, bringing us a sense of place and home, and making our communities great places to live and work.

3.25 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for
Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this debate about a topic that is vital to the survival of our high streets, as evidenced again by the number of Members present. I say “again” because this is not the first time we have gathered to discuss the causes of town centre decline and what we should do about it. Indeed, I took part in a debate on urban regeneration shortly after being elected to this place four years ago.

Very little has changed since then. In fact, things have probably got worse. In 2018, nearly 85,000 retail jobs were lost in the UK as businesses continued to go bust. In the past 18 months alone, the following big chains have gone into administration: Greenwoods, HMV, Berketex, Crawshaw, Evans Cycles, American Golf, Orla Kiely, Poundworld, House of Fraser, Gaucho, Warren Evans, East, Carpetright, Toys R Us, Maplin, Mothercare, Homebase, and L. K. Bennett. Many household names; many long-standing companies; it is a crisis.

The British Retail Consortium’s monthly football tracker showed that store visits hit a six-year low in May this year, with declines experienced in every region and across high streets, retail parks and shopping centres. According to a new report, online shopping will account for more than 50% of retail sales within the next 10 years. The report states that that growth will be powered by three primary factors: the changing demographics of the UK adult population; the development of faster, cheaper home deliveries; and fewer physical stores.

Our high streets and small business owners will continue to be hit by those changes in shopping habits. The Centre For Towns showed that the decline of our high streets has picked up pace in the past 10 years as consumers shop online rather than visiting the high street. The Office for National Statistics reported that the number of retail businesses and the number of high street retail jobs fell in every region of England except London between 2012 and 2017.

Those trends are reflected in the two main towns in my constituency: Ellesmere Port and Neston. Both have a retail offer significantly smaller than it was five years ago, due to the dramatic changes we have heard about. The town centre in Neston has lost all its banks, which has had a negative impact on both customers and retail businesses. A lot of retail units are in private ownership, many of them too large for what retailers are looking for nowadays, and shops in Ellesmere Port are closing regularly, and are not being replaced. When banks close branches, they undergo what I consider to be a cursory consultation that changes nothing and does not require them to think about their wider responsibilities for the vitality of our town centres.

Mike Amesbury: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is rather confusing to look at the ownership of some of those banks? Of course, we stepped in some time ago—they were bailed out to the tune of billions of pounds—so there is ownership there, but where is the control? It is rather confusing to look at the ownership of some of those banks? Of course, we stepped in some time ago—they were bailed out to the tune of billions of pounds—so there is ownership there, but where is the control? It is rather confusing to look at the ownership of some of those banks?

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend and neighbour makes an excellent point. Indeed, the power that central Government have through procurement and their control over many of those private enterprises should be used for the wider benefit of communities. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) mentioned, post offices are a great example of where we have lost control of an organisation. A number of the post offices on high streets in my constituency are closing, without any regard for the wider community impact. We really must begin to take back control, to coin a phrase.

Most of all, it is our town centres that are in need of a retail strategy. They are the heart of our communities, and their importance must not be underplayed. A new approach that regenerates our town centres is vital if we are to preserve their character, restore civic pride and give people a positive reason to visit their high streets. Local authorities have the knowledge and tools to tackle this, but they cannot do so without significant financial support. However, local authority funding has been cut like never before and the money needed for a true transformative approach to regenerate our town centres simply is not there.

As my hon. Friend Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) said, we need to be much more joined up in how we approach these things. The move to electric vehicles is one such example. It is not entirely clear who is in charge of the charging infrastructure, but it would be great if there were joined-up thinking, with charging points located in town centres used to encourage people to use the town centre facilities while they charge up.

As we have heard, unfortunately the Government’s plan to address the crisis is to pit towns against one another in a competitive bidding process known as the future high streets fund. Only a lucky few get a slice of the pie. I learned this week that despite putting in an excellent bid for Ellesmere Port, my local authority was not successful in the process. What does that say to the people of Ellesmere Port about the importance of their town, compared with others? What will the Government do to support Ellesmere Port town centre? Will there be a second round of funding? Will there be other initiatives, or will we have a rerun of the 1980s policy of managed decline for parts of the north?

My local council is doing what it can, but the multifaceted challenges we have heard about in the era of austerity cannot fall entirely on its shoulders. The trends are there for all of us to see. The evidence is clear that the capacity to meet such challenges has been hollowed out after a decade of cuts. It will take sustained, focused and locally driven but nationally supported investment. It will take imagination, requiring a change from the old way of doing things. It will take central Government to realise that one of the reasons why so many people feel disengaged and disenfranchised is that when they go to their town centre and see empty shops—

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. Will the hon. Gentleman wind up?

Justin Madders: I will, Sir David. When people see the household names going, the banks closing and the public sector shrinking, they have a stark reminder of how the growth of the economy has not been evenly distributed. Civic pride, community identity, jobs and opportunities all suffer when the high streets are in decline. We owe it to the people in our communities to do much better and reverse the decline. 3.31 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member
for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this important debate on a matter that is not raised often enough in this place. As a former retailer, I have seen many of these issues over the years, and I am delighted that she has been able to bring the debate to Westminster Hall. As we will get into online retail, I bring the attention of hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

The hon. Lady talked about the effects on people, communities and indeed companies. She brought up the spectre of the BHS closures, which was deeply hurtful to many people involved. She also talked about the work of local authorities and the possibility of them getting involved, and correctly called for a longer-term strategy and vision from the UK Government.

The hon. Lady talked about the business rate system in England, which is a key issue. I will come on to the Scottish context. She also mentioned the requirement for proper pay for people working in retail. She will be glad to know that in Scotland the real living wage—not the pretendy one—is being promoted by the Scottish Government, which indeed is a real living wage employer. Almost just at this moment, the 1,500th private real living wage employer in Scotland has been unveiled: Johnstons of Elgin, the menswear retailer. It was congratulated by the fair work Minister, Jamie Hepburn MSP. Congratulations to Johnstons; it is a really good example.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) talked about changes to banking and rural communities. I disagree about everyone being able to go on to online banking. Many people with disabilities and people in rural areas need banking facilities in the heart of their communities. In particular, those who are vulnerable need access to cash in a way that cannot be done online. The hon. Gentleman did, however, make an interesting point about town planning, which people should consider carefully.

The right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) discussed retail’s important contribution to the UK economy and employment. Indeed, in Scotland, retail is the largest private sector employer, accounting for 250,300 jobs. Retailers are kind-hearted, having donated £10 million to good causes in Scotland, and retail accounted for 13% of all new businesses formed in Scotland in 2016. It also accounts for a fifth of all business rates in Scotland.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about out-of-town versus city centre. There is much debate about how we marry the two so that everyone can benefit, because they are realities. That is one for greater consideration. He also mentioned the loss of UK Government offices, which I have seen in the highlands, with the tax offices, Department for Work and Pensions offices, local passport offices and Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency offices all coming out of communities and affecting people and local businesses, particularly retail.

The right hon. Gentleman brought up another subject close to my heart: support for post offices. These people desperately need a better deal so they can secure a living wage. As the Minister will acknowledge, there are people in post offices struggling to make a living. The right hon. Gentleman also made many suggestions to the Minister in a very good speech.

The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) talked about regenerating town centres, accepting the online issue. I still get a bit of a shiver when thinking about this future of deliveries by drones, with all these drones whizzing about. The temptation to put them out of the way might be too strong, but we should be aware that that may come in the future. He talked, quite rightly, about the danger of isolation for the elderly and those who are not internet-savvy—I think he included himself—with different ways to shop. He said that people deserved better, and he talked about the real living wage, so I am sure he will join me in congratulating Johnstons of Elgin.

The hon. Gentleman quite rightly said that local authorities and the Scottish Government should work together. He will be glad to welcome the work that the Scottish Government are doing with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on town centres. As well as providing the best business rates in the UK, the SNP Scottish Government have put together a business rates relief package worth more than £75 million. Ninety per cent. of businesses in Scotland will pay a lower poundage than they would anywhere else in the UK. The Scottish Government have launched a £50 million town centres fund in partnership with COSLA, with local authorities allocating the funds. That goes a long way in promoting the work between Government and the local authorities.

Bill Grant: To put that in context, when I look at my inbox I see a number of businesses have experienced a significant rates hike. Rural businesses in particular are hurting terribly, so a system had to be introduced to compensate for that. There are anomalies.

Drew Hendry: Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman is trying to paint a line that is not the fact. Through the small business bonus, 100,000 businesses in Scotland pay no rates at all, and those are mainly businesses in rural areas that do not come up to the level for being taxed.

The hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) correctly talked about public transport and its impact on retail. She gave the example of the fall in revenue for one of her constituents due to a change in bus routes. That brings us back to town planning. People must plan for the unintended outcomes as well as those they want in the future. She also mentioned banks and building societies, the importance of business rates and the need to tax big online retailers.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), as ever, did a great job of promoting his own constituency. He talked about the chamber of trade and, importantly, the need for a shopping experience. Green areas, coffee culture and all those things need to be thought out in planning for the future. He talked about the mix of online and physical, which is what we used to call—

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. Will the hon. Gentleman bring his remarks to a close? I added a few minutes for earlier speakers, so I will have to take a minute off each of the Front Benchers.

Drew Hendry: I will try, but there is a lot to say.

Unfortunately I cannot discuss the speech of the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), who made a number of important points. I will finish with something that is important to me and my constituents: the unfair situation on delivery charges. As we move to a culture of more online deliveries, consumers in Scotland are having to pay a disproportionate amount more
because of a postcode system used by retailers to charge them extra for deliveries. That is unfair, and the Scottish Government have done a lot of work on that issue. My colleague, Richard Lochhead MSP, and I have worked very hard over the years to make changes, and have made significant breakthroughs with individual retailers. However, it is time for this UK Government to step up to the mark and do something to ensure fair delivery charges for people across Scotland, particularly in rural areas of the highlands and elsewhere.

3.40 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this debate and on an excellent speech. I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) and my hon. Friends the Members for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) and for Ellesmere and Neston (Justin Madders), who all advocated for their constituencies and spoke strongly on this issue. They touched on the importance of a retail sector agreement and referred to the USD Aw proposals for an industrial strategy for retail; as a member of USD Aw, I declare an interest in that matter.

My wife and I decided to buy a dishwasher, and searched online for a local retailer. We found that Smiths TV, in Formby in my constituency, sold dishwashers. Its website was well designed, and when we went to the store, the layout was attractive and the staff were friendly and helpful, so we bought from them. It is a local independent retailer that is clearly doing well, with four stores in Sefton and west Lancashire. Meanwhile, Aintree retail park and Aintree Racecourse retail park, which are next to each other, are both thriving, packed shopping centres where footfall is strong.

In my constituency and across the country, there are success stories in retail, including independent retailers that combine a strong online presence with excellent in-store customer service, and shopping centres where the management and stores combine to present an attractive offer that ensures that customers come and visit. To return to a point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn, what can high streets learn from successful out-of-town shopping centres? I have mentioned the success stories in my constituency, and it is important that we all do so, because there are plenty more.

However, as is the case with everyone else who has spoken in the debate, the trend across my constituency is far from positive. There have been high-profile closures such as Maplin, Comet and the other names that have been mentioned. In the high streets of my constituency—in Formby, Maghull and Crosby—we have the tattoo parlours, betting shops and tanning salons that others have mentioned, where once we had household names or good local retailers. Many retailers in my constituency, like everywhere else, find trading tough. That is why it is disappointing that the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee had to report that

“the Industrial Strategy promised to work with low productivity sectors, such as retail and hospitality, with the potential for even small productivity gains across people-heavy sectors having a significant beneficial impact on the UK’s overall productivity. Yet we found that so far neither the retail nor hospitality sector has been able to make significant progress on securing a sector deal of their own”.

The retail industry is a key part of our economy; it employs 3 million people and, according to US D Aw, contributes 11% of UK economic output. Many people have their first experience of work in retail. In smaller towns and villages, shops are often the heart of the community, and retail is a fundamental part of how we all go about our day-to-day life. However, 74,000 jobs were lost in 2018 alone, with many more job losses predicted. There is a long-term decline in retail, which is a cause of great concern in many high streets and has a profound impact on communities, workers and the whole country.

However, as I have shown through the local examples I have given, there is much in the industry and high streets and town centres that tells us that this crisis can be addressed. Businesses can still thrive, and good, higher skilled, better paid jobs can be available if we improve skills and use technology to drive productivity, with a strong strategy and the proper partnership between national and local government, businesses and the wider community.

A successful retail strategy should put in place support for businesses to harness the power of the internet and to benefit from a combination of online and offline shopping. Smiths TV in Formby shows how that can work, but such good practice needs far greater promotion and support. Labour’s plans for business support will maximise the benefits of technology to help business, deliver the well-paid jobs of the future and help communities as well. As was said earlier, high pay means there is more for businesses too, as well-paid workers are able to buy more goods and services from them. The good use of technology, allied to equipping staff with the technical and interpersonal skills that I experienced at Smiths, offers a vision of a successful retail future.

The challenges in retail, especially in our high streets, have been analysed by a number of organisations. The Government must listen to the British Retail Consortium, to Bill Grimsey and Mary Portas, to US D Aw, and to others who have written excellent reports. All have produced reviews with evidence-informed recommendations to address the high costs of business rates; the lack of footfall and public transport; bank and post office closures; the need in town centres for work space and housing, as well as for good-quality leisure facilities such as bars, cafes and restaurants; and the opportunity to re-establish public services with lots of staff near where shopkeepers can benefit from their spending power—services such as doctors and dentists, whose patients are also potential retail customers.

Retail is an industry of national importance. We are a nation of shopkeepers, but we are in danger of becoming a nation of shuttered shops. That is why Labour’s plan—a bold and comprehensive offer that would bring customers and workers to town centres, reform the crippling system of business rates and preserve the essential heart of communities—is so necessary. In it, we have addressed the need to have decent bus services—services that are free for under-25s and that have free wi-fi; to keep banks open; to address the digital exclusion of the too many who cannot go online to bank, those who need to use cash to buy and those businesses that rely on cash; to retain cash machines for the same reason, for consumers and businesses alike; to have a register of landlords to address the challenge of empty shops; and to overhaul business rates and consider the alternatives, such as an online sales tax. All those ideas
are designed to help address requests made by businesses and shoppers. How about electric vehicle charging points to attract shoppers, while at the same time nudging behaviour on climate action?

A retail council that meets three times a year and whose recommendations go nowhere is a talking shop, and is no substitute for a retail industry strategy; £150,000 for a study of a limited number of high streets is no strategy either. When the majority of high streets have been excluded from the high street fund, it starts to look like window dressing, rather than the basis of a strategy that could transform the prospects of retail and communities.

A lack of a detailed plan simply will not save retail jobs, or reinvigorate high streets or communities. There are deep-seated problems in areas of deprivation, which will take much greater intervention than in more prosperous areas.

We must recognise the realities of shopping habits, including online shopping, and not give up on our shops and their staff. Working in a warehouse fulfilling orders cannot be the limit of our aspiration for millions of workers, an nor will online shopping be the answer in all cases. Creating an attractive experience that balances online and physical shopping will provide an opportunity for businesses, consumers and workers, as long as we have the right strategy. Human interaction is important in life; that is as true in retail as anywhere else, and online cannot replicate that experience.

Smiths TV in Formby shows what is possible. If it can succeed as an independent retailer, so can many more. However, retailers cannot do it alone, which is why it is now time for the Government to take action. We must have a proper retail strategy, working with the industry to preserve jobs and reinvigorate communities.

3.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing today’s important debate. Like her, I have a family history in retail and shopkeeping: my great-grandmother ran a corner grocery store, my great-grandfather was a bootmaker and my father used to run a DIY shop. It is interesting that we are having this debate, because he closed that DIY shop after the retail sector changed. The likes of B&Q finished off some of our small, independent DIY shops. I hope I have been able to bring some direct understanding to my role as a Minister in this area.

As the hon. Lady and other Members have pointed out, the retail sector employs more than 3 million people and contributed £94 billion of gross value added to the UK economy in 2018. The retail sector is at the heart of our communities and our country. I reassure Members that I am extremely passionate and determined about the retail sector and that I care vehemently about it, much as everyone who sits in the House of Commons—cares very much about it and values it, the jobs it creates and the value it delivers to our communities.

Retail has always evolved to meet changing consumer demands, and it will continue to do so. Indeed, it is already thriving in many areas. For example, we have the most developed e-commerce market in Europe, with 48% of the estimated total of £198 billion in 2018. We recognise the high-profile pressures in the sector, but there are also businesses that are expanding and developing, as outlined by the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) with his great plug for his local retailer Smiths TV. Amazon, Lidl, Aldi, Ocado and JD Sports are all companies investing in UK retail, which is a good sign for the future. Primark, which recently opened the world’s largest fashion retail store in Birmingham, is proving that a high street business can still be successful without a significant online presence. We have seen sales increase by 4% and increased profits. Organisations such as Pets at Home are taking on the challenge of changing consumer demand. In its stores, it is bringing in veterinary services and grooming services and investing in the workforce and apprenticeships. Many retailers are grasping the challenge of a changing retail sector and ensuring they are able to deliver services on the ground that consumers want.

We have heard examples from Members about local growth. It has been great to hear examples of local authorities working proactively with their high street forums and the opportunities available to them to try to grow and really focus on meeting the needs of the local community through the local retail offer. However, to continue to evolve, we need to innovate. I was therefore excited to see the UK Digital Retail Innovation Centre open in Gloucester in May this year, following a funding award of £400,000 from Gloucestershire’s local enterprise partnership. It will be a national centre for testing and developing disruptive digital innovations and will help shape and inform the future of cities with a special focus on retail.

Alongside those successes, we have seen some high-profile names struggle, including Woolworths, Toys R Us and, more recently, Debenhams and House of Fraser. We have been used to seeing those iconic names on our high streets, but in some cases they are no longer there. I do not underestimate the impact of those changes, which can be hugely difficult for the individuals and families involved and for communities. Indeed, I know the hon. Member for Blaydon met Toys R Us staff from the metro retail park when the store closed down. Some of them had been working there for 20 years, and I commend her for the support she showed to her constituents.

There is no doubt the sector is facing significant pressures, whether from uncertainty in the business environment or from changes in consumer expectations and preferences towards online shopping. Those challenges are reflected in retail across the world, not just in the UK. Our retail sector is still one of the best in the world, and we are well placed to deal with the challenges. Retail has a long history of responding successfully to change, of turning challenges into opportunities and of turning pressure into innovation. The Government are, and I personally am, absolutely committed to supporting the sector as it responds to change and strives to continue to serve the public so well, as it has in the past, and as it will in the future.

I am pleased, as part of my portfolio, to serve as the co-chair of the industry-led Retail Sector Council, alongside Richard Pennycook, the chairman of the British Retail Consortium. There has been confusion over the idea that the council does not meet very often and is just focused on the troubles of the past, rather than looking
to the future, but I assure Members that we not only have Retail Sector Council meetings, but a number of sub-groups heading up the workstreams and meeting regularly. A lot of work goes on outside those meetings to reach targets. The workstreams are focused on future challenges and how we can drive the retail sector forward. It is not just a talking shop; if it were, I can assure Members I would want no part in it. I spent many a year before becoming an MP in talking shops, and I do not particularly want to do that as an elected Member of Parliament and especially not as a Minister.

Bill Esterson: I am glad the Minister has mentioned the Retail Sector Council. I am curious as to what it has achieved. Perhaps she can tell us, because if it is not a talking shop, it will have made a difference, and there will be some outcomes, deliverables and differences made.

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. As he will know, when the Retail Sector Council was set up last year, we set its priorities. The six workstreams and the priority workstreams have been agreed. We are working for outcomes. The beauty of the Retail Sector Council is that it is the retail sector coming together with Government to find solutions to the future challenges. It includes not only the bricks-and-mortar retailers, but the online retailers and the small independent retailers. In the council, the sector is working with Government to move forward and bring forward plans and proposals that will benefit and aid the sector.

Liz Twist: Will the Minister agree to set up a retail sector deal to further promote the work of the retail sector?

Kelly Tolhurst: Absolutely, but the hon. Lady will know that all the sector deals are being driven by the sectors themselves with the support of Government and with strong leadership and great ideas. My wider hope for the retail sector is that we will see that deal delivered by the Retail Sector Council as soon as possible.

Costs to business is another workstream, and a number of Members raised them. As part of that workstream, the co-chair and I are meeting the Financial Secretary to the Treasury next week to discuss some of the preliminary findings on costs to business in the retail sector. A large survey of the entire sector was carried out. That area is of big interest to me in terms of how we levy taxation in the future. The skills and lifelong learning workstream is running in parallel with the costs to business workstream. Some of the early work on that is being led by Amazon and a small working group, and that is proving useful.

Alongside the work of the retail sector, the Department regularly considers a wide range of policies. My officials are working across Whitehall on policies that affect the retail sector. A number of Members have mentioned support for our high streets. Members may know that the high streets Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), has recently taken on a joint portfolio with my Department. As I am the retail sector Minister, we work closely on joined-up thinking on retail and high streets. We have the £1.6 billion action plan for high streets, which includes the £675 million future high streets fund. We are seeing 50 organisations move to the next stage in the development of the plans, which will enable local authorities and local populations to drive the development of their towns. We have the taskforce, which will work with local authorities across the country to deliver help for those that need to increase their retail space.

I will sit down now, because I recognise that the hon. Member for Blaydon may want to come in. I am happy to have another meeting with her on the other questions she asked.

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): With not much time, Liz Twist to wind up.

3.59 pm

Liz Twist: I thank all Members who have contributed to a lively and interesting debate on the retail sector. They have shown real enthusiasm for it.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Economic Growth and Environmental Limits

[STEWART HOSIE in the Chair]

4 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I beg to move.

That this House has considered economic growth and environmental limits.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Hosie. I am grateful for the opportunity to debate economic growth and environmental limits. It is, of course, a huge subject, covering why and how our current economic model, which puts GDP growth above everything else, must change fundamentally, fast. I will focus on the environmental imperatives for that, especially the climate and biodiversity crises, and set out practical steps that I hope the Treasury will adopt.

It is crucial to note, however, before going into the environmental detail, that the Treasury’s obsession with GDP growth is also undermining social and economic progress for the vast majority of UK citizens. GDP is an incredibly poor metric for measuring wellbeing or social cohesion. For example, people becoming unhealthy can actually have a positive effect overall on GDP, as revenue from associated healthcare boosts growth. Similarly, the extraction of oil and gas pushes GDP up, while pushing us closer to the precipice of climate breakdown.

I, of course, acknowledge that Government Departments have goals other than economic output. The Office for National Statistics in particular is doing some important work on wellbeing statistics as part of their “Beyond GDP” programme. There is also the ONS/Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs project that seeks to incorporate UK natural capital into the UK environmental accounts by 2020. All of that is welcome, but it is all at the margins. The ONS website is unequivocal about the priority. It says quite clearly: “Gross domestic product (GDP) growth is the main indicator of economic performance.”

GDP therefore still trumps everything, remaining the primary objective across Government, especially for the Treasury.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on introducing the debate, and on her hard work in this House on the environment and climate change. Although I certainly like to check on GDP and other financial aims, does she agree that the measure of success cannot be GDP alone? It must equally be based on the happiness and health of our constituents.

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and kind words. As he says, the purpose of Government should surely be to promote happiness and health, yet we have a perverse obsession with GDP growth, which can often go up even when happiness and health are going down. That obsession must end if we are to secure a safe space for humanity, and if we are to live within environmental limits, or planetary boundaries, to use an alternative term.

I will not be surprised if the Minister takes issue with me on that, arguing that the UK has embraced so-called green growth, perhaps citing the clean growth strategy. Leaving aside the fact that there is nothing clean or green about the Government’s support for rampant airport expansion, road building or fossil fuel subsidies, the essential point is that even so-called green growth rests on the assumption that economic growth can be decoupled from environmental harm fully and fast enough. I will make the case this afternoon that that is a false assumption.

Just yesterday, a new report from the European Environmental Bureau exploded the myth of absolute decoupling. The study looked at a range of factors—materials, energy, water, greenhouse gases and so on—and found that there is no empirical evidence for an absolute, permanent, global, substantial or sufficiently rapid decoupling of economic growth from environmental pressures, either now or in the future. In other words, it is time to move from efficiency to sufficiency. As the report concludes, “Although decoupling is useful and necessary, and has occurred at certain times and places, ‘green growth’ cannot reduce resource use on anywhere near the scale required to deal with global environmental breakdown and to keep global warming below the target of 1.5°C”.

The transgression of environmental limits has dangerous consequences for all humanity. That was pushed into the spotlight by the UN global assessment of nature—the so-called Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. If ever there was a mouthful that was designed to make it hard to know what anyone was talking about, that is it; we should call it a report on nature.

Regardless, it found that 75% of all land and almost half of all marine and water ecosystems have been seriously altered by human activity. It found that 1 million animal and plant species are now threatened with extinction. That is a horrendous number—significantly greater than at any other time in human history—and poses a severe and direct threat to not only those species but human wellbeing in all regions of the world, especially those least responsible for the damage that is causing it.

The report identifies the growth of the global economy, and specifically the growth of material consumption in affluent nations, as one of the major driving forces behind those trends. It is unambiguous about the need to move away from endless consumption and GDP as a key measure of economic success, stating that we must steer “away from the current limited paradigm of economic growth” and “shift beyond standard economic indicators such as gross domestic product”.

I am keen to emphasise that, although Greens have long been leading the political debate on the environmental and social case for ditching GDP growth as a measure of progress, that argument is finally moving into the mainstream. Cross-party collaboration is incredibly important too, and I am delighted that 20 MPs have signed my early-day motion on the report from the intergovernmental panel. My early-day motion calls on the Government to “urgently show global leadership in developing and advocating alternatives to GDP and in the transition to economies that, rather than being divisive and degenerative by default, are distributive and regenerative by design.”

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech and making many good points. I agree that we need to move beyond GDP. Is she aware that work has already been done on
alternative methods of measurement? For instance, the University of Leeds, through the Sustainability Research Institute, has a consumption-based emissions model that would give us an alternative to GDP. We could calculate everything based on emissions, including at source, as well as those used in the UK or other developed countries. Should we not move to that sort of model, rather than a GDP-based model?

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The work going on at the University of Leeds is worthily exciting. It demonstrates that there is a lot of work going on, both in this country and internationally, into researching what alternative indicators might look like. I think what is lacking is a real commitment to move them into the mainstream. In the regular updates on the radio or in the Financial Times, when we hear about GDP growth and how we should be very happy that it has gone up, we could look at those indicators, which might well show that our wellbeing is being severely undermined by environmental damage.

Turning to the climate emergency, the primacy of GDP growth as the overarching priority for the economy is the elephant in the room. To quote Greta Thunberg, “Our house is on fire”, and the GDP growth obsession is the obstacle blocking the door to the emergency exit. In April, Greta visited Parliament and spoke about why she and millions of other young people were missing school to strike for the climate. She said very clearly that the way that we measure progress is absurd and archaic:

> “People always tell me and the other millions of school strikers that we should be proud of ourselves for what we have accomplished. But the only thing that we need to look at is the emission curve. And I’m sorry, but it’s still rising. That curve is the only thing we should look at... We should no longer measure our wealth and success in the graph that shows economic growth, but in the curve that shows the emissions of greenhouse gases.”

That call to rewrite the economic rulebook is echoed by many others in the climate justice network, including many in the grassroots movements for a green new deal and in the academy and economists. The reaction to a tweet by the London Mayor, Sadiq Kahn, one week into the Extinction Rebellion protests was interesting; it illustrates that climate justice is inextricably linked to the transformation of the economic system. To be fair, I am sure he did it without thinking it through that much, but he tweeted:

> “My message to all the climate change protestors today is clear: let London return to business as usual.”

That tweet went down so terribly because the new climate justice movement understands that business as usual is killing the planet and destroying our children’s future. The litmus test for adequate climate action is no longer what is considered politically feasible within the current system; it is whether we are transforming the economic system to fit with what is scientifically necessary to keep within 1.5° of global heating, and to reverse the unravelling of the Earth’s life support systems before our eyes.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): I have immense sympathy with what the lion, Lady is saying, and I agree. She talked about political feasibility. All the proposals and politics that she is suggesting are difficult to achieve in an environment of gross inequality. Would it not be easier if we addressed equality, to make all these things more acceptable?

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his wise intervention. Certainly, if we are not going to make the economy bigger by growing it and growing it—we simply cannot, within environmental limits—arguments about redistribution become absolutely central to the whole debate. Everything that I am saying is about social justice and environmental justice being inextricably linked. They must be, because we have to tackle them together. Although it is quite hard to find opportunities when the environmental data is so grim, there is an opportunity to get our social systems and inclusiveness right, and to get our inequality sorted, at the same time as taking serious steps towards making the way we organise our economy genuinely sustainable.

On climate, as on biodiversity, I believe strongly that we must look at the science. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s October report, entitled “Global Warming of 1.5 °C”, says that we need “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented change across all aspects of society”.

We have barely a decade to cut global emissions by half. As the co-chair of an IPCC working group put it, “The next few years are probably the most important in our history.”

The Treasury is doing a very good impression of ignoring the urgency of taking action. The Government boast about emission cuts and about legislating for a net zero emission goal to be reached in three decades’ time. However, the Committee on Climate Change said in its new report, which was published this morning, that the next 18 months are make or break, especially as the UK “is lagging far behind what is needed, even to meet previous, less stringent, emissions targets.”

The UK’s carbon reduction statistics ignore consumption-based emissions. Our exported emissions are one factor that explains why global emissions continue to rise, and why we are still heading for a devastating 3° of warming, even if countries deliver on their Paris pledges.

This is all to say that the pursuit of economic growth is devouring our efforts to decarbonise. I will quote the work of Jason Hickel, a leading environmental economist at Goldsmiths. He has explained the situation by examining the IPCC’s trajectories on reaching net zero by mid-century: The IPCC is telling us that we have until 2050 to get to net zero, but the global economy is set to nearly triple in size during the same period, which means three times more production and consumption. It is hard enough to decarbonise the current economy in such a short time span. The idea that we will be able to do it three times over is, frankly, for the birds. However heroic our assumptions about the potential for decoupling, there is no evidence that it can be completed quickly enough in the timeframe that we have.

There is some hope, because the IPCC report contains one lifeine scenario that does not rely on speculative and harmful negative emissions technologies to keep global heating under 1.5°. That scenario is our emergency exit from climate breakdown. So what does it look like? Fundamentally, it is about scaling down material consumption by 20% globally, with rich countries such as the UK leading the way. As yesterday’s European Environmental Bureau report concluded,

> “Policy-makers have to acknowledge the fact that addressing the climate and biodiversity crises...
“may require a direct downsizing of economic production and consumption in the wealthiest countries.”

I should add, “among the wealthiest people in the wealthiest countries,” because I take the point made by the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins): equality and justice needs to be at the heart of this process.

As I say, the ONS work on wellbeing indicators beyond GDP and on natural capital is important and welcome, but it is clearly not the priority. It is not a primary consideration in Treasury decision making. Nor is the wellbeing work integrated with environmental considerations. Will the Minister commit to ensuring the ONS has the resources and the direction required to integrate environmental limits into its “Beyond GDP” work, including, as a priority, consumption-based carbon emissions? While I am making requests of the Minister, can he tell us what has happened to the latest release of those “Beyond GDP” statistics? If they are quarterly, as the ONS website states, the latest were due a couple of months ago, back in May.

I turn to the positive case for ousting GDP as a measure of progress, and to some of the alternatives that we could adopt. There is an extensive and expanding evidence base to suggest that ousting GDP as a measure of progress is essential to achieve both environmental and social justice. Transitioning away from the growth dogma is not about hurting people’s welfare—quite the opposite. It is about placing wellbeing centre stage, reducing inequalities, cutting out waste and inefficiencies, and prioritising quality of life over quantity of things.

There is a chorus of experts—academics, economists and campaigners—proposing concrete, credible alternatives to get us out of the GDP gulag. Many of them are members of the global Wellbeing Economy Alliance. I will briefly give four examples. The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) will be very happy, because the first example I will give is from the University of Leeds, where researchers are exploring a “good life for all within planetary boundaries.”

This shows that the UK and other wealthy nations are well past the tipping point at which “using even more resources adds almost nothing to human well-being.” The researchers explain that this means countries such as the UK could “substantially reduce the amount of carbon emitted or materials consumed with no loss of well-being.”

A second example comes in the shape of a doughnut. In her book, “Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist”, Kat Raworth sets out to replace the dominant image of the economy as a closed, self-generating loop with a picture of the economy that shows energy flowing in from the sun, and waste and heat flowing out. Her doughnut image requires us to recognise that all economic activity is embedded in the Earth’s living systems and in society. Instead of maximising GDP, we need to change our goals to meet “the human rights of every person within the means of our life-giving planet.”

Crucially, this model combines environmental limits with social factors such as housing, equity, political voice, education and income. The inner boundary of the doughnut is the social floor, below which wellbeing suffers. The outer boundary is an ecological ceiling, beyond which we overshoot the Earth’s support systems. The doughnut’s fundamental point, which the Treasury seems to have not yet grasped, is that the current economic system is failing on both human wellbeing and environmental health grounds.

A third example is a call from 238 academics for the EU and member states to plan for a post-growth future, in which human and ecological wellbeing are prioritised over GDP. They say:

“Growth is...becoming harder to achieve due to declining productivity gains, market saturation and ecological degradation. If current trends continue, there may be no growth at all in Europe within a decade. Right now the response is to try to fuel growth by issuing more debt, shredding environmental regulations, extending working hours, and cutting social protections. This aggressive pursuit of growth at all costs divides society, creates economic instability, and undermines democracy.”

The academics end by offering some measured and moderate practical next steps, including constituting “a special commission on Post-Growth Futures” in order to “actively debate the future of growth, devise policy alternatives for post-growth futures, and reconsider the pursuit of growth as an overarching policy goal.”

I would love to see citizens’ assemblies play a major part in that.

Secondly, the academics suggest prioritising alternative indicators over GDP in all economic decision making. Thirdly, they propose establishing a Ministry for economic transition, to drive the shift to a new economy that focuses directly on human and ecological wellbeing, and away from one that is structurally dependent on economic growth.

The fourth and final example is New Zealand, where the Treasury has conducted the world’s first wellbeing budget. Finance Minister Grant Robinson explained that GDP growth was simply not translating into higher standards or better opportunities. Instead, the wellbeing budget looks at spending on the basis of a project’s contribution to the wellbeing of the population, as measured through four dimensions: human capital, social capital, natural capital, and financial and physical capital. The former Cabinet Secretary, Lord Gus O’Donnell, recently launched a report by the all-party parliamentary group on wellbeing economics that makes a similar case for wellbeing to replace growth as the main aim of UK spending in the forthcoming spending review. Those are just some examples.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): The hon. Lady is giving a fantastic speech. She has mentioned the views of four different people on the limits of using GDP; what it is, what good it does in our economy, and what good growth does. Some 51 years ago, Robert F. Kennedy—hardly an economic radical; he was a Democrat—gave a speech on the limits of GDP. I add that because he is someone that I and many people across the political divide can respect. He was well ahead of the curve on this issue.

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Gentleman is a very good friend and colleague, but he has just taken my final point; I was building up to that speech from Bobby Kennedy. I forgive him, because he is a good colleague and it was very good point.
I give a shout out to the all-party parliamentary group on economic wellbeing and the APPG on limits to growth, of which I am a co-chair, and which works closely with the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity under the leadership of Professor Tim Jackson, who does good work in this area.

I want to leave time for the Minister to respond, so I will conclude. The climate and biodiversity crisis means that urgency is becoming emergency, in terms of getting economic transformation going. I will skip most of my lovely Bobby Kennedy quote, but his words ring as true today as they ever did, so I will keep the last bit. He said that GDP “measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.”

I have three requests of the Treasury to which I hope the Minister will respond. First, will he put rocket boosters behind the ONS “Beyond GDP” work, ensure that the environment is fully integrated alongside social factors, and commit to adopting those indicators and using them alongside or, even better, instead of GDP growth? I would even let him use them alongside GDP growth, as long as that were done regularly, so that we could see those indicators as a key measure of the nation’s progress.

Secondly, from this year on, will the Minister publish consumption-based carbon emissions, material throughput and wellbeing statistics alongside quarterly GDP figures? Thirdly, will he meet me and some of the leading economists, academics and practitioners working on this issue, to inform the forthcoming spending review?

As Kenneth Boulding said more than 50 years ago, “Anyone who believes exponential growth can go on forever in a finite world is either a madman or an economist.”

Thankfully, we now have a new generation of environmentally literate economists, and it is time that we listened to what they have to say.

4.22 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): I thank the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for tabling this debate and other hon. Members who intervened or who came to listen to and support her. I am always partial to a good Robert Kennedy quote, so I am sorry to see that the hon. Lady’s thunder was stolen at the end of her speech, but I enjoyed it none the less.

As the hon. Lady eloquently set out, it is now more important than ever that the Government and institutions such as the Treasury, which is at the heart of this debate, confront head on the question of how we continue to grow the economy while protecting our environment and tackling climate change with all the vigour and urgency that she and others would like. I believe that the two can and will be done together, and can be mutually beneficial.

The UK is a world leader in this area, but I appreciate that many people—me included—would like us to go further. Between 1990 and 2016, the UK reduced its greenhouse gas emissions by 42% while growing the economy by more than two thirds, demonstrating that environmental action need not come at the cost of economic prosperity.

The Government are determined to continue to build concern for the environment into our economic model. In a moment, I will explain some of the workstreams we have already undertaken and where we could go further. We want to ensure that environmental policies are well considered and that the Treasury as an organisation is leading them, as I believe it is. The hon. Lady argued that it is time fundamentally to change economic models if we want to address the climate emergency. She questioned in particular whether GDP is a sensible measure of our economic wellbeing, so I will begin by addressing that.

GDP remains one of the most important economic indicators, but it is by no means the only one that is of concern to us or which is used by other major economies around the world. It is closely correlated with employment, incomes and tax receipts, which makes it perhaps the most useful indicator currently available to us. It is used by the Government, the Treasury, and the Bank of England to set economic policy and manage the public finances and, as the system of national accounts framework is set at UN level, GDP is easily comparable across countries and time periods, both historically and in the future. It is important that any changes in the economic modelling that we use are made internationally, and the UK needs to show leadership on that.

The Government recognise, however, that GDP undoubtedly has its limitations and should not be seen as an all-encompassing measure of welfare and wellbeing, and we entirely accept that it was never designed to be. Former Chancellor George Osborne commissioned Sir Charles Bean to undertake an independent review of economic statistics. The review acknowledged some of those limitations, such as the challenge of capturing activities where no market transaction takes place, the challenge posed to GDP and to some of our existing modelling by technology, transforming the way that we measure wellbeing and productivity and, as the hon. Lady mentioned, the fact that GDP estimates make no allowance for the depletion of natural resources.

The Government fully supported the recommendations of the Bean review, which we commissioned, and we have provided the ONS with an additional £25 million to help improve UK economic statistics and implement the Bean review. That was the “Beyond GDP” initiative that the hon. Lady mentioned, which aims to address the limitations of GDP by developing a broader measure of welfare and activity. In response to the hon. Lady’s question about the publication of statistics, the ONS is an independent organisation, so we do not control it in that respect, but I am happy to pass on her comments and ask the ONS to respond.

In the time left, I will briefly mention a number of other steps that the Government have taken. The Treasury’s Green Book, our guidance on the appraisal and evaluation of infrastructure and other investments, is essential to a number of decisions that are made by the Government. In 2018, we refreshed the Green Book to include additional environmental values, such as greenhouse gases, air quality and noise pollution. We also included a social cost-benefit analysis, which I hope is making a significant difference. It will be very important in the upcoming spending review. That work is well perceived internationally. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has now convened international Finance Ministers, and
the area that the UK will likely lead on internationally is that of economic modelling and how we can do that better on a global scale.

Clive Lewis: The Minister spoke about the Green Book, which is still—despite the changes—essentially a neoclassical economic model based on equilibrium economics. Most scientists and economists on the fringes of economic thinking would tell us that we are moving into a disequilibrium position in our economic model. The two are completely incompatible and the Green Book is not fit for purpose as we enter a climate crisis in which many of its assumptions are no longer credible.

Robert Jenrick: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman, but the theme behind his remarks is one of the reasons why we have amended the Green Book. We have created this concept of social value, so we now take into account negative externalities to the environment and to people’s lifestyles as a result of greenhouse gas emissions, for example. I am happy to have a further conversation with him on that after the debate, as there is very little time left.

We are working closely with Dieter Helm’s review and recommendations. I met him to discuss the issue of natural capital accounts, which we are taking seriously—it is a big endeavour. We are working with the ONS and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to bring that forward. I hope that we will be one of the first countries in the world to take the issue forward.

Following the report by the Committee on Climate Change, the Chancellor and I met Lord Deben and accepted his recommendation over the summer that the Treasury should do a major and urgent piece of work on how we can fund in a fair way the changes that we need to make as a society as a result of the Committee’s recommendations. That work is under way. I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady to give her more detail on some of those initiatives, which are extremely important. We want to take them forward with gusto in the months ahead.

Question put and agreed to.

4.30 pm

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Before I call the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) to move her motion, eight Members have notified me that they intend to speak, and I suspect many more may wish to intervene. We only have an hour. I do not want to limit the key points that anyone wishes to make, but if we can have a little brevity, it would be greatly appreciated.

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the business case for High Speed 2.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, in my first debate as a Back Bencher in more than five years. I am delighted to have this opportunity to discuss one of the biggest concerns for many of my constituents, and to outline why I believe that the business case for High Speed 2 must be urgently reviewed by the Government.

I first became aware of HS2 when it was proposed in 2009 by the then Labour Government. Investment in infrastructure, creating jobs and growth, improving travel times between our major cities, and closing the north-south divide were all put forward as reasons in favour of the UK’s second high-speed train line. However, those supposed benefits unravelled one by one, and it quickly became apparent that HS2 is not the right infrastructure project, will not improve point-to-point travel times, and will not close the north-south divide. It will create jobs, yes, but at an eye-wateringly expensive rate, far beyond what we might expect from a similar project.

Those of us who expressed concerns about HS2 even while it was still in consultation were dismissed by others as nimbys and told that we were flat wrong about the wider benefits that HS2 would bring to the north. I was then and continue to be willing to be proved wrong, but with the delay to the notice to proceed, growing concerns about the project’s spiralling costs, ongoing engineering and design difficulties and, even now, the rumours that the line past Birmingham might never be built, it is high time for the project to be thoroughly reviewed to ensure that it will actually deliver for taxpayers.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to hear the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire speaking in a debate, rather than her listening to me asking for one. Does she recall the number of times that I have said in the Chamber of the House of Commons that HS2 will cost much more? Every time I said it, £10 billion more, and going past that. Now, it is accepted that it will cost £100 billion. Does she agree with that figure?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has raised the issue a number of times, and it is true to say that many think the costs will overrun. I will come back to that.

For me, both as a concerned constituency MP and as someone with 25 years of experience in finance, including project finance, I am alarmed at just how much the business case for HS2 has changed since the project was initially proposed. The business case that HS2 relies on now bears little resemblance to what Parliament was
told at the start of the process—if I cast my mind back to when I first became an MP in 2010—nor to what we voted on when the enabling legislation was passed, which I voted against, or when the subsequent main legislation was enacted.

First, we were told that HS2 was about reducing journey times and improving the economy by bringing businesses and workers from the south to the north to spread economic prosperity around the country. Then we were told it was about capacity constraints on the west coast main line, and managing the continual growth in annual passenger numbers. Both arguments no longer stack up.

On improved journey times and associated productivity gains, the underlying assumption built into the business case for HS2 was that any time spent travelling for business purposes was wasted time, and that business travellers undertake no productive work while travelling. In the 21st century, technological advances such as mobile devices and improved wireless internet connections clearly mean that work and leisure activities are increasingly mobile, and increasingly affordable and accessible for rail passengers. Such advances are expected to continue.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I have great respect for the right hon. Lady, but she is fundamentally wrong on this issue, although she is right to criticise the way in which the Department for Transport uses travel times. In the assessment of all transport infrastructure, the Department fails to take into account the economic investment that always follows investment in transport. The case is the opposite of what she is saying: it underestimates the benefits from HS2.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman makes my point for me: the business case needs to be reassessed with accurate underlying factors taken into account. It is the case that the more productivity on trains increases, in particular as faster fifth generation—5G—mobile internet is rolled out across the country, the less valuable the journey time savings are, and therefore the smaller the estimated benefits of HS2 become on those measures.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right—we see this in transport infrastructure, where the Department for Transport uses travel times. In the assessment of all transport infrastructure, the Department fails to take into account the economic investment that always follows investment in transport. The case is the opposite of what she is saying: it underestimates the benefits from HS2.

Andrea Leadsom: I fear that I am very much aware of what the hon. Gentleman says, and I agree with him.

Clearly, therefore, much of the capacity constraint on the west coast main line is spatially and temporally specific, being focused on the peak rush hours, and only about 60% of all available seats into Euston are in use. For the other major cities on the line of route—Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield—across the entire day, all of those stations operate at less than half their passenger capacity in terms of seat availability.

Mr Sheerman: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Andrea Leadsom: Very briefly.

Mr Sheerman: As the right hon. Lady knows, I am a very experienced traveller between Wakefield and London, and know the routes well. May I ask her to pay attention to my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer), from Manchester, because he is talking about journey times, and I completely agree with her that this is not about journey times. She also mentioned capacity, and it is about that, but it is also about one more thing—connectivity. We have not had a new railway line north of London for 150 years. Surely now is the time to improve our infrastructure and to make our trains and lives fit for the 21st century.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—we certainly need to invest in our rail infrastructure—but my question is whether HS2 is the right piece of infrastructure.

The argument for the business case around journey times and productivity quickly collapsed, and HS2 Ltd turned to arguing for capacity instead. That capacity argument has been questioned almost since it was first made, and most recently by the Lords Economic Affairs Committee in its report of May this year, “Rethinking High Speed 2”.

The original business case for HS2 was put forward at a time of strong and continued growth in passenger numbers in the preceding years, and the expectation was always that this growth would continue unabated. That is not the case. I made that point in 2011, when I led an HS2 debate on the Floor of the House. As I said then, HS2’s forecasts were “heroic” when compared with Network Rail’s numbers over the same period. According to the Commons Library, across the entire rail network, annual passenger growth peaked in 2011 at about 8%, and growth has been on a downward trend since then. Passenger growth between London and the west midlands has now fallen to 2% growth per annum, against a decadal average of 6%.

It is true to say that the west coast main line is the busiest mixed-use rail corridor in Europe, with 15 fast trains coming into Euston in most peak hours of the week and little to no availability in that period for additional train paths. However, capacity on the trains themselves is a different matter. As anyone who travels at rush hour between Euston and Milton Keynes—as I do frequently—will know that there is always high capacity pressure on any of the trains during that peak period: about 95% of all available seats on morning peak arrivals into Euston are occupied, with many trains cramped and uncomfortable. Again according to the House of Commons Library, across the entire day only about 60% of all available seats into Euston are in use. For the other major cities on the line of route—Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield—across the entire day, all of those stations operate at less than half their passenger capacity in terms of seat availability.

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allocated by the Department for Transport, to alleviate crowding issues in the morning and evening peaks? The main alternative considered by the Government, known as the strategic alternative, could have achieved the same result at a much lower cost, through a combination of infrastructure and rolling stock upgrades, at a cost of around £4.9 billion in 2011 prices. Additional capacity and more fast-line services could be delivered via Euston to relieve the specific pressure points during the peak-hour rushes, rather than building a whole new line that would create unneeded capacity throughout the day.

The Lords Economic Affairs Committee report concluded that the Government have “yet to make a convincing case for proceeding with the project” and it has “not seen convincing evidence that the nature of the capacity problem warrants building HS2.”

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): On the point about finance, is the right hon. Lady aware that HS2 has entered into an astonishing 270 or more non-disclosure agreements with third parties? Does she agree that the Government should make public the number of non-disclosure agreements, settled agreements, compromise agreements and any other arrangements that include non-disclosure provisions with former staff members? Does the right hon. Lady share my concern that funding from an unauthorised redundancy payment scheme operated by HS2 was used to fund some or all settlement or compromise agreements with former senior staff? In some cases, those staff were regarded as having made serious protected disclosures about their concerns over HS2’s financial statements. Transparency is essential in the funding of this project. Does the right hon. Lady agree?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman mentioned that to me yesterday, and I am gravely concerned. As all right hon. and hon. Members will know, I am extremely unhappy at the prospect of non-disclosure agreements preventing whistleblowers from coming forward with information that is vital to the public interest or their own personal interest. People should not be gagged under any circumstances.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate on a topic we have discussed many times. I voted against HS2 at every opportunity in the House of Commons. In 2013, I predicted that it would cost in excess of £100 billion. The then Secretary of State laughed, and I think he was quite right to—it is clear that the project will be far in excess of £100 billion.

Does my right hon. Friend recall the report by Sir John Armitt in August 2018? His committee stated that, given that hubs are no longer in the centre of cities but on the outskirts, an extra £43 billion of infrastructure spending would be required to make use of the current hub sites that have been chosen. That has not been programmed into the budget at all.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the lack of point-to-point movement in HS2. Passengers do not end up at the Bullring in Birmingham, or in the west end of London; they just end up somewhere on the outskirts wondering how on earth they will get to where they want to go.

The business case for HS2 is seemingly not based on improved journey or improving capacity on journeys between the cities along the line of route. That was alarmingly confirmed by the chief executive of HS2 Ltd, Mark Thurston, in November last year, when he appeared before the all-party parliamentary rail group. At that meeting, Mr Thurston remarked that to remain on time and on budget, HS2 Ltd was considering fundamental changes to the project, including, but not limited to, reductions in the speed that HS2 trains will operate at and reductions in the total number of trains per hour.

With fewer and slower trains, it is hard to understand how the business case can be maintained, given the growing lack of incentive for passengers to choose to take a more expensive HS2 train over a classic service. I have asked HS2 Ltd to confirm whether it is modelling the impact of such changes, but so far I have been unable to obtain a definitive response.

As the former chairman of HS2 Ltd, Sir Terry Morgan, said when he appeared before the Economic Affairs Committee on the 22 January, nobody, not even he as a former chairman of the project, can say with any certainty what the final cost of HS2 will be. That cost has gone up and up over the years. In February 2011, we were told that HS2 would cost £37.5 billion. By January 2012, that figure had crept up to £40.8 billion. In June 2013, we were told the total cost had risen to £50.1 billion. Today, based on the funding envelope set out in November 2015—not an estimate of the cost but rather the money available from DfT for the project—we are told that HS2 will cost the British taxpayer £55.7 billion. That is £55.7 billion for a single train line.

We have not actually seen a comprehensive breakdown of the costs for the full Y network of HS2 since 2013, although the National Audit Office has more recently said that, at the time of the 2015 spending review, the full cost should have been estimated at £65 billion. HS2’s land and property budget alone is expected to be five times greater than originally forecast, but that is of no help whatsoever to my constituents. I have had cases in South Northamptonshire where family farms have been cut in half, people have been forced to sell their businesses at a vastly undervalued rate and one constituent has been forced out of the family home that she had lived in for many years through a lifetime tenancy under the Agricultural Holdings Act 1986. There are countless examples where I have had to intervene time and again on behalf of my constituents, due to the insensitive behaviour and slow engagement of HS2.

Maggie Throup: I, too, have had some very sad cases, where HS2 Ltd is not doing itself any favours. Considering the overall spend, the quibbling is over very small amounts. If it got that bit right, it might get more people on its side to make sure it delivered the project, which my constituents welcome, as long as they are looked after. If part of the line is cancelled, those properties will be blighted for ever.

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly agree that HS2 needs to do much more to protect those who have been affected through no fault of their own. There has been real hardship. There are countless examples in my constituency and I am aware of many in other constituencies.
As hon. Members have set out, concerns have been raised by industry experts and former whistleblowers from the company that the total cost for HS2 may very well be in excess of £100 billion. In contrast, DfT has separately announced investment of £48 billion in our railways over a five-year period through to 2024, comprising major infrastructure upgrades across the country and newer, faster, more comfortable trains to improve the passenger experience. I totally applaud the DfT for that decision—it is the right sort of investment and will improve our railways in all parts of our United Kingdom, sharing the benefits among all rail users.

We should consider HS2 in the context of alternative uses for the money for infrastructure investment. I was delighted when my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) advised me they would contribute to today’s debate. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) for all the excellent work she continues to do to raise concerns about this project.

I am a passionate advocate for better infrastructure. There is no doubt that properly targeted infrastructure investment can massively improve productivity and enable growth and economic opportunity equally for all parts of our United Kingdom, including in the north and the regions, but getting the best bang for our buck has to be at the heart of all that we do. With the benefit-cost ratio for HS2 declining to 1.4 in October 2013 and remaining unchanged in the intervening period, it is vital that we make sure that we are investing in the right infrastructure projects. The Government’s own guidance on value-for-money assessments has said that a benefit-cost ratio of 1.4 for phase one would represent a low value-for-money project.

What can we do? My hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) has spearheaded a whole host of alternative transport project proposals with the TaxPayers’ Alliance—he will expand on that later. I am pleased that the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) is here to set out his own ideas about better value-for-money projects. We have to think creatively about our transport infrastructure and be brave enough to scrutinise the value for money of any project if we think it might not deliver the benefit it promises. We have to hold HS2 Ltd to account to ensure that it is open and transparent in all that it does.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister in her response to commit to a full review of the business case for HS2, before the notice to proceed is granted later this year, and to make a clear and open statement on the Floor of the House on whether this project truly does represent good value for taxpayers’ money.

4.50 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) on securing this important debate, and on her excellent speech, with which I strongly agree.

I state categorically that I believe passionately in our railways. I have been a daily commuter for 50 years and I have always believed in their future. I continue to support strong investment in our railways, but not in HS2. The alleged business case for HS2 has two essential components: cost and need. The costs have been ballooning, dwarfing the claims of £50 billion by multiples. Even the rumoured likely costs now are way below what an eventual bill would be. With more time, I could give some explanations as to why, but I wish to focus on the supposed need and the likely passenger demand for HS2.

The business case is based on a frequency of 18 trains an hour leaving and reaching London. HS2 has grudgingly agreed that a figure of perhaps 16 trains an hour in off-peak periods might be appropriate. The trains would be some 400 metres long, probably with 16 carriages; they would be rather similar to Eurostar trains, which are 20 cars long, and capable of seating 80 passengers per carriage. That is well over 1,000 passenger seats on each train. With 18 trains an hour over the day, that would mean in excess of 200,000 passenger seats going to and from London. That is a significant proportion of the total population of Birmingham; it is complete nonsense. In any case, 18 trains an hour is just not possible. At a meeting of the Select Committee on Transport in 2011, SNCF witnesses from France with some knowledge of high-speed TGVs were astonished at the 18 trains an hour figure, saying it was impossible, and that 12 trains an hour was the absolute maximum.

HS2 has been in a mess and a panic for some time about costs. It asked if it would be possible to terminate trains at Old Oak Common and avoid the horrendously expensive costs of tunnelling through to Euston. The idea would be to transfer passengers to Crossrail at Old Oak Common. That would be impractical because of the vast numbers involved. Up to 20,000 extra passengers on Crossrail every hour is not a serious proposition. All this is just not credible. If HS2 goes ahead, we will surely see expensive trains on a very expensive track rattling around the country with very few passengers on them.

I want to end on a positive note. There are some serious and much-needed alternatives to HS2, and I have written a paper setting out some of them. I submitted my paper, prepared with the advice of a range of friends in the railway industry, to the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee for its inquiry into HS2. I also submitted it to the recent Great British transport competition, supported by the TaxPayers’ Alliance, and was pleased that one of my proposals was selected as one of the winning schemes.

Most significantly, there is the GB freight route, with which I am involved and to which the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire referred. This would be a freight priority line from the channel tunnel to Glasgow, built to a large-loading gauge and almost entirely on railway land, capable of accommodating full-sized lorry trailers on the trains. It would take some millions of lorry journeys off our roads every year, with immense benefits. It would link all the majority economic regions of Britain to each other, and to the continent of Europe, and Asia beyond.

There are several serious rail schemes that should be adopted and, if HS2 does not go ahead, all the schemes paused and abandoned by Government in recent times could simply be readopted. Electrifying the whole rail network, with massive improvements to railways in the north in particular, where rail has been disgracefully neglected, could and should go ahead. These schemes
could provide many thousands of jobs very quickly, with track work ready to go. This would be money well spent in every sense.

We should reflect on the sensible Eddington report, which recommended rail investment in and around our major cities and conurbations, where real passenger need is most concentrated.

Mr Sheerman: Does the hon. Gentleman not realise—I think he does—that those of us in the north of England just want reliable and reasonably speedy connections between the towns of the north, and would love this sort of investment, sooner rather than later?

Kelvin Hopkins: I agree with the hon. Gentleman; absolutely. Even within the northern region there are some dreadful train services. There are old carriages on rail tracks that are a disgrace and should have been replaced, and the lines have not been electrified. They should have been.

Laura Smith: It is key to note that for Northern Powerhouse Rail to happen, we have to have the HS2 infrastructure in place.

Kelvin Hopkins: I think I have made my point. I am running out of time, Mr Hosie. I could go into much more detail, but on this occasion perhaps I should conclude here. I think the case against HS2 is overwhelming. I look forward to a sensible Government abandoning it and reinvesting in all the other schemes that are so much more beneficial and needed.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. I intend to start the summings-up at around 10 past, so the time for each speaker is obvious, if all three want to speak.

4.55 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins). I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) for securing this important debate.

The HS2 business case is clearly deeply flawed, as my right hon. Friend pointed out. When I was first elected, I was in two minds about HS2. I could see the damage it was doing to my constituency, but I thought it might be a worthwhile project for the country, if its administrators were savvy enough to resolve some local issues. Four years on, my view has shifted. The continuing and unceasing lack of care, interest or attention that HS2 pays to my constituents and my community have destroyed any faith that it can deliver the benefits that it promised.

Each individual failure is compounded to create an image of an organisation riven by incompetence and unable to deliver the project. For example, take-up of the need-to-sell scheme for phase 2b continues to be extremely low. The number of new applications has not exceeded double figures in the last nine months. Of applications placed before the panel, only a third have been accepted, whereas half the need-to-sell applications made in phases 1 and 2a were. The process remains time-consuming, and involves frequent requests for additional information and documentation. In spite of revisions, the guidance is still insufficiently detailed to enable applicants to understand fully what information and evidence is required for a successful application.

Further confusion has arisen in respect of the atypical or special circumstances route, which is intended to supplement the discretionary property schemes and provide a safety net where the specific requirements of existing schemes cannot be met. Departmental officials taking part in local public engagement events have been advising applicants that they should be applying under the atypical special circumstances scheme because of their particular situation, but applicants are then informed by HS2 that it is not available to them, as they are eligible to apply under one of the discretionary schemes.

Applicants understandably expect the advice that they are given by officials during public engagement events to be accurate and correct. The fact that that does not appear to be the case causes further unnecessary anxiety and frustration for applicants, as well as reinforcing the sense of distrust in HS2. It gives the impression that the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing.

Andrew Bridgen: Does my hon. Friend agree that HS2 appeared to be trying to create the perception that the project was beyond the point of no return—that we cannot stop it because so much money has been spent? Does she also agree that in business, the first loss is the best loss, and we are throwing good money after bad on this project?

Antoinette Sandbach: I certainly do. I remember stating the figure of £100 billion on television, only to be told that it was ridiculous. Now it looks like a certainty, rather than the ridiculous proposal that others claimed it was.

Issues continue even once applications under the property scheme are accepted. My constituents repeatedly tell me about the unco-operative and, at times, obstructive approach of surveyors acting on behalf of HS2. The surveyors’ repeated failures to acknowledge email correspondence, lengthy delays in responding to correspondence—even after numerous chase-ups and the involvement of members of HS2’s property team—and delays in arranging meetings are not only unacceptable but undermine my faith that HS2 can be delivered on its already inflated budget.

There is considerable concern, particularly for applications under the statutory blight scheme, that property valuations are based on the opinion of a single Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors surveyor, who is not local and is paid for by HS2, fostering a sense that the valuer is not impartial; in contrast, the need-to-sell scheme has an average of three property valuations. There have been repeated concerns that properties are being undervalued. HS2’s surveyors cite the additional compensation provided under the scheme, the suggestion being that the undervaluation is offset by the additional compensation, rather than there being recognition that the compensation is for the upheaval caused by moving property, and is not related to the value.

I know that the Minister has tried to mitigate some of these issues in the past, but time goes on and nothing changes, despite the Minister’s efforts; ministerial orders are ignored and overruled by HS2, which has come out with legions of excuses. If it cannot deliver for my
constituents, how can it deliver for the country? My faith in this scheme is fundamentally undermined, as is my faith in the business case.

5.1 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) on securing the debate and on giving the House a chance to confront a couple of important choices. She is right to say that nettles need to be grasped and bullets bitten, but I think she has chosen the wrong nettles and bullets, and I will explain why in the next few minutes.

As is traditional now, the argument against HS2 is couched in terms of value for money. In any value-for-money calculation, the money is easy to calculate, but the value is much harder to put your finger on. There were arguments in a previous debate about the Treasury Green Book, which is not a wide-ranging analysis. If we measure what we treasure, we will clearly see that HS2 is one of the best value-for-money projects that this country has contemplated for many years.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Liam Byrne: I will in a moment.

Coming from Birmingham, what I treasure above all is jobs. We have had the slowest jobs recovery since the financial crisis of any city region, and HS2 will bring lots and lots of jobs, not at some distant point in the future but over the next five years. It will bring something like 33,000 jobs around Curzon Street and 77,000 jobs around Birmingham Interchange, in addition to the 30,000 jobs that will be created on the line at peak. This is the most important fiscal stimulus outside London and the south-east. Indeed, if we were to cancel HS2, I would bet my bottom dollar that we would put the Midlands back into recession within a year.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman, with his local knowledge, describe what is happening around Curzon Street now, and what has happened around Curzon Street for the last 20 years?

Liam Byrne: The former Secretary of State is right to make that point, because a number of significant businesses are now relocating to what is the worst unemployment hotspot in the country; the worst unemployment and youth unemployment in the country is in and around east Birmingham. We have a chance ahead of us to wipe out that youth unemployment, but only if we grasp the nettle and drive through HS2.

Graham Stringer: My right hon. Friend makes a brilliant case. If anything, he underestimates the result. When the Transport Committee went to France to look at the impact of the TGV, it found that the go-ahead cities that used the high-speed lines got huge extra investment that had not been calculated in the original assessment. Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds are all go-ahead cities, so I expect more jobs than my right hon. Friend says.

Liam Byrne: Precisely. If we measure what we treasure, and if we treasure jobs, HS2 is, frankly, a project that we need.

However, that is not all I treasure; I also treasure tangible action to decarbonise our economy and our region. I want the west Midlands to lead the first zero carbon revolution. Back in 1712, when the Newcomen engine was demonstrated up at Dudley castle, we sparked the carbon revolution the first time around. We need a radical plan that allows us to move trucks off the road and on to rail. Only with the capacity that comes with HS2 can we reopen 36 new freight lines that can take a million lorries off the road each year. We cannot de-clog the M6, the M5 or the M42 unless we get that freight off the road. It is impossible to see how we can drive forward the decarbonisation of a sector that contributes 40% of our carbon emissions each year if we do not drive ahead with HS2.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I share the right hon. Gentleman’s aspirations, but for Scotland. To meet the UK-wide net zero carbon targets we have set for 2050, we need to make sure that these new rail lines work for the entire country. Does he agree that we need to review HS2, not only on its business case, but on making sure that it works for the entire United Kingdom and connects the powerhouses in the Midlands with the true northern powerhouse, which is of course Scotland?

Liam Byrne: I am all for that, so long as it does not introduce a moment of delay in driving this forward. Frankly, our economy cannot have any further delay.

I treasure a project that puts the west Midlands at the centre of this economy. I particularly treasure the speed, which will result in a journey time of something like 65 minutes from Birmingham International to Canary Wharf, the most important business site in the country, via the connection at Old Oak Common.

The right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire advanced the traditional bang-for-buck argument, which is that if we got rid of HS2, there would be plenty of bucks left for other kinds of projects. I have to say that that is not fiscal realpolitik at all. The fiscal realpolitik will mean that money currently earmarked for HS2 will be quickly absorbed into other projects, and Opposition Members will be forgiven for worrying that it will disappear into the £10 billion-a-year tax cut proposed by the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson).

The right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire was right to demand choices, but the choices that she proposes are wrong. The real strategic transport choice that this country must confront is not between HS2 and other rail network lines, but between planes and trains. We should drive ahead with HS2 and cancel the ludicrous decision to build a third runway at Heathrow airport for £14 billion. We could use half that money to build a high-speed loop and take passengers from Heathrow to Birmingham, where there is already untapped capacity for 17 million passenger movements a year.

Around the world, a trillion-dollar high-speed rail revolution is under way, and we are being left behind. It is time that this country got on with it.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): I call Victoria Prentis. Please be brief. Then I will call the Front-Bench spokespeople.
5.7 pm

**Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): With that in mind, Mr Hosie, I endorse wholeheartedly everything said by the first three speakers, and particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who truly eviscerated the business case for HS2. I politely disagree with the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who truly eviscerated the business case for HS2. I politely disagree with the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who truly eviscerated the business case for HS2.

I make no apology for—

Mr Hosie, I endorse wholeheartedly everything said by the first three speakers, and particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who truly eviscerated the business case for HS2. I politely disagree with the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who truly eviscerated the business case for HS2. I politely disagree with the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who truly eviscerated the business case for HS2.

I make no apology for—

We love our area. It is fair to say him firmly about it later.

Other than by spending £100 billion of taxpayers' money.

There may be ways to assist with employment in Birmingham that £100 billion is worth some jobs in Birmingham; £100 billion is worth some jobs in Birmingham; £100 billion is worth some jobs in Birmingham.

HS2. I politely disagree with the right hon. Member for

Leadsom), who truly eviscerated the business case for

Friends and Neighbours (SNP) for bringing forward today's debate in a very candid way.

It is absolutely right that this House scrutinises HS2. I have listened carefully to the debate, and it is absolutely clear that the objection is rooted not so much in the actual scheme as in the governance of it, and I, too, have put question marks over the governance and management of it. Some of that sits fairly and squarely with the Secretary of State and the fact that he is not doing his job of calling HS2 to account. Therefore, it will be absolutely right that, on Monday, hon. Members from across the House support my amendment calling for greater scrutiny of the project. I very much hope that they will join me in the Lobby.

I take issue with the fact that a number of non-disclosure agreements have been issued. We want there to be real transparency. That is about calling management to account for the way they are handling the employment situation in their organisation. It is absolutely right that those questions are asked of HS2 and that it is brought to account for that.

I want now to set out Labour's position on the whole project. Connectivity and reliability must be at the heart of our railway system. There have been problems, and we need to make improvements. We are determined to do that through our enhancement programme. HS2 should not be segregated; it needs to be integrated into our rail enhancement work, and that is certainly what we want to do. We want to see more capacity built across our railways.

Our driving force is, first and foremost, to decarbonise our transport system. Currently, 29% of emissions come from our transport system, and we are in fact seeing regression on carbon reduction, not least with the deeply ecologically and environmentally damaging road building programme—road investment strategy 2—that the Government propose. We want to see good public transport investment, and certainly that is what people will get under a Labour Government.

We want to drive modal shift. It is so important to have people moving from their cars on to our rail network—we see that as comprising the main arteries of our transport system. But crucially, as my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) said, we need lorries coming off the roads and freight moving on to rail. HS2 provides an opportunity to ensure that we have the good connectivity—

Kelvin Hopkins: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Rachael Maskell: I am afraid I do not have time.
There is an opportunity to have good connectivity between ports and airports and to ensure that we can bring that right through to urban consolidation centres and out to the final mile. We need to seriously decarbonise our transport system using rail.

We want skills to be at the heart of this opportunity as we build the rail network for the future, and that brings me to one of the questions I have for the Minister today. In the light of Hinkley point being behind schedule and of the number of infrastructure projects the Government have planned, we have a bell curve whereby we have a peak in demand for skills but not the skills to match that. How will she ensure that there are sufficient skills for this project, particularly given that, at its peak, it will provide jobs for 30,000 people? We need to ensure that the project is not delayed because of poor infrastructure planning across the economy.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), who made a most excellent speech, about ensuring that we measure what we treasure. This is about jobs. Certainly on the Labour Benches, we believe that it is important that we invest in high-quality jobs for those areas of the country that have been missed out to date. Therefore, inward investment in the northern towns and cities, and in the midlands—east and west—will be vital to rebirthing our economy in those areas. At the moment, they are in a lot of pain because we have not seen that investment.

We have a real opportunity, but it has to be managed properly. Building capacity across our transport system is really important. We need sustained freight paths. Part of this will also be about seeing growth in patronage and ensuring that we reduce journey times. We need to lead that right into Scotland to ensure that we can see that modal shift from plane on to train. That is the larger vision of where we are going. But we would also do things differently; we make no bones about that. For instance, with parkway stations, it does not make sense that people have to drive to get the connectivity with the rail network. We would very much want to seek urban connection points; we believe that the situation needs to be reviewed.

The final phase of the project—the 2b stage—has to be fully integrated with trans-Pennine connectivity. This should be one project, not two segregated projects; it needs integrating. We hear that call from Transport for the North, and we hear it now from HS2, and we certainly hear the call from politicians across the north that it is time we brought those projects together into one. There are proposals for constructing things differently from the current Y shape and for making this much more about ensuring, first and foremost, that we get the connectivity across the north. The case was made very clearly in the early days, because it was seen as a shiny new train, in rela tion to the Bill. Labour will bring forward amendments on Report, and we very much hope that people who believe there should be greater scrutiny, governance and accountability of HS2 will join us in the Lobby to ensure that we put in place the right checks and balances for this project, to drive up the very treasure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill mentioned.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) on securing this important debate. I am honoured to be responding to her first Back-Bench debate—I was hoping that it would be on far more compatible terms, but we will have to agree to disagree on a number of the issues under discussion.

The debate provides an opportunity to reinforce the importance of HS2 not only for its capacity or for shortening rail journeys, but for fundamentally boosting the economy and smashing the north-south divide. My right hon. Friend has been a strong advocate for her constituency regarding the impact of the line there. She has quietly and diligently worked behind the scenes to communicate her concerns to the Department for Transport. I value the opportunity to put this on the record for her constituents to see.

Craig Tracey: When the argument changed from speed to capacity, does the Minister agree that there were more options, which could have been considered, to deliver that more quickly and cheaply, and provide greater benefit to our constituents? We are trying to predict rail usage in the distant future, but we have seen huge technological advances since the project was announced in 2009.

Ms Ghani: The business case has not moved from speed to capacity. People hooked on to the speed aspect in the early days, because it was seen as a shiny new train, but capacity, job creation, skilling up and smashing the north-south divide were always important aspects. If hon. Members fixated on one point and now realise there are many more, that is for them to come to terms with.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: The Minister is right. Those people who say that the case has changed from speed to capacity should read the original document put out by the Labour Secretary of State for Transport at the time, which spoke more about capacity than speed.

Ms Ghani: My right hon. Friend is a huge source of knowledge on this issue, as he is a former Secretary of State for Transport. He is right that all of those arguments have always been there. Unfortunately, people fixated on one or two points and now they are rather surprised that a large infrastructure project, which moves people from A to B, has many other positive impacts.
Luke Graham: One of my constituents, who was recognised as a whistleblower on HS2 and was featured on the “Panorama” programme, cited several problems with the assumptions used in the original business case. What are the Government doing to address those issues? They were raised and it went to the Public Accounts Committee. There are a number of follow-up questions still to be answered.

Ms Ghani: We are given a tight deadline to respond to any Select Committee. We respond as much as we can to the deadlines provided. I will go on to address the business case.

Mr Ivan Lewis: Will the Minister make public the number of non-disclosure agreements, settled agreements, compromise agreements or any other arrangements, which include non-disclosure provisions with former staff members? Can she confirm that funding from an unauthorised redundancy payment scheme operated by HS2 was used to fund some or all settlement or compromise agreements with former senior staff, and that in some cases those staff were regarded as having made serious protected disclosures as to their concerns—this is the same point made by the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham)—over HS2’s financial statements? If she cannot answer today, will she write to me with detailed answers before the summer recess?

Ms Ghani: I know that NDAs are a particularly sore point for the Labour party right now, but we regularly engage with local authorities, sharing work at the early design stage with them, which is why they use NDAs, especially during the planning phase. They are used to protect commercially sensitive and personal information. I will take the point about using taxpayers’ money on the chin. We need to ensure that we are always using taxpayers’ money properly and transparently. We always hold HS2’s feet to the fire on all of those issues. I am happy to put all of this in writing, and to answer in writing any further questions that the hon. Gentleman has.

Victoria Prentis: I do not want the Minister to be in any doubt that worries about NDAs come from only one side of the House. On the Conservative Benches, we are equally concerned about the governance of HS2. NDAs are a real concern to us in getting to the bottom of what is going on.

Ms Ghani: As I mentioned, NDAs are used to deal with commercially sensitive or personal information. This is a large project involving a large chain of people and companies. We will put into the public domain any information that we can. We will respond to all queries from Members of Parliament within the allotted time.

Arguments have been made for and against HS2. I want to explain why this Government are committed to HS2. Every time the House has voted on this project, the Government have always won with a stomping majority. Our current infrastructure is 150 years old. It is an overstretched Victorian network. Passenger numbers have doubled in the past 20 years, and on key routes in the west coast inter-city corridor they are set to triple.

We have an overcrowded railway, which is also one of the oldest. With HS2 in place, we can deal with the pressures on express trains, freight trains and slower local commuter services, which are already operating at peak capacity. That is just one of the reasons why HS2 is crucial: to solve our chronic capacity problems. I was intrigued by the argument that there will not be as many passengers using our railway network in the future. I hope this Government will not make the argument for people to stand still, but will encourage people to go out for social and work reasons.

HS2 is a new dedicated railway for fast inter-city express services, no longer encumbered by the inevitable inefficiencies associated with mixed-use lines, which will also free up huge capacity on the existing railway for more local trains, including for services to places such as Milton Keynes. In fact, 70% of the jobs created across our economy will be outside London, bringing prosperity to the north and the midlands, just as the first railways did, and not only to the cities on the high-speed line. HS2 trains will call at over 25 stations across the UK, from London to Scotland. It has already created 9,000 jobs and 200 apprenticeships. We expect that to rise to 30,000 jobs at peak construction, including over 2,000 new apprentices, many of whom will be trained at the national colleges in Doncaster and Birmingham.

Ronnie Cowan: In 2009, the Labour Secretary of State for Transport, Geoffrey Hoon, said that “a new company, High Speed 2, has been formed to develop the case for high-speed services between London and Scotland.”—[Official Report, 10 March 2009; Vol. 489, c. 144.]

Will this Conservative Government restate that aspiration?

Ms Ghani: Indeed, because the full stretch of HS2 will go up to Scotland. One of our ambitions is to reduce the journey time from London to Scotland. That is why we are continuing to ensure that we get through all the legislation and that the line stays on track.

HS2 will have a big impact on local jobs. At present we have over 2,000 businesses in the supply chain, 70% of which are small and medium-sized enterprises. That is what comes of building an ambitious railway line connecting eight of our top 10 cities.

Kelvin Hopkins: On the Scotland point, in 1990, British Rail ran a special train from King’s Cross to Edinburgh, with a two-minute stop at Newcastle, in three and a half hours—three and a half minutes faster than is planned for HS2. All that is needed is a bit of modification on the east coast main line, and that could be a regular service.

Ms Ghani: I am sorry, I was not in the House in 1990 when that was reported; I am talking about 2026 and 2033, when we will connect faster trains to Scotland.

I will now discuss some real live cases of how HS2 is bringing greater economic benefits than we thought would be possible over a decade ago. HSBC, for example, has brought 1,000 jobs to Birmingham by moving its retail and business banking headquarters. Other cities along the line are seeing benefits from businesses which are relocating, including Burberry investing in a new factory in Leeds, claiming proximity to the HS2 station as a key factor in its decision. Freshfields and EY now employ 1,000 people in Manchester. Locally, places are gearing up for the arrival of HS2: Toton has plans for it to facilitate the Toton innovation campus, with the
potential for up to 10,000 new jobs and a range of new housing; and the Cheshire science corridor enterprise zone, which was launched in 2016, aims to create 20,000 jobs by building a golden triangle with Liverpool and Manchester.

I fear that I am running out of time, but the business case is clearly solid: there is one budget and one timetable—HS2 will continue on track. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire asked me to confirm at the Dispatch Box what the budget and the timetable are. I stand here to state confidently that the budget is £55.7 billion and that the timetable is 2026 and 2033. I look forward to continuing this debate on Monday afternoon, when we hope that the Bill will return to the Floor of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the business case for High Speed 2.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall
Thursday 11 July 2019

[Mr Nigel Evans in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

National Shipbuilding Strategy

1.30 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the National Shipbuilding Strategy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I declare an interest as a member of the GMB trade union, which I have been for the last 30 years.

I was trying to think when we last had a debate on shipbuilding in the House, and it is quite a while ago. Part of the reason for that is the impression people have that the UK no longer builds ships—that shipbuilding is a smokesstack industry that is a ghost of the past. I hope to put that image to bed in my remarks and, along with right hon. and hon. friends who will contribute to the debate, to show not only that shipbuilding is an important part of our industrial sector, but that it also has a good future if it is given the proper support.

It is also my pleasure to declare another interest. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on shipbuilding and ship repair. We have just produced a report on the national shipbuilding strategy, and I thank my fellow members, the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who unfortunately has another commitment today and cannot be here, but who has been a strong supporter of the group; my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who was important in framing the report; my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), who will be here later; and the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who I am sure will speak for himself, and who has been a key contributor to the work of the group.

We produced the report earlier this year, and I thank the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions, who supported the document and its launch. I also pay tribute to the industry, the trade union movement, academics and the Royal Navy, who gave evidence for our report. On a personal note, and on behalf of the group, I thank Richard Steadman, my former assistant, who helped draft the report, and who has now gone to move.

The report was important, not just to review the national shipbuilding strategy, which the Government adopted more than a year ago, following the Parker review, but to advocate for the industry. As I said, people think we no longer build ships in this country. Is the industry a lot smaller than it was? Yes, it certainly is. Just after the second world war, we produced more than 50% of the world’s shipping. That went into steady decline, but the industry’s footprint is still there—in shipbuilding yards in places such as Glasgow and Birkenhead, or over at Harland and Wolff—and related industries still exist. In the area I represent—the north-east—Newcastle, Sunderland and the surrounding areas still have a lot of companies that are connected to the shipbuilding industry.

I thank the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who unfortunately cannot be here, for supporting the application for this debate to the Backbench Business Committee and for being a strong advocate for the shipbuilding sector and its importance to his area, Birkenhead, on Merseyside.

The industry is now smaller and mainly reliant on Government naval procurement for its future. That is important, and there is a basic issue that we need to address: if we want the sovereign capability to build complex warships in this country, we have to invest in it.

It is important to highlight that the industry also has spin-offs into other sectors. When people see a ship being built, they concentrate on the hull and superstructure—what they can see—but the real value and expertise in a complex warship today are not only in what is manufactured, but the through-life support. That creates jobs in a whole range of sectors and ensures that those jobs are maintained over the life of the ship.

We must protect skills; the sector cannot be successful, and we cannot keep our sovereign capability, without investment in skills. That is not just about skills such as welding, which are completely different to what they were 20 or 30 years ago—they are highly qualified, highly technical jobs. There are also skills in marine engineering, and that also has a spin-off, because the whole industry supports ships in this country and around the world. There is also project management. The two aircraft carriers that were built were a huge undertaking and could not have been done without very complex project management. We do that very well in this country, and we export that skill around the world.

Our skill in naval architecture is equally important, and has come to the fore with BAE Systems’ new Type 26 frigate. Because of the design, the company has now won export orders from both Australia and Canada. The actual vessels may not be being physically built in this country, but that does not really matter. What is important is that the skills that have gone into designing the vessels and the combat systems, and the research and development that lie behind that, are kept. We also have a leading edge in information technology, and a unique capability in this country, because of the nuclear deterrent, in nuclear marine engineering.

If we want an example of what happens when the pipeline of orders is turned off, we see it in Barrow in the 1990s, when the decision was taken not to continue investing in the skills needed for building submarines. When we tried to pick up those skills for the Astute class, there were problems. I often say—some people might have heard me say it before—that these are complex skills; they cannot just be turned on and off like a tap when we need them. They need constant investment.

The industry today employs 32,000 people directly, contributing more than £2 billion to the UK economy, and there are many knock-on jobs. Type 26 is a good example. I counted more than 65 companies in the BAE Systems supply chain, and a lot of those companies are not located anywhere near the sea. We have steel from Bradford, roller shutters from Bolton North East, fire
Mr Kevan Jones]

and flood detection systems from Manchester Central, and plate from Wolverhampton South East. Although we traditionally consider communities such as Glasgow and, in the past, Tyneside and Merseyside as where the shipbuilding industry is, that is not the case. It is a national endeavour now.

The other important point is that programmes such as the Type 26—I give credit to BAE Systems for its work on this—are spreading work around the country, and also putting work into small and medium-sized businesses. That is not just giving them immediate work; in some cases, it is giving them work for a long time to come.

As I said, the industry now relies mainly on naval procurement. Following my involvement with Swan Hunter on Tyneside in my early days, I could write a book about the mistakes that were made as we downsized the industry. We had competition rules that ensured that yards competed against each other, which ultimately led to yard closures and the consolidation, quite rightly, of complex warship building on the Clyde. That is one of the things in the naval shipbuilding strategy I have difficulty with: we have to ensure that we do not make the mistakes of the past by trying to reinvent those competition-type rules.

The Aircraft Carrier Alliance was a very good example of how we can have the final assembly at Rosyth, but spread that work around the country—to Tyneside, Falmouth and elsewhere—to ensure that those blocks are built. In terms of Sir John Parker’s reference to the new Type 31e frigate, I am not sure how that ship will be built in a block form, because it is quite small. However, the alliance shows that we can have a success story if we bring together people in the industry. Although the carriers were criticised for their cost, not only was the engineering undertaken remarkable, but the carriers were delivered on time and with techniques—if we look, for example, at the US’s new carriers—that are years ahead in terms of the innovation and technology. That was because we have the skills throughout the country needed by the industry.

As I say, the old shipyards might have gone from areas such as the north-east, but the skill levels are still there. One of the key messages I want to convey is that, if we are to keep the sovereign capability and, separately, ensure that we have the skill base, we must have that throughput of work through the yards. It is important not only for the companies on the Clyde, but for the SMEs in the supply chain, because they can ensure that there is long-term work and invest in the skills and innovation that are needed.

I have asked many parliamentary questions of the Minister, who has been very helpful in his replies, and I think he is sympathetic to the case. The throughput of work is important, not just for skills, but to ensure that we have follow-on and that we do not get the situation we had with the submarine-building programme, when we lost that capability. We need to give industry the certainty that it can invest. If it has work going on into the future, it can make the right investment decisions.

I turn now to the issue of the fleet solid support ship. I pay tribute to the trade unions and others that have been lobbying for these vessels, which will be used to support our carriers, to be built in the UK.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making a really good speech, and I congratulate him on securing this debate. I am sorry that duty calls for me to return to Cornwall and that I can only make this intervention and not a speech. I thoroughly agree with him. I am very proud that the Royal Fleet Auxiliary is based in Falmouth. As he says, we have a valuable through-life contract. I wholeheartedly agree that the ships should be built in the UK, and we are proud to have the opportunity to service them. It is vital to have such high-skilled, well-paid jobs in a peripheral area such as Cornwall, which has low wages. Those jobs are vital to our local economy. When decisions are made about procurement, they should be about not just the price tag on the vessel, but the contribution that those industries make to the regional economy.

Mr Jones: I am envious of the hon. Lady for going back to Cornwall. I spent my summer holidays there last year, and it is a wonderful part of the world.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): So is Durham!

Mr Jones: But Cornwall is, equally, very nice.

The hon. Lady makes an important point. It is about not just the build, but the through-life support. For a lot of the systems that we procure for the armed forces—certainly in shipbuilding—we look at the initial procurement, but we should also be looking at the through-life support. That is where the jobs are, and where the value is for the original, prime companies. As she rightly says, there is also value for smaller companies and others. If we are to spread prosperity around, we should see the contract as an investment in Britain. As she rightly argues, it is an investment in skills going forward. When looking at whether we can afford to make that investment, we should ask the Treasury, “What is the prosperity agenda?” The right hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) did a very good report that tried to explain that the prosperity agenda should be linked to procurement in the Ministry of Defence. One of the GMB trade union’s reports argued that 20% of the value of the fleet solid support contract comes straight back to the Treasury anyway, through taxes and national insurance.

That has to be taken into account, but it is the throughput of work that will ensure that the shipyards and supply chain are maintained. We have a great opportunity to do that with the FSS contract. Unfortunately, for reasons that I am not sure even the Minister understands or privately supports, it has been put out to international competition. We will make the same mistakes that we made in the 1980s if we think this will somehow lower the price or get a better deal. I am sorry, but no other country in Europe does the same thing.

We can dance on the end of a pin over whether EU procurement rules apply to the FSS vessels—I have made it very clear that they do not. The French have just ordered four new Vulcan class support ships. Did they think about putting that out to international competition or asking British yards to tender? No, they did not; they ordered them directly. It is the same for Italian and Spanish ships. That is the difference.
The South Koreans and Daewoo have now pulled out of the competition for the FSS contract, but we are not dealing with a level playing field. Those companies have huge amounts of Government subsidy, which is not open to UK shipbuilders. If we are to procure the ships and build them abroad, it is quite clear that the Exchequer will not get back 20% straightaway in tax and national insurance. We will also lose the ability to support our shipbuilding and ship repair businesses.

Since 2010, the Government’s industrial strategy on defence has been disappointing. When I was a Defence Minister, I had the privilege of working with Lord Drayson, who understood this issue. As part of his wider industrial strategy on defence—I think it ran until 2010—he rightly argued that if we want to build complex warships in this country, we need to put in the investment, get the drumbeat of work going, and ensure there is certainty for industry.

Since 2010, we have been promised various defence strategies, but what we really need is an overarching defence industrial strategy. I know the Minister will say that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy or other Departments are dealing with these things, but I am sorry: a particular strategy needs to be developed for defence industries, including the maritime sector.

Sir John Parker’s strategy was an attempt but, as I said, I think it misses the point. It tries to reinvent some of the wheels of competition that failed in the 1980s. There is a fixation in the Ministry of Defence—I cannot understand where it comes from—with the idea, “Isn’t it terrible to give the work to BAE Systems?” BAE Systems is the only company in the UK capable of building complex warships. There are ways of incentivising it, but also ensuring that we get value for money and that we have the necessary systems. The hulls are important and the steel is important, but being able to invest in combat systems, engine technology and other things related to shipbuilding is vital, because they are exportable.

The carriers were a good example of Babcock, Thales and BAE Systems coming together in an alliance that worked. I do not understand why that alliance should be broken up on completion of HMS Prince of Wales, which will happen soon. That alliance seems an obvious way forward in terms of skills for the FSS. I understand that the new Secretary of State wants competition to be reviewed, which is welcome. I hope we can get understanding of the points that I and a lot of other Members have made about the importance of shipbuilding in the UK.

Let me conclude where I started. This is a vital sector if we are going to keep sovereign capability for complex warship building in this country. It needs to be invested in. It is not a smokestack industry; properly invested in, it is an industry for the future. Off the back of contracts such as that for the fleet solid support vessels, I would like to see investment in not only technologies but skills. We need urgently to ensure that companies such as BAE Systems, which do a fantastic job of recruiting apprentices, have the certainty to invest in skills. If we do not, we will fall behind: even with the political will to build complex warships in this country, we will not have the skills to do so. As I said, we have only to look at Barrow and the submarine programme to see the problems with trying to regenerate skills from scratch.

I am pleased that we are having this debate and putting shipbuilding on the agenda. I hope that that incentivises the Government to make an early decision to award the FSS contract to British yards or a British consortium.

1.53 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As an old schoolmate of yours, Mr Evans, it is a particular pleasure for me to contribute to this debate under your able chairmanship. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for continuing his relentless and entirely justified campaign to ensure that the defence footprint, particularly as regards naval shipbuilding, is not shrunk still further in this country.

Mr Evans, you will know, having been in the House even longer than me, that one of the few benefits of having spent more than two decades here is that we get to see trends over decades. What has happened with our naval shipbuilding does not make for a pretty picture. I remember the 1998 strategic defence review undertaken by the then new Labour Government of Tony Blair. It set out a policy for the Royal Navy that seemed to leave it in quite a winning position. Although the Royal Navy was asked to sacrifice three of its frigates or destroyers, thus reducing its total from 35 to 32, the review put forward the concept of carrier strike and amphibious strike, which meant that the two large aircraft carriers would be built.

Hadhad it remained in that formulation, the Royal Navy would have had every reason to be satisfied. We all know, however, that that was not the case. Successive Governments reduced the total from 32 frigates and destroyers, first to 31, on the basis that these were much more capable ships and therefore 31 would be able to do the work of 32. When that little stratagem succeeded, the 31 were reduced to 25, and the 25 were then reduced to our present pathetic total of 19 destroyers and frigates—six destroyers and 13 frigates, to be precise. Before anybody starts lecturing us about the change in the nature of warfare, it is worth reflecting on the fact that one of those 13 frigates, HMS Montrose, is in the news today, having performed the very important function of protecting British shipping from Iranian attempts to respond to the impounding of a large vessel of theirs that was believed to be carrying contraband oil to Syria.

It is rather hard to have a strategy when we are dealing with only a relatively limited number of vessels, even though those vessels may well be much more potent, powerful and versatile than their predecessors. However powerful, versatile and potent they are, each can be in only one place at any one time, and that means that each can be built in only one place over a particular period. That makes it harder to have a versatile and flexible strategy to match those qualities in the ships that are being built.

One of the encouraging results of the publication of the national shipbuilding strategy was that, in identifying the general purpose frigate, the Type 31e—the cheap and cheerful version of the next generation of frigates—as one that should be designed for export, Sir John Parker, to whom we should again pay tribute for everything he did, also specified that, as a result of those vessels being built in modular fashion, they would be very flexible and adaptable over time to what is sometimes called...
incremental acquisition. In other words, we get the ship hulls built and get them out to sea, and then, over time, because we have built compartments in the vessels that can be used for a variety of purposes over a period of years, we sow the seeds of their future adaptability and additional potency.

We should remember that this was the first time there was talk of an increase in the total number of vessels. Instead of just being told, “We will be replacing 13 Type 23 frigates on a like-for-like basis,” we were told that there would definitely be eight of the Type 26, specialising in anti-submarine warfare, and at least five—not a limit of five—of the Type 31e general purpose vessels. It will be interesting to hear from the Minister whether there are plans to exceed the figure of five for the Type 31e.

Slightly less than a week away on Tuesday 16 July there will be another debate in this Chamber about defence expenditure. Of course, all these issues, including the important one about the fleet solid support ships raised by the right hon. Gentleman, generally come back to defence expenditure and—it must be said—the inadequacy of defence expenditure.

I regard it as one of the achievements of the Select Committee on Defence that, with members representing no fewer than four different parties, it has consistently come to the view, irrespective of party allegiance, that too little is spent on defence in the United Kingdom—far too little. Our expectations were managed downwards to such an extent that it was believed to be some sort of triumph when we did not dip below NATO’s basic recommended minimum guideline of 2% of GDP. To coincide with next Tuesday’s debate, the Committee will bring out an updated report, following on from our 2016 report in which we laid out the decline in defence expenditure as a proportion of GDP compared with rises in health, education and, above all, pensions and benefits, and how defence had declined in our scale of national priorities to such an extent that the size of the armed forces was becoming unsustainable.

The national shipbuilding strategy gives us an opportunity to reverse that decline, and I would be grateful to hear from the Minister what plans there are to do that. It will be no easy task, given that we will remove the Type 23 frigates from the fleet at the rate of one a year between 2023 and 2035. It will be no small task to replace each of those frigates at that sort of rate with a new, modern, complex warship.

Mr Kevan Jones: The right hon. Gentleman is talking about the number of ships. Does he agree that the crisis point in the Navy is also about people and not just in number? I referred to skills in the shipbuilding industry, but there is also a need for particular skills in the Royal Navy.

Dr Lewis: That is true, because if we fall below what one might call critical mass, we will not be able to maintain the necessary footprint to support the construction and manning of vessels on a consistent basis. That is why the question of the fleet solid support ships is so important. Those vessels can be classified as warships or, if we choose not to, simply as auxiliaries. We have that choice, and it is a choice that we feel, on a cross-party basis, it is necessary to exercise.

The trouble that the Ministry of Defence runs into is that every time a long-term strategic view suggests to it that we ought to make an investment of this sort, it runs up against the short-term imperative that the defence budget is so small that cuts must be made at every opportunity, even where, as in this case, they are short-sighted and storing up problems for the future.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank the Chair of the Defence Committee for giving way. Is there not another priority for the MOD—the increased submarine activity we are seeing from Russia? The lack of Navy surface vessels could contribute to that. The modernising defence programme really needs to address that issue.

Dr Lewis: I entirely endorse what the hon. Gentleman said, and I am glad that he mentioned the modernising defence programme. I will take a moment to talk about that exercise. It was felt at the time that the programme was not a very substantial document, but it did rescue the armed forces from what I can only describe as a bureaucratic ambush laid out for it by something called the national security capability review.

Right hon. and hon. Members will remember that that mini-strategic defence review was an exercise that I believe began in 2017 and was conducted not by the Ministry of Defence but by the National Security Adviser, who is currently also the Cabinet Secretary. It was designed to consider security, intelligence, cyber-warfare and defence all in the round. I even heard Sir Mark Sedwill in front of a Committee on which I sat refer to a £56 billion defence and security budget, thus taking all the budgets and putting them together, as it were, in a single basket. There was only one snag with that. If the review decided, as it was minded to do, that much more money needed to be spent on what was called “21st century threats” such as cyber-warfare and ambiguous or hybrid warfare, as there was to be no extra money for anything, the already depleted conventional armed forces would have to be cut further.

The hon. Gentleman’s point is therefore particularly pertinent. Although we live in a world where we face new hybrid warfare, cyber-warfare and other highly technological threats we have not faced before, that does not mean that the traditional threats on the sea, under the sea, in the air and on land have gone away. It is a profound mistake to say that, just because we need to spend more money to meet novel threats, we can afford to spend less money to keep up the strength of our conventional armed forces.

I referred briefly to the Defence Committee’s original report from April 2016, entitled “Shifting the Goalposts?” that set out charts showing the decline in defence expenditure to barely 2%—and that figure was achieved only by including certain categories in the total, such as war pensions, that NATO guidelines allow us to include but we never previously chose to. We just scraped over the 2% line by doing that. I will not spoil the effect by revealing in advance what the new figures show, but believe me, they are not cause for great comfort.

We are now at a stage when we are expecting a change of Prime Minister. Every Prime Minister has a honeymoon period. Even the present one did—sadly, it did not last all that long. In this case, the person most likely to become the next Prime Minister projects an optimism, a sunny personality and a robust world view.
I suggest that all of us, from whichever party we are, should remain united on one thought—there will be a brief window of opportunity. There will be a moment when we will have a new occupant of No. 10 Downing Street who will be full of the joys of spring. This will be our chance to say that the great naval traditions, all those matters of history and all the events in which his great hero, Sir Winston Churchill, participated as First Lord of the Admiralty and later as Prime Minister will be laying, as another Prime Minister once said, the hand of history on his shoulder. What better way to shake the hand of history than to restore defence spending to its rightful place in the scale of our national priorities?

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Hon. Members will be able to tell that the right hon. Gentleman and I are old school chums because I gave him a bit of latitude to ski off-piste. I call Douglas Chapman.

2.10 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): Thank you very much, Mr Evans; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I will try to maintain as best I can the level of optimism displayed by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis). I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) on securing the debate. I welcome the opportunity to talk about the great importance of this issue not only to the industry but to those who work in it and—from the perspective of a Scottish MP—to the Scottish economy.

As hon. Members will know, shipbuilding has been part of the industrial fabric of Scotland for most of the last three centuries. The world’s highest-quality ships were once built on the River Clyde, where around a fifth of the world’s ships were constructed in the early 1900s. As we all know, the industry’s decline has hit Scotland hard, but there is still a sense of pride among Scots about our shipbuilding heritage. There are plenty of reasons why shipbuilding can and should survive in Scotland today. We have the talent and the infrastructure to take on large shipbuilding contracts, as we have seen in the construction of both aircraft carriers, and it is imperative that we maintain that capability as part of a sensible industrial strategy and defence strategy for future years.

If the Government are serious about protecting the future of shipbuilding and about the delivery of the shipbuilding strategy, they must award the contract for the fleet solid support vessels to the UK consortium’s bid. My views on the issue have been clear from the start: it was a huge mistake for the Ministry of Defence to tender the contract internationally. I maintain that position.

Francis Tusa, an expert from Defence Analysis, prepared a compelling report on behalf of the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions last year, setting out the case for the fleet solid support vessels to be built in domestic shipyards. The report notes that retaining the contract in the UK would result in serious returns to the Treasury of up to £415 million—even by Treasury standards, that is not small beer. The report also points out that a yard in Rosyth, which is in my constituency, is big enough to accommodate those ships. That yard is crying out for work to secure its future after the contract for the HMS Prince of Wales aircraft carrier comes to an end.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the fleet solid support vessels are big enough to be built in block form, as the carriers were, with the work spread around the UK?

Douglas Chapman: Absolutely; the right hon. Gentleman makes a valid and accurate point. The Minister has visited Rosyth and has seen for himself what we have to offer, but he is assiduous and visits areas across the UK, so I am sure that that point will not be lost on him when decisions have to be made in future. The GMB estimates that if the support ships order were placed in UK yards, it would create up to 6,500 jobs. Not only would that help to protect the future of Rosyth but the benefits would be shared across the UK. A Government who say that they have a prosperity agenda at their heart must show that it is real and not just something that trips off their Ministers’ tongues. It must be made real and must have a real impact on our economy.

The Government continue to roll out their tired old party line: “These vessels are not warships and are therefore subject to international competition.” How can they peddle that myth when the Minister’s predecessor confirmed in an answer to a written question that he expects the support ships to be fitted with close-range guns, such as the Phalanx? The Phalanx is a 20mm Gatling gun designed to shoot down fast anti-ship missiles, aircraft and fast-attack craft. To argue that a vessel fitted with such weapons is not a warship is difficult for everybody to fathom.

Like many hon. Members, I have repeatedly raised this matter, whether at Defence questions, via written questions, during debates in the Commons Chamber and in Westminster Hall, and again today. The Government must look at this again to be absolutely sure that they are making the right decision, not just for the future of the shipbuilding industry but for the prosperity agenda that they say is so important. I have also raised the matter with the Prime Minister during Prime Minister’s questions, and followed up with a written invitation to her to visit Rosyth dockyard in my constituency, to see for herself the skills, talent and infrastructure that we have there to fulfil such a contract. To echo the right hon. Member for New Forest East, the new Prime Minister will receive an invitation as soon as he is appointed, and I hope it will be met with more optimism and will provoke a better response than last time.

My message has received cross-party support. I tabled an early-day motion calling on the Government to restrict the support ships tender to domestic competition, and it was signed by Labour, Conservative, DUP, Plaid Cymru and SNP Members. I would be grateful if the Minister gave some reassurance that our plea for those ships to be built on these islands was not falling on deaf ears.

Although it is an island, the UK’s ability to protect its own coastline is severely lacking. Scottish maritime territory accounts for 60% of UK waters, yet the UK Government have failed to maintain any surface vessel presence in Scotland. All Royal Navy vessels are based on England’s south coast, so it currently takes more than 24 hours for a ship to reach us. I visited Devonport
on Tuesday, and it took me half a day to fly there by plane. A 24-hour delay by ship is too big a risk for us to take with our national security.

I am not privy to diplomatic cables—I know that some people are—but I have heard rumours that the US are looking at developing a naval base somewhere in Scotland. Imagine the US having a larger naval presence or footprint in Scotland than the Royal Navy. If there is any truth in that rumour, we live in very strange times indeed.

The RAF Nimrod maritime surveillance aircraft were scrapped in 2010, and we are told that we would need to wait until 2021 for the full P8 fleet to be delivered. That is outrageous when, in recent years, incursions into Scottish waters have increased to their highest level since the cold war. Incidents of Russian transgressions into Scottish waters were reported in 2011, 2014 and 2019. The previous Defence Secretary admitted to the Defence Committee that "Russian submarine activity in the North Atlantic has increased tenfold in recent years."

Despite that, the Tories have perpetuated a nosedive in the number of Royal Navy ships from 77 in 2010 to 66. Furthermore, during the Scottish independence referendum, we were promised that 13 Type 26 frigates would be built on the Clyde, but that figure has since been reduced to eight. The commitment to a frigate factory is another promise that was rolled back and has come to absolutely nothing.

When he was Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond) repeatedly told the people of Scotland that the only way to secure the future of Scottish shipbuilding was to remain part of the UK. Yet inside the UK, Scotland’s shipbuilding industry has been eroded. Shipbuilding in Scotland employed 15,700 workers in 1991. That figure has more than halved to just 7,000 in recent years. Compare that with independent Norway, a state of similar size to Scotland, which over 37,000 people were employed in that sector in 2008.

During the Scottish independence referendum, we were also promised 12,500 full-time military personnel in Scotland, yet levels are now well below 10,000. In Norway, again, 20,000 people are employed in the armed forces—double the proportion of the population in Scotland.

It is safe to say that the Tories have broken their promise to Scottish shipbuilding and on many other fronts. They clearly cannot be trusted with the future of the industry—although I will be happy to hear more positive sounds from the Minister today. Plenty of small states such as Denmark manage to maintain their sovereign naval defence capability very successfully. With independence, I am sure that Scotland could do exactly the same.

Last year, as a member of the Public Accounts Committee, I led an evidence session on the defence equipment plan, which highlighted a £15 billion black hole in the MOD budget. Sufficient funds have not been made available to dispose of any of the 20 submarines that the MOD has decommissioned since 1980, seven of which lie in the dockyard in my constituency. All the while, the nuclear arsenal continues to burn a huge hole in the defence budget, to the tune of £2.2 billion per year. Continuing to spend such astronomical sums on nuclear weapons that will never be used while our coastal defences are compromised is simply unsustainable and unacceptable.

The Public Accounts Committee findings uncovered the fact that the Type 31 budget did not exist. It is a smaller frigate, but its exportable elements are important to the future surface ship business, in particular in yards such as Rosyth and others across the UK. All the skills and talents that we developed while building two of the largest ships that the Royal Navy has ever built—the QE class—will be lost unless we can maintain the shipbuilding industry through contracts for the support ships or, for example, the Type 31s. In terms of the numbers, the Type 31s could employ 2,000 people over the term of the contract, attracting 150 new apprentices into the industry. That is a price worth paying to ensure that we have a good industry into the future.

In conclusion, in the context of ever-tightening budgets, in the MOD in particular, the Government must reconsider their defence spending priorities and review their shipbuilding strategy. Shifting resources to shipbuilding would mean responding directly to 21st century security threats. The Government must also review their decision-making process for tendering shipbuilding contracts abroad to ensure that a vital industry is protected from further decline. We must also see fulfilment of the unmet promises that the Government made to the people of Scotland during the 2014 independence referendum.

There can be a bright future for shipbuilding in the UK and in Scotland, although the jury is still out on whether the Government can produce the prosperity agenda that we all look for. Agreeing to the contracts for the fleet solid support ships, the Type 31e frigates and the missing list of Type 26 frigates is paramount in the future of shipbuilding and in making the national shipbuilding strategy not just a document to lie on a shelf gathering dust in the Main Building but a real plan for action and prosperity.

2.23 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is, as always, a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Evans. It is also a pleasure to represent the Clyde shipyards and the shipyard workers of Govan in the Westminster Parliament. On Friday morning, I had the opportunity to see the work being carried out on the Type 26 frigate HMS Glasgow, which is being made in Govan. In a few weeks’ time, I look forward to going to the steel-cutting for the second Type 26, HMS Cardiff.

I thank my good friend, the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), for securing this debate and for his fantastic work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on shipbuilding and ship repair. I am delighted to serve on that APPG, which reflects the public affection and support for the shipbuilding industry across the UK. That affection and support crosses political boundaries, as we have seen today. Whether someone is a supporter of the Union or independence for Scotland, or indeed of Brexit or remaining in the European Union, right across the range people care deeply about the shipbuilding industry in Scotland and the United Kingdom. As the right hon. Gentleman said—I was delighted that he
highlighted it—the export success of the Type 26 frigate shows the world-class design capability in the workforce on the Clyde.

I was not the only visitor to the Govan shipyards on Friday. I was there in the morning, but on Friday afternoon there was another curious visitor to the Clyde shipyards—but I will return to the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) shortly. I will first say that I agree with the points made by all those who have spoken so far in paying tribute to the trade union movement. I am clear that were it not for the pressure that the movement has placed on all political parties, we would not have a shipyard industry at all and, indeed, the CSEU—the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions, which is having its conference today—has written to the two contenders to be the next Prime Minister. It did so because in a couple of weeks—I say this with great affection and respect to the Procurement Minister—he may not be the Procurement Minister; we do not know. There are rumours of shredders in the Departments working overtime in preparation for the new regime. It might even be you, Mr Evans, who is called to become the Defence Procurement Minister.

Mr Kevan Jones: Scraping the barrel!

Chris Stephens: The right hon. Gentleman says that, but I can assure you, Mr Evans, that I could name a lot worse—but I will not.

The CSEU wrote to the two contenders asking them about support for the shipbuilding industry and specifically on the issue of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary fleet support ships. It has yet to receive a response from either contender. It was curious that the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip should appear in a shipyard in Scotland but not mention his support or the importance of the shipbuilding industry to the United Kingdom—curious indeed. Not only those who work in the shipyards but the general public are entitled to know what the direction of travel will be under the person with the sunny disposition referred to by the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis).

The public are entitled to know what both of the two individuals contending to become Prime Minister will do for the shipbuilding industry, and in particular whether they believe that the Royal Fleet Auxiliary support ships should be built in the United Kingdom. As the CSEU clearly stated in the foreword to the all-party parliamentary group report on the importance of the Aircraft Carrier Alliance, which other hon. Members have mentioned,

"that work is now coming to an end and the CSEU believes that up to 20,000 skilled jobs in shipyards and 20,000 jobs in supply chains are now at risk. There is an urgent need for work to fill these yards."

I totally agree with that proposition.

The excuses about fleet support ships not being warships are curious. We might think that they were some sort of cruise liner—that the next time we watched an episode of "The Love Boat", we would see this fleet support ship that has been built and is somehow not a warship. I understand from parliamentary answers that those ships will take part in, for example, counter-piracy. I have never seen "The Love Boat" involved in counter-piracy, but I know that warships are involved in it. To suggest that ships that are armed with naval guns are not warships is curious.

Mr Jones: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a ship that is equipped with Phalanx guns is a warship? They are not there to keep the pigeons off the deck.

Chris Stephens: That is an excellent analogy, perhaps better than the one I used. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct: these are warships. If it looks like a warship and acts like a warship, it is reasonable to assume that it is, in fact, a warship and not a civilian ship.

The criterion should be changed to designate fleet solid support ships as warships. If I understood correctly the answers the Minister gave the right hon. Member for North Durham and others in Monday’s Defence questions, that will be the direction of travel. It is all very well saying that will be the future direction of travel, but it should be the immediate one for those contracts. The GMB trade union has said—a point emphasised by my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman)—that 6,500 jobs could be created by securing that; £285 million of the estimated cost of the order could be returned to taxpayers—money that would be lost should the order go overseas. That is an important criterion that the Ministry of Defence, and the Treasury, appear to overlook.

After four years in this place I am starting to believe that it is the Treasury that makes the defence decisions, not the Ministry of Defence.

Dr Julian Lewis: Definitely.

Chris Stephens: Apparently the Chair of the Defence Committee agrees. If the Treasury is making those calls, surely it has to take account of the fact that the workers who would build those ships would pay income tax and national insurance that would go back into the Treasury coffers, but that will not happen if the contracts are sent to other places. Unite has estimated that the Treasury would receive 36p in every pound from those defence projects. This is an excellent opportunity for the Minister—in the next two weeks, before his elevation—to demonstrate the Government’s commitment to taxpayer value by making sure that the ships are built in the UK. I have other constituency demands, which I have lobbied the Minister about, and I hope he will take my advice on those in the next couple of weeks, too.

There are plenty of examples of other countries—normal-sized nations or larger ones such as the UK—that better plan their sovereign naval defence capability, build their warships and keep their drumbeat going. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife highlighted, and as shown in my exchange with the Chair of the Defence Committee, this issue is important in the context of current Russian activity. The excursions into Scottish waters are increasingly blatant but there are still no Navy surface vessels based in Scotland—they are all based on the southern coast of England. That seems a very curious way of organising defence when there is increased Russian submarine activity.

As others highlighted, promises have been made about the shipbuilding industry. We heard the classic one that there would be 13 Type 26 frigates; the Treasury then
interfered and they became eight Type 26 frigates, and then five Type 31 frigates. Despite that announcement more than three years ago, I still do not know exactly where the Type 31 frigate sits within the Royal Navy and what its purpose will be. It may have a general purpose, but where does it fit in? It is just a smaller and cheaper ship, and that seems to be the only reason it exists. That ship was supposed to be exportable—one that would be easier for BAE Systems and others to sell abroad, so perhaps we might think about going back to 13 Type 26 frigates. In relation to the Type 31 frigate, the Minister should look at the benefits of the prosperity agenda across the UK; I hope he will give a commitment to that.

Now, there is the frigate factory. A former Defence Secretary still insists that the frigate factory exists in the Clyde, and has found himself arguing that twice in the House of Commons Chamber. On one occasion, the GMB trade union and a BBC journalist with a television camera went around the site of the proposed frigate factory and found ash. There is an important point here, which is contained in the all-party parliamentary group’s report, and I hope the Chair of the Defence Committee will pick it up: the Ministry of Defence needs to look at giving some support to shipyard investment. It is no use the Treasury and the Ministry of Defence insisting that they want the industry to build more efficiently and save costs if they do not help the industry to invest in its own shipyards. That shipyard investment can ensure that ships are built more efficiently and cheaper.

Mr Kevan Jones: It is about not just Government investment but private sector investment. Companies such as BAE Systems must make that private sector investment if there are long-term future orders for those yards. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that what we do in this country is in stark contrast to the Canadians’ investment in new shipyards at Halifax, and the Australians’ investment in Adelaide?

Chris Stephens: I absolutely agree. What Canada and Australia are doing seems light years ahead of what the current UK Government are doing. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will agree that, for far too long, the shipbuilding industry has been experiencing feast and famine—a stop-start period in which there is no continuous drumbeat to build. He is right that the Government have to make a continuous commitment, with the private sector, to look at shipyard investment.

The APPG report—the Minister has a copy—lists 10 reasonable and excellent recommendations. As a member of the APPG, I am very proud of the report, which is about ensuring that we have a thriving shipbuilding industry. One of my frustrations when shipyards are shown on television is that there is always a clip from the 1970s, with the welder wearing the welder’s helmet. I have some sympathy for that because I have family members who were welders, but the industry is far more highly skilled than that. The design is far better. I recommend anyone to visit the visualisation suite of BAE Systems—I know the Minister has been there, as have I. It shows the highly skilled way in which warships are built.

I fully support the all-party parliamentary group’s report, and it has been a pleasure, as always, to take part in this debate.

2.37 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, for the first time I believe. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for securing this debate. I declare my interest as a long-standing and proud member of the GMB trade union. As my right hon. Friend outlined, despite decline into a smaller industry, shipbuilding is still a vibrant part of our economy and needs proper support. If we want to maintain sovereign capability, we need to invest. It is not just about the jobs linked to the ships but the spin-off industries and other parts of the UK economy. As he said, it is a national endeavour across the UK and supports small and medium-sized businesses.

We heard the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), support the shipbuilding industry and talk about the variety of purpose, versatility and future adaptability of the vessels. As he has done on many occasions, he talked about the inadequacy of defence expenditure. I am afraid I do not share his optimism about the prospect offered by a new Prime Minister, particularly if it is the candidate that I think he was talking about, but that may be another discussion.

We heard from the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) about the need for the fleet solid support ships to be built in domestic shipyards. I will talk later about the expertise in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency at the Rosyth shipyard. Unfortunately, I cannot share his optimism about the future of Scotland outside the UK—or indeed of Wales outside the UK—but that is something more appropriate for the debate currently taking place in the main Chamber.

Overall this debate has been consensual; I want to keep it in that spirit, but there are a few points I wish to raise. When the Secretary of State delivered one of her first public speeches in her new role, we were encouraged to hear her mention the prosperity agenda and talk up buying British. In recent weeks, as exemplified at Defence questions at the start of this week, we have seen little genuine change in that direction. The fleet solid support ships are still being tendered internationally. Ministers have consistently refused to reclassify them as warships, which would ensure that the contracts support the UK defence industry and allow us to retain crucial skills that lie at the heart of our sovereign capability. In the meantime, the shipyard at Appledore was closed; in December the Harland and Wolff shipyard was put up for sale by its parent company, which has since filed for bankruptcy; and Cammell Laird has been making redundancies.

We see this not as a matter of administrative hurdles or roadblocks, but simply a matter of political will. The Government want to save money, which is an honourable goal, but they are not considering the long-term benefits to our economy, as we have heard throughout the debate when contributors talked about the increased tax and insurance take, and the wider benefits and prosperity across the economy, as well as the benefits to our sovereign capability. In his summing up can the
Minister mustering the political will and ensure that the contract is tendered to UK companies only? Can he confirm what assessment has been done on the potential costs of retrofitting a foreign-made ship with sensitive equipment in the UK?

We see the narrow obsession with cost cutting elsewhere, such as with the Type 31e programme. The average, similarly-sized European frigate costs £350 million, I understand. Reports have suggested that at the UK asking price of £250 million the ships will be unable to protect themselves. We in the Opposition believe that security cannot be done on the cheap. Can the Minister confirm whether the price for a Type 31e frigate is capped at £250 million? Is that a fixed price? If so, given such reports, does the Minister not think that this is a security risk?

Finally, Mr. Evans, the ships we build must be properly staffed. Last week, the RMT announced that 700 members of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary—the Navy’s supply lifeline—had decided to take industrial action over their below-inflation pay offers. They have been offered 1.5% compared to the Royal Navy’s 2.9%, despite the RFA carrying out 64% of the Navy’s tasks, on top of its own. Can the Minister confirm that he will urgently consult the Defence Minister’s people to ensure that our RFA staff are properly paid? Does he not realise that shoddy pay offers contribute to reducing the attractiveness of this important service?

2.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Evans. I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Jones) on securing the debate, and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. I echo the comments made by the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) about the tone of the debate, which has been somewhat less fraught than some shipbuilding questions and debates that I have been involved with in my time in this role.

As the Minister for Defence Procurement, I am acutely aware that I have responsibility for ensuring that we procure the best capability for our armed forces, but also for keeping an eye on value for money because we have a huge responsibility to the taxpayer, as well as for making sure we protect our nation’s interests, both here and abroad. I understand and appreciate that there is also a responsibility to ensure that our defence spending encourages and promotes prosperity throughout the United Kingdom, not just in the main industries but, crucially, throughout our vast supply chain.

I am pleased to speak in the debate, and I am grateful for the insights that others have contributed. The need for us to project our influence globally, while promoting UK exports and prosperity, was at the heart of the 2017 national shipbuilding strategy. Since its publication, work has been going on to deliver the vision of a productive and innovative UK shipbuilding industry, and that is at the heart of this subject.

I thank the right hon. Member for North Durham and the other members of the APPG on shipbuilding and ship repair. I appreciate the meeting we had, which was of great value. There was some serious food for thought in the document that he and his colleagues presented, and I will talk a little more about that later.

The strategy sets out the Government’s procurement approaches for Royal Navy warships and other naval vessels. The strategy builds on our strengths, but also identifies where more must be done collectively, in both Government and industry, to address the structural challenges the sector faces in terms of access to innovation, maximising productivity, skills—a number of people mentioned those—and winning global business. Our ambition is for our shipyards, and the vast network that underpins them, to be catalysts for their local economies, driving growth and creating the highly skilled and well-paid jobs we all want to see.

Douglas Chapman: I hear everything the Minister is saying, but there are shipyards in the UK that will be hanging by a thread in terms of skills and future investment in infrastructure unless quick decisions are brought to the House and made by the Government. We cannot go on like this, going from feast to famine. One of the points of the national shipbuilding strategy was to get a steady drumbeat across all these sectors. I would like to hear what he has to say about that.

Stuart Andrew: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will come on to that point a little later, because I accept that it is an important element of where we need to get to to try to support our shipbuilding industries.

I was glad that the APPG’s report recognised the contribution from the UK’s shipbuilding and ship repair industry to the UK economy of over £2 billion; we should be mindful of that. I am fully cognisant of the need to obtain the right capability for our Royal Navy, at the same time as trying to ensure that we get good value for our taxpayers. That is why we are helping the industry to grow, compete and successfully win bids in the global market, as well as just in the UK market. That is part of our objective, and we will be looking at that more widely when we consider our approaches to a potential defence industrial strategy.

In my time in post, there has been a huge amount of focus on the fleet solid support ships, which I understand, but in terms of a successful UK shipbuilding industry, we should be looking much more widely, and the right hon. Member for North Durham made that point powerfully. All of our vision is for a shipbuilding sector that does not need a contract for a couple of non-complex warships; it could also work in the civil sector.1 It is a globally competitive sector that is looking at how it can export high-value designs, systems, sub-systems, and integration work, so it can win commercial and defence contracts on its own merits.

Mr. Kevan Jones: I understand the point that the Minister is making, but it is important that investment in Ministry of Defence contracts for ships in this country has a spin-off into the civilian sector, in terms not just of producing complete ships, but supporting marine engineering, architects and everything else. If we are to keep that leading edge, which feeds into civilian work both in this country and abroad, including in ship repair and refurbishment, that steady drumbeat of work and investment is needed.

Stuart Andrew: I said that I would come on to those issues a little later, and I promise I will—I will not hide from them.

1 [Official Report, 17 July 2019, Vol. 663, c. 10MC.]
[Stuart Andrew]

The strategy is important for the Ministry of Defence, but I am keen that we look at this across Government too. For that reason, I have asked to meet the Minister for Business and Industry and the relevant Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Transport so that we can discuss how best to support UK shipyards, from the perspective of not only defence, but the opportunities that may exist for the commercial maritime sector and whether it is ready and prepared for them. I want this to be a cross-Government approach to securing the future of the industry.

The strategy sets out an ambitious plan to put the UK at the forefront of the technologies of the future. That is why investment in science, technology, and innovation is key, as they have the potential to drive improvements in productivity, to grow prosperity in the UK and to build an internationally competitive industry that is resilient to the peaks and troughs of both military and civil shipbuilding.

We have heard today about the success of the BAE Systems approach when it comes to the Australian and Canadian work; the company has also been successful in terms of the Royal Thai Navy’s offshore patrol vessel requirements. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has had conversations with both the previous and the current Secretary of Defence in the United States about whether the Type 26 and Type 31 might be appropriate and suitable for their requirements. That is something that she will continue to pursue, as will we all.

Of course, there are all sorts of other investments happening, such as the Royal Navy’s new autonomy and lethality accelerator. This £45 million programme will deliver rapid and ongoing transformational change across the maritime environment. The Royal Navy is also forging ahead with things such as the 3D printers that the right hon. Member for North Durham sent me a question about recently. There is a lot of work going on in that innovation area that will continue to support the wider supply chain to our industry.

A few hon. Members have mentioned the Type 31e programme, so I will give an update. It is, of course, a pathfinder for the delivery of the new shipbuilding and capability vision set out in the strategy. We announced the award of contracts for the competitive design phase in December. I am pleased to say that the competition is still on track, and it is our intention to announce the outcome of the competition for the design and build of the ships by the end of the year. It has been a vibrant and healthy competition.

I take the point that the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) made regarding the value. I have been checking throughout the price we have, which is £250 million per ship. We made some initial adjustments to make it tie in with the way we have procured other warships in the past, so we have taken costs such as Government-furnished equipment out of that £250 million. The Royal Navy assures me—both I and the Secretary of State have been quite robust with it—that the capability we will receive will meet its requirements; it has given us that absolute reassurance, and it is looking forward to receiving the ships.

I will go over some of the other points that have been made. In opening the debate, the right hon. Member for North Durham rightly talked about the skills agenda—I will come on in a minute to the points about the supply chain. He is absolutely right that we must ensure that we learn the lessons from the submarine programme. It has been blindingly obvious to me, as I have been learning this job, that ensuring that Barrow is right up there again and capable of delivering our submarine programme has been a major challenge.

Coming on to the drumbeat, it is our intention to ensure that the industry has that 30-year plan of what the Royal Navy’s requirements will be, so that it can see where the opportunities will arise and where there may be potential gaps that it may need to fill. That said, we have of course provided 20 years’ worth of work on the Clyde. I will comment in a minute on what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is doing in this area, because it will be incredibly important.

[Steve McCabe in the Chair]

I have heard a number of people say that the FSS are warships, and that no other country in Europe buys its support ships or other ships from international orders. That is not quite true: for example, Germany had an international competition for its multi-purpose frigate, Norway has procured a support ship from South Korea and five frigates from Spain, Australia has had two support ships from Spain, and New Zealand has an auxiliary ship from South Korea. It is not true to say that all those countries always have their ships built in their home countries.

Dr Julian Lewis: What the Minister says is completely correct. The question is not so much whether countries choose to do this but whether they have to. In the case of Germany, its expenditure on defence is notoriously a much smaller proportion of its GDP than ours is of ours, so it is probably doing it for the same sort of reasons. That does not make it the right policy.

Stuart Andrew: I will come on to my right hon. Friend’s comments. He talks about funding, which is absolutely the heart of the issue. With a very challenging budget, we must ensure that we get the maximum capability possible for our armed forces at the best value. I must say that in the past, international competition has proved very successful; on the MARS tankers, it saved a considerable amount of money. We want to go for two of the ships on the FSS with the option of a third.

Dr Lewis rose—

Mr Kevan Jones rose—

Stuart Andrew: I will give way to my right hon. Friend, but there will be a fixed budget, and we must get the best we can out of that money.

Dr Lewis: I fully understand the logic of the Minister’s position, but it just goes to what I was trying to convey in my speech: it is a question of short-term savings that will show up in an annual budget, compared with medium to long-term costs when the time comes that we want to build other ships and we find that we have lost our industrial footprint to some extent and have to reconstruct it. I acknowledge that that is the dilemma that he faces.
Stuart Andrew: I am grateful for the point that my right hon. Friend makes. That is the balance we are struggling with at the moment; I will be completely upfront about that. It will probably be helpful if I go on to talk about what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said. In the speech that she gave to the Royal United Services Institute, she was quite right to say that we needed to look at where we could explore changing policy so that the UK could at least have the choice, if it so wished, to just build in the United Kingdom.

A tremendous amount of work is going in to reviewing the national shipbuilding strategy. We have Sir John Parker’s comments and of course we are taking stock of those. My right hon. Friend asked for a review to learn the lessons from the MARS tankers, so that we can feed those. My right hon. Friend asked for a review to learn the lessons from the MARS tankers, so that we can feed those. My right hon. Friend asked for a review to learn the national shipbuilding strategy. We have Sir John Parker’s comments and of course we are taking stock of those. My right hon. Friend asked for a review to learn the lessons from the MARS tankers, so that we can feed those.

Dr Lewis: Will the Minister give way?

Stuart Andrew: I had better give way to the right hon. Member for North Durham first, and then I will come back to my right hon. Friend.

Mr Kevan Jones: On the MARS tankers, when the Minister is asking for the costings, could he ensure that the costs of the assessment phase, which I think were nearly £100 million, are included? I am also led to believe by industry that some of the costs were incurred because of the poor workmanship and other issues that surrounded it, so what was seen, on ticket price, to be very competitive was overall quite expensive.

Stuart Andrew: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that the report we commissioned will look at every single aspect of that, including the benefit to the supply chain in the United Kingdom. There is some evidence that a number of UK supply chain companies have seen their international work increase as a result of being part of that. We are formulating our response to the review of the strategy.

Dr Lewis: The Minister is being amazingly kind. I really appreciate it. Let me put this sunny scenario before him. Let us imagine that the wishes of the Defence Committee come true and the defence budget is restored to 3% of GDP, as it was right up until the middle of the 1990s, quite a few years after the end of the cold war. Will he at least acknowledge that if there were an uplift in the defence budget, spending some of that extra money on securing the shipyards and the defence-industrial footprint, even if that sometimes meant that we spent more than we might spend in the short term if we contracted with an overseas builder, would be a sensible strategic decision?

Stuart Andrew: Again, that is part of the work that the Secretary of State is looking at, so that the United Kingdom can make a choice on those options. Of course, that will require more money. We have to accept that. I look forward to right hon. and hon. Members securing similar debates, so that Treasury Ministers can answer those questions.

Dr Lewis: They never do. They always try to put it back to you.

Stuart Andrew: The next time it comes to me, I will push it back, so that hon. Members can challenge that. We can make strategic decisions, but we are governed by the rules of the Treasury Green Book, which we obviously have to follow. The debate on that is a wider debate that we need to have.

I want to put to bed some questions on the FSS. Frankly, we are at a point in the competition at which to delay it and start again would not be helpful for our plans for the carrier groups, so I cannot say to right hon. and hon. Members that that competition will change. It is still an international competition and will continue to be. That said, we still have a UK consortium in there, which should we welcomed. I sincerely hope that that consortium submits a competitive bid that not only features the skills we have been discussing, which are highly valued around the world and have certainly provided success in areas such as Australia and Canada, but help it to become more internationally competitive. Again, that is part of the strategy. We hope that it may well win some more of that work.

There were a couple of comments about the frigate factory. I feel like I am repeating myself somewhat, but BAE Systems took this decision that, for commercial reasons, the value for money was not there; the MOD agreed, but it was a commercial decision. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) talked about the exportability of the Type 26 and the Type 31, and how the Canadian and Australian examples should mean that we should forget about the Type 31 and concentrate on the Type 26. However, the vessels are for different markets, which again is part of the offer that our shipyards might be able to promote to other parts of the world. The Type 31 follows a modular approach, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) rightly says, so it can be adapted to suit varying countries’ needs for whatever work they want the ship to do. We hope that the prosperity brought to the UK through exports of the Type 31 will be quite considerable.

Chris Stephens: The Minister is being very generous. Are he and the Ministry of Defence open to discussions on frigate factories and future shipyard investment with, for example, BAE Systems and other private sector organisations, to look at how we can improve shipyard construction?

Stuart Andrew: Yes, absolutely. Sir John Parker was commissioned to undertake a review, and he spoke to businesses, industry and all the stakeholders. He has written his recommendations, which we are considering. I have had extensive conversations and meetings with trade unions, industry and trade associations, and I assure right hon. and hon. Members that that competition will.

I assure the hon. Gentleman and other Members—I know that I speak on behalf of the Secretary of State—that, as long as I am in this role, which may only be for another 14 days or so, we will continue to ensure that all the points that have been made will be seriously considered. We will review and challenge, and we will make sure that all that helps us to formulate the Ministry of Defence’s response to that review, so that we can do what I actually believe we are all trying to achieve: to make our shipbuilding industry successful here in the
UK and abroad, so that the skills and jobs that so many people have come to rely on, including our country and our armed forces, can be relied on for years to come.

3.6 pm

Mr Kevan Jones: Welcome to the Chair, Mr McCabe. We have had a good debate, with contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) and the hon. Members for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) and for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman). I agree that it has been a consensual debate, and it has been good to get this issue on the agenda and to make sure that we discuss shipbuilding in the House.

I was going to ask Mr Evans whether he would do me a favour. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West challenged the two Conservative leadership contenders on the letters they received from Mr Ian Waddell, general secretary of the CSEU, on their attitudes towards the fleet solid support vessels. I can hardly ask you to convey that to them, Mr McCabe, so I ask the Conservative Members here to tell those contenders that a reply to those letters would be helpful. It was especially remarkable that the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) visited a yard in Glasgow last week and was clearly not even briefed on the vessels.

It was a good debate, and we need to keep having these debates and talking about these issues because while shipbuilding in this country has a bright future, whether we like it or not that future depends on Government and private sector investment and on the throughput of work that those yards want. Without that, we will not retain skills and we will not have the bright future that the industry not only can have but rightly deserves.

I wish the Minister the best of luck in the next 14 days. To be fair to him, he is prepared to listen to different views and I give him credit for that. I am not sure that I have the same interest in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, so if he goes off there, or somewhere like that—I do not know. I put on the record my thanks for the work he has done in this sector. If he could sign the contract for the FSS in the next 14 days, that would certainly make a lot of people very happy.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the National Shipbuilding Strategy.

3.9 pm

Sitting adjourned.
They should be framed by that overall attitude. Not only is it one of this country’s most popular stations, but it is also one of the BBC’s most valuable assets. Does she acknowledge that, as a country, we are very proud of it?

Damian Green: The hon. Lady just said that this House has considered e-petitions 234627, 234797 and 235653 relating to the BBC.

It is a great pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. All three petitions relate to the BBC. One calls for a public inquiry on what the signatories perceive as bias in the BBC, another calls for the abolition of the licence fee, and the third is about the restoration of free TV licences for the over-75s.

As we have previously debated the licence fee, and with it a number of accusations of bias, I do not propose to spend much time on it this afternoon, because lots of people want to speak. But let me be clear: as Harold Wilson said, public inquiries take minutes and years, and they seldom solve anything—certainly nothing as subjective as perceived bias. Although the BBC sometimes gets things wrong, as any organisation does, I do not believe that it is inherently biased in its news and coverage of current affairs. Indeed, we ought to remember that the BBC’s news coverage is looked at around the world as a beacon of straightforward, unbiased news reporting. As a country, we ought to be proud of that. If it has a bias, it is probably towards London, as those of us who have sat through items about London stations on the national news will know. It does not reflect the regions and nations of this country well.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): The hon. Lady just said that we ought to be proud of the BBC. Does she acknowledge that, as a country, we are very proud of it? Not only is it one of this country’s most popular institutions, but it is a source of great credit for this country around the world. Whatever mistakes it makes, they should be framed by that overall attitude.

Helen Jones: I agree. The reason for the BBC’s popularity is that we maintain the model of public service broadcasting. People who want to get rid of the licence fee ought to remember that a public service broadcaster is free of commercial and sponsorship influence in its news, and that it provides a far wider range of channels and radio stations than that provided by broadcasters that aim at niche markets. In fact, the BBC’s output has to cater for the duration of this Parliament, knowing full well that in 2015 they had entered into an agreement with the BBC that made it impossible.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that people are rightly outraged by that decision? They voted for the Conservative party because it had that promise in its manifesto. More than 4,000 pensioners in Barnsley are due to lose their TV licences, and a huge number of people have got in touch with me about the issue.

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend is right. The BBC was very foolish to accept that agreement with the Government, who did what we have seen them do so often: devolve the blame for their cuts. We have seen that time and again, particularly in relation to older people. The Government say they want a good system of adult social care, but they have consistently cut the funding for councils to pay for it, especially in the poorest areas and in those with the longest legacy of industrial diseases and ill health.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Have we not found through this that many people who are eligible for pension credit are not getting it? Those who are exempt will not have to pay for TV licences. Some £2,936,000 of pension credit is not being claimed in my constituency, so should we not write to people about that on the back of TV licences? Is it not time that we fixed both the BBC and the issue of pension credit?

Helen Jones: I will come in a moment to that very good point. Let us consider how else the Government have dealt with these issues. All people of pension age are entitled to a free bus pass, which was brought in by the Labour Government in 2001 and extended to cover the whole of England in 2008. The scheme is currently underfunded to the tune of about £652 million, because the Government keep reimbursing people based on 2005-06 fares. How long before it disappears?

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): A manifesto promise broken by this Government reads:

“We will maintain all other pensioner benefits, including free bus passes, eye tests, prescriptions and TV licences, for the duration of this parliament.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that this broken promise is letting down not just older people, but trust in politics?

Helen Jones: I absolutely agree. We can see a pattern in the agreement with the BBC. The BBC was to take on the funding of free TV licences as the Government gradually withdrew their contribution, and then it would take on all such funding from 2020-21. In 2017-18, the cost of those licences was about £655 million. Last year the Government paid £468 million from the Department for Work and Pensions, and this year they will pay £247 million. That is an unsustainable funding model, and the Government knew that, or at least they ought to have known that—if they did not, then they are even more incompetent than I thought—and when they entered into the agreement with the BBC.

To fund the licences, the BBC would need to close down channels or radio stations. A number of columnists have written about the money paid to the BBC’s top
earnings. Some are grossly overpaid, and in my view—this is entirely subjective—some of the so-called talent are not very talented. However, restricting the top rate of pay to £100,000 would not meet the cost of the licences. Again, the Government must have known that, but they want to deflect the blame. They knew there would have been an outcry had they tried to amend or abolish the scheme, so they sent it off to the BBC. When the changes were made, they said, “Nothing to do with us, mate.” They are the “not me, guv” Government—the Arthur Daleys of public administration.

It is the Government who made the decision on TV licences, and it will be really damaging to older people in this country. If someone cannot get out and about, and no one visits them, the TV is their companion. If someone cannot afford to go out and socialise, the TV is their entertainment, their window on the world and a way of keeping their mind active. Unfortunately, that is the lot of many older people in this country. We do not respect or value our older people as we should. I declare an interest, because I am heading that way myself.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As the hon. Lady will know, people of my generation always used to say, “Well, this is the BBC. It’s gospel. It’s the truth.” Does she share my concern that the BBC is not now as impartial as it should be and that we need to instigate reform in order to alter that perception, so that we can go back to the good old days of unbiased reporting of fact rather than personal perceptions and opinions?

Helen Jones: I am afraid that I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman—the BBC produces very good news coverage. People sometimes see bias when they are being told things that they do not want to hear—we must remember that.

Many older people—half of over-75s, in fact—are disabled. Age UK estimates that three in 10 are living in poverty or just above the poverty line. For those people, TV is a lifeline. Many of them live alone. I have one elderly friend who leaves the TV on almost all the time because it is another voice in the house.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Jones: Not yet. I need to make some progress, as many hon. Members are waiting to speak.

The TV is another voice in a house that was once full of people and very active but is now silent. To remove free TV licences from such people is the most mean-spirited of Government cuts. It will make lonely people lonelier—15% of our older people are lonely—and it will further isolate those who are already isolated.

It has been argued that restricting free TV licences to those in receipt of pension credit is somehow fairer because they are more deserving—the idea of the deserving and the undeserving is very 19th century—but there are several answers to that proposal. First, by the time someone is 75, they have paid their dues to society: they have worked, paid their taxes, and many have brought up children. Giving those people a free TV licence is a way to give something back as a small recognition of their past contribution.

Another argument is that we need a mix of targeted and universal benefits, but the latter—as the Government are discovering—are much harder to cut, because most of the time they are a guarantee of continuance. That argument is based on the myth that there are lots of wealthy pensioners. Recently, a lot of publicity was given to research claiming to show that older people were on average £20 a week better off than those in work, but much of the coverage did not mention that those were the figures after housing costs. If we look at the figures before housing costs, we see that people in work are better off.

Yes, many people in the older age groups own their own homes outright—the figure is about 40% of those born between 1945 and 1965—but that leaves a lot of people paying rent. Some 30% are still paying mortgages, while those who own their homes outright have forgone other spending to pay for them. What do we have now—a Tory Government punishing thrift?

Those who attended the public consultation pointed out very forcibly that in many areas older people have more expenses than younger people. Their heating bills are bigger because they are often at home all day and feel the cold more. Many pay for social care; one lady, whose husband is in a nursing home, is seeing her savings disappear before her eyes because of that expense.

Those figures are for those on median incomes, which means that half of all pensioners are below that level. Age UK states that three in 10 over-75s are in poverty or just above the poverty line—that means 1.9 million people—and 20% cannot afford to go out and socialise even once a month, while 37% cannot afford a holiday away from home.

One reason not to tie TV licences to pension credit is that pension credit uptake has been stuck at 63% for years. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) said, that means that a lot of money goes unclaimed, including more than £4 million in my constituency and £3.5 billion nationally. The Government could have done something about that—an uptake campaign, for instance, or a simplification of the application process—but they have not done so because the lack of uptake means that they save not only on pension credit, but on the benefits that come with it.

Another reason not to tie free TV licences to pension credit is that those who will be hit hardest are just above the level for claiming pension credit and will lose far more of their income than wealthier people. Age UK estimates that 40% of over-75s would either not be able to afford a TV licence or could afford it only by cutting back on food or heating, for example. Those to whom we spoke made it clear that their generation were brought up to pay their bills and that they will pay them even if they have to cut back on something else. Letters from the licensing authority are already dropping through people’s letterboxes a year in advance, telling them that they will have to pay and causing real worry to many people. I wonder how long it will be until the scammers appear, ringing people and sending emails to say, “We are just checking your television licence. Give us your bank details.” That will happen—in fact, I am told that it is already happening in some areas.

Do we really want to live in the kind of country where pensioners go without food to pay for a TV licence, or go to jail for not having one? We recently celebrated our D-day veterans and quite rightly reflected
on the debt that the country owes that generation. We cannot repay that debt by taking away free television licences. What will happen to those in care? At the moment, people in care homes get a discounted licence, but the regulations refer specifically to those under-75 because the over-75s were already deemed to receive free licences.

The BBC probably did not know that, which brings me to the important question of who should decide social policy. I cannot think of any way to frame that question such that the BBC is the answer. The BBC is not equipped to do it, does not have enough information to do it, and should not have to do it. It is a matter for Government and for Parliament.

Andrew Bridgen: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Jones: I will as the hon. Gentleman has been bobbing up and down.

Andrew Bridgen: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. She makes some very valid points, but she is letting the BBC off the hook and acting as an apologist for it. Does she recall that at the 2015 charter renewal, the BBC said that it was delighted with the terms of the charter; delighted about getting an inflation-linked increase to the licence fee; and delighted about being let off having to fund the roll-out of superfast broadband? It is now reneging on its commitment to the over-75s.

Helen Jones: It is not the BBC but the Government who are reneging on their promises to the electorate, which were made as recently as 2017—it is as simple as that.

The Government should consider taking back responsibility for funding free licences. That would cost £740 million by 2020-21, which sounds like a lot, but is a drop in the ocean compared with most Government expenditure and with the spending proposals made by the Conservative leadership candidates. The right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt) says that he will cut corporation tax to 12.5%, which would be one of the lowest rates in the developed world and would cost £13 billion. The right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson)—I was going to say “for Henley,” but he does move about a lot. [Interruption.] I apologise to the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell). The right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip says that he will raise the threshold for the 40% rate of tax. That would cost £9 billion, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies says most of the benefit will go to the top 10% of earners. I have heard those on the Government Benches say that change would protect those on middle incomes. They need to get real. The median income in this country is not £50,000. It is not even £40,000. Last year it was £28,400, and that is hugely inflated because incomes at the top end include large bonuses. There is a choice. Does anyone in this Chamber need a tax cut? We might like one—

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Helen Jones: I am about to wind up, so no.

We might like a tax cut, but we do not need one. There is a choice. Tax is the price we pay for being in a civilised society. Speaking personally, I would rather forgo a tax cut and protect our older people properly. I know what side I am on, and I know what side my hon. Friends are on. In fact, I know what side all the Opposition parties are on. The question is for those on the Government Benches.

If Government Members want to stop this happening—I think some of them genuinely do—they have to pressurise their own Ministers to stop this nonsense, take control of free TV licences, amend the legislation and look after our older people properly. They should do it because that is what they promised to do and because, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) has said, we cannot means-test for loneliness and disability. But most of all, they should do it because it is the right thing to do. They will be judged on whether they keep their promises, and this is one they certainly have not kept. The blame is not with the BBC, which, as I have said, was crass to accept the settlement in the first place. The blame lies firmly with the Government.

Several hon. Members rose—

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Order. A number of people want to take part in the debate. I know we have three hours, but I want the winding-up speeches to begin at about two minutes to 7. I will not impose a time limit, but I say to hon. Members: bear that in mind and consider your colleagues. I call John Howell.

4.52 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Thank you, Mr Wilson. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I suppose I should start by declaring an interest. For a number of years I worked as a presenter for BBC World Service television. I presented such well-known programmes as “World Business Report” and “World Business Review”, which I am sure trip off the memory of those who managed to catch them. I was not one of the mega-rich presenters. The hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) spoke of people in the talent pool who do not have much talent. I like to think that I did have the talent but was not paid enough for it. However, anyone who had that role realised that it was a wonderful role to have, because they could walk down any high street in the UK and nobody would recognise them, but when they got off the plane in Delhi they would be mobbed, because that was the distribution of the programme.

As a presenter at the BBC, I was made very aware of its editorial policies. I like to think that I did not infringe those policies at all during my time as a presenter, so I do not think an accusation of bias on my part would have been either made or appropriate. I fully accept that the BBC is not a perfect organisation. I fully accept that it makes mistakes. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) said—he is no longer in his place—it is an enduring British institution that carries much weight and is held in much esteem by people in this country.

When I was a presenter at the BBC, few would have doubted that it was value for money—I cannot recall the issue ever being raised. However, it is raised in the BBC’s annual report for 2018—and it is glossed over somewhat. That report states that, based on the BBC’s survey of people who watch it, its value for money rating was six out of 10. The very next words of the
report state that that is “within target”. That is an absurd thing to say. It is absurd to describe getting only six out of 10 as remaining “within target”. Far more needs to be done before the BBC can achieve value for money.

I suspect that the value for money argument is influenced principally by three factors. The first is the news coverage and whether there is an appreciation of bias in that. I suppose that comes down mostly to whether the BBC is biased in one way or the other in its coverage of Brexit. Personally, given the way Brexit has divided the country, I think it would be difficult not to see BBC presenters divided in the same way.

The second factor is the range of content. A constituent contacted me to say that he objected to the way a programme he was watching on one BBC channel suddenly switched to another so something else—I think it was the tennis from Wimbledon—could be run. That is not an acceptable way of behaving.

The third factor is the arguments about salaries and the gender pay gap. Going back a few years, the 2013-14 annual report asked for a reduction in the overall cost of talent. I cannot see that any appreciable change took place between the publication of the 2013-14 report and the current year. I happen to know that the director-general is working on that, but we need to see progress pretty quickly.

Looking at the range of content, which is one of the arguments I suspect people may have used to justify the BBC’s value for money, I shall point out two programmes. The first is “Bodyguard”. I thought that was a fantastic programme, and it will have been of interest to all of us in the Chamber, covering the subjects it did, but it was made by a production company owned by ITV. I will say a little more about that, and about how the nature of the media industry is changing, in a minute.

Secondly, in the field of investigative journalism, I praise the “Panorama” programme that covered the issue of antisemitism. I watched it from end to end and became more and more disturbed as I watched. I noticed that the hon. Member for Warrington North said bias can be seen when we hear what we do not want to hear. That is a prime example of bias being shown, because it is clearly something that people do not want to hear. I thought that was a very good programme, and it is one that I have recommended that people should watch on iPlayer.

I mentioned that “Bodyguard” was produced by an ITV production company. That illustrates in part the changing nature of the media industry. When I was the chief executive of a production company, I went over to New York to see the foreign editor of Fox. I said to him, “I’ve come here to sell you some lovely programmes that I’ve made about foreign and interesting places”—places such as Mongolia. I was the first journalist into Mongolia to interview the new democratically elected president. He looked at me and said, “Foreign—you mean Californian?” That line would not be appropriate today. The world has changed, and the media world has completely changed.

One area in which the BBC competes is online programming. We have seen it compete fully against Netflix, with quite a lot of dissatisfaction in working out the value for money score from Netflix. BritBox is coming online shortly from ITV, so there will be even more competition in this area. Whether in such circumstances the BBC can maintain its position on the licence fee is certainly open to question.

The commercial element in the BBC is not new. We tend to think of the BBC as having no commercial advertising. That is simply wrong. BBC World Service television carried substantial commercial advertising, and I did not find that it interrupted the flow of my presenting in the slightest, and nor did viewers find that it interrupted their enjoyment of the programmes.

Andrew Bridgen: Would my hon. Friend note that Channel 4 is also a public service broadcaster but it is not in receipt of any of the licence fee? It funds itself completely from advertising.

John Howell: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. The idea of keeping out commercial advertising was fine 50 years ago, and even 20 years ago, but in today’s world it needs to be looked at again in the context of how the BBC will function.

I was going to say a few things about free TV licences, but the hon. Member for Warrington North has said many of them already, so I will not comment.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Do you agree with her? That is what we want to know.

John Howell: I think this is a fault of both the Government and the BBC. I have told the director-general that—he happens to be a constituent of mine—and that is the position I will take. Just before my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) comes in with a witty comment, that is not sitting on the fence; it is a position that I fully hold. The BBC has done itself no good at all in how it is has gone about dealing with the TV licence.

5.2 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I recently wrote to 10,000 constituents to ask for their thoughts on the free TV licence. I will read out some of their replies:

“I lost my wife in January and now I spent a lot of time alone. Having the TV on in the background is like having someone with me. I do not know what I would do without it.”

“My husband died two years ago. I can’t move well enough to leave the house on my own. TV is the only company I have. Why are they going to take it away from me?”

“Lindsay has dementia and is unable to read or write anymore. TV is vital stimulation, otherwise she sits staring into space. No way could she afford to pay for a licence on a state pension.”

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way so early in his remarks. Age UK has said that 850,000 people in the UK have dementia and that by 2025 the figure will be 1 million. Of course, many of them will be over 75. Is not the cruellest thing about this change the idea that people with dementia might be pursued by the BBC for payment for a TV licence?
Stephen Morgan: My hon. Friend is right. We must think about the most vulnerable in our society whom this decision will affect. I received a steady stream of correspondence in letters, emails, phone calls and office visits in response to my letter—the figure is in the hundreds. While each person conveyed a heartbreaking account of how they would be affected by this Government U-turn, the collective responses are a powerful testament to how important the free TV licence is.

In Portsmouth South, 300 people got in touch, and nearly 90% of them supported the continuation of the free TV licence. Nearly 70% cited loneliness as their main concern if their licence were to be revoked.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): My hon. Friend’s testimony is really powerful. Some 3,000 households in Blaenau Gwent could lose their free TV licences. Crucially, while TV is a source of entertainment, it is also often a form of companionship. Does he agree that the Government should reconsider their decision and restore this important benefit for older people?

Stephen Morgan: I absolutely agree. I think that Age UK has said that four in 10 people say that TV is their only company. The free licence is therefore a social policy that the Government should retain.

The repercussions of the Government’s decision will not be felt in Whitehall; it is people in my constituency who will suffer—people in Portsea, Fratton and Southsea: Portsmouth people who I grew up living next door to. Actions speak louder than words. The Government have snatched a vital benefit from the demographic group who need it most: the most vulnerable in our society. They are owed it by the Government.

Karen Lee: I have had a busy weekend, with two day-long galas in Lincoln—Boultham Park on Saturday and Lincoln Arboretum on Sunday. We had a petition about TV licences and were mobbed by people wanting to sign it. Everyone cross-party seems to agree, and in Lincoln I think 4,400 households will be affected. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is totally and utterly morally wrong to withdraw something so important, particularly when maintaining it was an election promise?

Stephen Morgan: I absolutely agree, and I echo the comments from my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). I am proud that my grandfather was a D-day veteran, and now face further financial turmoil because of a poorly thought through Government policy?

In response to my countless letters and numerous written questions, including a joint letter I wrote with the Portsmouth Pensioners Association to the Prime Minister, I have consistently been told that this decision was made by the BBC. Since when did a broadcasting organisation begin administering welfare? Will Marks & Spencer or Tesco be responsible for delivering universal credit? Should we expect National Express to begin dishing out free bus passes for the over-75s?

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Karen Lee: I am an unashamed fan of the BBC. We keep talking about the TV licence fee, but it is worth rehearsing the fact that the BBC provides a huge range of services in at least five or six distinct areas. What I would loosely call the social aspect of the BBC is hard to define, but people forget that it funds five classical music orchestras. We could debate whether that is a good use of licence fee payers’ money, but there it is.

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I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Last week I hosted an event for the BBC at which it launched a new app called Own It, which is designed to help children to navigate social media. This week, I am hosting an event with the BBC for a scheme it is doing with the Arts and Humanities Research Council to fund doctoral students. Of course, we all celebrate the Proms. The BBC does a lot that no commercial organisation would do, much of which strays into the area of social good or the work of the
Mr Edward Vaizey

Arts Council England. Frankly, I do not think it spends enough time telling people like us what it does in that field.

We refer to the TV licence fee, and we have heard a lot of citations from pensioners talking about how much they love television, but let us not forget radio. The BBC accounts for about 70% of radio listening. There are not just the national channels that we all listen to—Radio 4 and 5 Live for this demographic, I suspect, and also Radio 1, Radio 2, Radio 3 and 6 Music—but local radio, which is absolutely vital. In my constituency we have BBC Radio Oxford and, nationally, 39 local radio stations provide vital local coverage, in particular local news.

It is often BBC News that gets the BBC into trouble—there is always something for Brexiteers, remainers or Corbynistas to get their teeth into and object to. I thoroughly enjoyed the speech of hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell)—I had no idea about his life as top-flight media executive; he was a star of the BBC World Service. There is also the Parliament channel, local radio news and the BBC’s website. However often we disagree at times with how the BBC covers particular aspects of news, we can all agree that in an era of fake and very biased news being disseminated on social media—we see the effect that that has had on politics in the United States—we are lucky to have, broadly speaking, an unbiased and objective news service at the heart of the BBC, which is widely respected in the UK and abroad.

Then there is BBC drama and entertainment, including “Strictly Come Dancing”, “Poldark”, which we all watched last night, and “8 Days”, which I watched this morning with my Cavapoos at home. Quality drama pervades the whole of the drama output of British television. One reason why British television is so respected around the world is because the BBC sets a quality anchor—a quality level—that everyone else aspires to, which would not be there without it.

Then there is the BBC’s foray into the world of commerce. It generates its own revenue to keep the licence fee within reason and sells its programmes all over the world. BBC Studios, which makes programmes, is now in profit. The BBC has made a foray into commercial television with UKTV, to which I shall return.

The BBC does much work to make itself as accessible as possible. The iPlayer is probably the most user-friendly TV platform—I include Netflix in that. The BBC has also supported the roll-out of digital radio, and it has constantly innovated in relation to apps, as more and more people are obviously accessing content on smartphones. As my hon. Friend said, it is not perfect and gets things wrong.

The issues facing the BBC include the licence fee itself, which we looked at when we undertook the charter review. We concluded that, rather like democracy, it is the least-worst option of funding the BBC. It maintains a level of independence from the Government and gives the BBC a secure income. By and large, it still works. It is not destined to last forever. It may be that the BBC eventually moves to a subscription model—we will have to wait and see. Let us not forget that the licence fee has evolved. There used to be a radio licence fee that people took out separately from the TV licence. There may be debates about whether there is a licence fee aspect of funding the BBC and a subscription aspect.

The BBC will continue to look at savings. It has taken about £1 billion in costs out of the organisation over the past 10 years, and it is right that it has done so. It has an existential challenge, in terms of competing with the commercial sector. It is a big elephant in the room, in so far as the UK media scene is concerned. Ten years ago, we could not move without every media organisation, including, funnily enough, The Guardian, complaining about its reach and scope. That has been dwarfed by the advent of Netflix, the resources that Sky will have following its takeover by Comcast, and Disney. The competition to fund content, and for eyeballs—not least given the changing ways that people are consuming content—will present real challenges to the BBC to remain relevant, particularly to a younger demographic. I do not envy it that.

The BBC faces challenges on which it can lead the way. It focuses far too much—this slightly contradicts what I just said—on saying, “How do I compete against ITV or Netflix?” and not enough on saying, “What does the privilege of a secure income from the licence fee allow me to do for the UK as a whole?”

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman is giving very compelling testimony about the value that the BBC adds to this country. I wholeheartedly endorse everything he has said. He is getting into the wider issue of the social value that the BBC adds. Elderly people frequently suffer from isolation and are unable to get out of the house. One of my constituents has said:

“I am disabled. I cannot go outside without my carer or my wheelchair. The television is my friend and companion.”

Does that not back up what the right hon. Gentleman has said? The BBC is about more than just entertainment; it adds social value over and above that.

Mr Vaizey: It certainly is. If I knew about the services that the BBC provides in greater depth, I could probably rattle off five or six others, beyond simply the television, that it provides for the hon. Lady’s constituent.

Perhaps this sounds like navel-gazing—I am coming to my conclusion—but I think the BBC could take a massive lead in supporting much greater diversity, including with disabled people and black and minority ethnic people, not just in front of the camera but behind it. It really could invest in that. That is not to say that, over
the past 30 or 40 years, it has not been at the centre of training legions of people who now work across the media.

The issue that concerns MPs at the moment, however, is the BBC’s struggle with having the free TV licence foisted upon it. As I have said already in the main Chamber, that policy was forced on the BBC by the Government, by the Treasury. There was no negotiation—the BBC was going to take the free TV licence, whether it liked it or not, as far as the Treasury was concerned. The only room for negotiation was what the BBC might be able to claw back in order to mitigate the financial impact.

The decision was wrong, and it was made because the then Government had to meet their manifesto commitment—ironically—of making £12 billion in welfare cuts. It was the wrong decision to impose on the BBC, and this Government compounded it. Having forced it on the BBC, they are disgracefully trying to have their cake and eat it, saying, “It’s the BBC’s decision but we disagree with it.” If they are going to force the policy on the BBC, they should support its decision. If we could roll it back, an honest Government would take the policy back from the BBC, engage with the public and decide whether free TV licences are affordable.

My personal view—is this where I will lose the support of Opposition MPs—is that the free TV licences were a gift given by a previous Government without thinking of Opposition MPs—is that the free TV licences were a decision whether free TV licences are affordable.

I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for opening the debate.

In the UK, 3.6 million older people live alone, of whom more than 2 million are aged 75 and over. A huge proportion of those individuals rely on their television to alleviate the loneliness that often comes when people live by themselves. Taking away free TV licences for the over-75s who are not in receipt of pension credit will detrimentally affect people who have worked hard all their lives. It will affect working-class areas, such as my dad, Kitty and Merv, and all our elderly population, the least we can do to show them respect is to give them a free TV licence.

I fear that, by seeking to maintain its outdated funding mechanism, the BBC is handing its critics a big stick with which to beat it increasingly hard, especially following the most recent decision on free TV licences for the over-75s. A television licence designed for the tiny market for TV broadcasting in the 1960s is utterly at odds with the staggering array of live, online and recorded broadcasting market options now available, as well as with the ever-growing and emerging technologies in the sector as we enter the 2020s. The television licence is nearly an antique. It is a punitive tax that belongs in the past if the BBC is to survive and thrive as a public service and as a worldwide entertainment broadcaster into the future.

The BBC has an enviable international reputation for excellence, and one that we must celebrate in this House and not begrudge. In an opinion poll last year, the BBC was rated the most trusted news brand in America, with a staggering 90%, beating Fox, CBS, CNN, Bloomberg and others. I was not surprised to see, in line with that finding from overseas, that while many hundreds of my constituents signed the petition to abolish the TV licence, barely 100 signed the petition for an inquiry into alleged bias—a point that the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who introduced the debate, touched on. To have been trained by or gained experienced in the BBC is a world-class addition to any broadcaster or producer’s CV, as I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) knows only too well.
All that is good about the BBC needs to be preserved and refreshed. We must support the BBC as an institution for the important value—in the widest sense of the word—that it adds to our national life and our international soft power, cultural standing and esteem. In that vein, as a friend of the BBC, I wish it would embrace the possibility of securing alternative funding to the anarchistic and criminalising television licence regime.

In the days when the BBC was the only broadcaster available in the UK, the licence would have seemed an obvious choice of funding, but the world has changed. We can receive a great number of television channels, not only from the UK but from overseas. Now, many people can record, pause and rewind live TV as part of their subscription, and a significant proportion subscribe to a number of pay-TV services in the UK. The figure was 15.1 million in the first quarter of 2018, while online subscriptions to Netflix, Amazon and Now TV combined totalled 15.4 million.

That state of affairs, as the Institute of Economic Affairs has pointed out, acts as a perverse incentive for television makers not to make televisions multifunctional. We do not need a television licence to own a phone that could be used to watch television programmes, but we do need a television licence to own a television that can be used as a phone. As we enter the 2020s, mobile multifunctional devices are ever more ubiquitous, and we cannot un invent them, any more than we could un invent the transistor radios that made the old radio licence an unsustainable nonsense, finally leading to the abolition of the radio-only licence in 1971. We need to look at all possible means of financing the BBC that do not involve any kind of archaic household licence to own an everyday consumer good.

**Helen Jones:** Will the hon. Gentleman outline for us how he proposes that we should fund those channels and programmes that appeal only to minorities and would never attract a commercial sponsor? Also, how would he fund other aspects of the BBC, such as the Proms, its classical orchestras and so on?

**Jack Brereton:** I am about to get to that point. We need to do away with the inspectors and the prosecutions to enforce the licence. That might mean looking at the potential for paid on-demand digital broadcasting, or some form of subscription package, as we see with Sky, Netflix, Virgin, Amazon Prime and others. That might mean allowing programme sponsorship and advertising, as we see on most channels, such as ITV and, of course, Channel 4. As has been referred to, Channel 4 is a public service broadcaster. Unfortunately, the hon. Lady was wrong when she said that there is only one channel—Channel 4 has a number of channels, including E4 and others.

**Helen Jones:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Jack Brereton:** No, I have already given way to the hon. Lady.

I thank Channel 4 for taking on the BBC hit pottery programme, Stoke-on-Trent’s own “The Great Pottery Throw Down”, following the BBC’s unfortunate and, frankly, wrong decision not to commission a new series of “The Great British Bake Off”. Channel 4 behaves like a commercial organisation, whereas the BBC does not—it grows organically and then, unfortunately, gets taken advantage of.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Channel 4 is a public sector broadcaster and receives subsidies, as my hon. Friend mentioned, but Channel 4 outbid the BBC for one of its own programmes, “The Great British Bake Off”. Channel 4 behaves like a commercial organisation, whereas the BBC does not—it grows organically and then, unfortunately, gets taken advantage of.

**Jack Brereton:** I recognise my hon. Friend’s point, but I suggest that a number of the programmes on Channel 4 add a huge amount of good to the country and beyond, as do many commercial stations. Many of the programmes that I enjoy on Channel 4 are factual and not just entertainment.

For programmes in the arts, crafts and culture sphere, perhaps there could be Arts Council-style grants, particularly for the purest of public good, public service broadcasts, if appropriate safeguards against interest group capture can be devised. They would not necessarily have to be made by the BBC, but could be funded by competitive tender through the BBC as a grant-awarding body. There could be more collaborative work with educational institutions, such as the Open University or others, to finance certain programme output.

It is certainly worth looking at the potential for purchased ticketing for BBC recordings. BBC shows are free to attend, but BBC tours are paid ticketed. There is clearly sufficient demand for those tours to make charges sustainable and to raise revenue. I wonder, too, given the huge waiting list and interest in shows such as “Strictly Come Dancing”, whether the market mechanism of paid ticketing might be an option to manage that demand. I have heard it said that at one point the waiting list for audience tickets to “Top Gear” was measured in decades. What an incentive it would be for the BBC to keep producing compelling programmes if it made audience ticket revenue.

At the moment, tickets to BBC shows are available to anyone with a UK postcode. There is clearly some kind of ticket pricing to be explored, perhaps even differential ticket pricing where a tour is included, or hospitality and so on. There is certainly a chance for some entrepreneurialism. I do not pretend for a moment that ticket sales would ever raise the sums raised by the TV licence, but they could be one of a number of streams that the BBC could pursue for certain programmes.

**Andrew Bridgen:** My hon. Friend is making some important points. BBC iPlayer is inaccessible outside the UK but it hosts the BBC’s back catalogue, which the licence fee payers have funded over decades. Surely a huge source of income for the BBC would be to allow people in the English-speaking world access, for a cost, to the BBC’s back catalogue through BBC iPlayer.

**Jack Brereton:** I entirely agree. It has been mentioned that the BBC seeks quite a significant income from international broadcast rights, and it could build on that substantially if it used the BBC iPlayer brand more effectively overseas.

The future of broadcasting, and of the BBC, is exciting. The BBC must not allow itself to stay in the past. I fear that the licence fee has become a comfort blanket that threatens to be a deadweight as other broadcasters move forward in the international market.
As an admirer of the BBC, and as someone who values it as a vital institution for our country, I hope that it will enthusiastically embrace the opportunities for alternative funding streams that must be explored now that the television licence is all but antique.

5.34 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I will speak briefly on behalf of the 570 people in my constituency who signed the petition calling on the Government to continue funding free TV licences for the over-75s. I mentioned in my intervention that at the weekend we were out as a party collecting signatures, and I imagine we got at least another couple of hundred more.

I am proud that we were in the top 50 constituencies to oppose this unjust and mean-spirited policy. It is totally unacceptable that over 4,400 households in Lincoln could lose their free TV licence under the plans. A recent survey found that 40% of older people say the television is their main source of company, and the Government seem determined to means-test loneliness and isolation. Nationally, it is estimated that over 1.6 million pensioners living alone will lose their free licence in a means-tested system. That is symptomatic of the Government’s whole approach. They should not offload responsibility for funding free TV licences on to the BBC. In fact, it seems that whatever question we ask in the Chamber, the responsibility is always pushed to somebody else.

It is particularly worrying that a further 1.3 million poorer over-75s who are eligible for pension credit but do not claim it are projected to lose their TV licence. That is one reason I will launch a campaign in Lincoln to end the pension credit scandal. More than 1 million pensioners in the UK do not get the pension credit they are entitled to. Those people generally have worked all their lives—they should get those benefits. My campaign will seek to raise awareness and offer support to those who are missing out on that crucial support.

I am aware that many hon. Members still want to speak, and we are all speaking along the same lines, so let me end by saying that it is typical of this Government to choose to cut taxes for corporations and the highest earners, while targeting their spending cuts on vulnerable older people who are struggling to make ends meet. That is morally wrong.

5.36 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate all the petitioners who have made this debate happen. I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary BBC group, which seeks to support the BBC but also to be a critical friend when required. I was going to speak about the real positives that the BBC delivers, but my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) did just that. I am reminded of Lord Patten, who said:

“No-one would invent the BBC today. But thank God our predecessors did.”

In many ways the BBC is an anomaly, but it is much loved. As my right hon. Friend made clear, in an era when we have much to be concerned about—bias, influence, commercialisation and exposure to young audience members—it is fantastic that the BBC still stands for independence, impartiality, entertainment, excellence and education. We would lose that at our peril. Indeed, one need only speak to friends and colleagues who have moved abroad, and they all say that the one thing they miss greatly is watching the BBC.

I want to pick up on a point raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) and for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) about the BBC’s ability to sell more of its content abroad. BritBox, which is being piloted by the BBC and ITV, is a good example of where the BBC does innovate. It will allow audiences from outside the UK to view its content, at a charge. That is a good example of where the BBC is trying to make money from its own content.

I want to focus my remarks on the decision that the BBC has been required to take. I say “required” because I do not care what anyone says; there is no way that the BBC will be able to use 20% of its budget to carry on with the current position. The BBC did consult widely—I remember back in February inviting all MPs to come and hear about the proposals and what they would mean, and to get involved and get their constituents involved. The options were as follows: it could copy the current scheme, which means that 4.64 million over-75s would continue as is, but that would cost £745 million, rising to £1 billion by the end of 2030 because we are all living longer—that is to be celebrated, but it pushes up the cost. That would be equivalent to the funding for BBC 2, BBC 3, BBC 4, BBC News and all the BBC’s output for children, so it is clearly not sustainable.

Those who say, “Well, what about Gary Lineker’s salary?” should bear in mind that if the BBC axed the pay for all the talent earning above £150,000 it would save £20 million, so there would still be a long way to go to reach the £745 million. By the way, I am a big fan of Gary Lineker and think he gives value for money. [Interruption.] I have lost some hon. Members on that point. I am surprised to hear that from my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire, with Gary Lineker being a great Leicester player. Brexit has obviously ended that relationship.

The second option was removing the benefit altogether, which would mean that the poorest over-75s would have no option at all. I know that the Government would say that they funded the BBC to some regard, but to a degree I am surprised that the BBC has not chosen that option. The third option was a 50% discount, so everyone over the age of 75 gets the benefit, but only 50% of it. That would still cost £415 million, which is equivalent to the entire BBC 2 budget. The other option was raising the threshold to the age of 80, which would cost £481 million and be equivalent to BBC 2’s budget or BBC 4.

Of all the options, the one that we have landed on was the one that found most favour. I will not say that it was liked, because I do not think that anyone liked it, but linking the benefit to pension credit means that 900,000 over-75s will still benefit. It will cost £209 million, which the BBC will still have to bear, and that is greater than the funding it was given to take it on. That amount is still the same as the cost of Radio 1, Radio 2, Radio 3, Radio 4 and Radio 5. That is where the BBC has found itself.
I believe in telling it as it is. The BBC has agreed to this, but I do not think it was given much option—it was either agree to this or to something else. The BBC was not funded for it. Probably due to a copy and paste mechanism, our last manifesto said that we would guarantee free TV licences for the over-75s for the term of this Parliament. I am not confident that that means 2022.

Helen Jones: Does the hon. Gentleman know something we do not?

Huw Merriman: I certainly do not know something that the hon. Lady does not know.

We made a manifesto commitment that now puts us in a difficult position, if the BBC is going to take away the licence fee for those outside the means test from 2020 to 2022. It leads to an argument for the Government Benches that the Government would need to carry on funding it, at least for that two-year period.

I take issue with the petitions—like my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), I will now lose part of the room, or perhaps all of it. Although I understand the cost implication for those who cannot afford the licence fee—I absolutely recognise that pension credit is at its lowest level and that those just outside the pension credit boundary will struggle to meet this cost—I have a fundamental problem, which I am surprised that Opposition Members do not share. If a multi-millionaire happens to be over the age of 75, they receive a free universal benefit that is effectively being subsidised by someone in their early 20s who is renting and cannot afford to buy a property of their own.

I believe that there is a cost to everything and there are choices. The Government spend £800 billion each year on our public services. If we are spending money on people who can afford to pay, ultimately that means either that somebody else has got to pay for it or that somebody else will not receive the same benefit.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has made some interesting points. Earlier in the debate reference was made to a public good. A public good is defined as a service, such as healthcare or education, that we feel is so important to us as a society that we collectively provide it. The BBC is a public good; it has a value for our democracy, for our community cohesion and for society generally. Therefore, we should pay for it collectively and not leave people who are over 75, and who cannot afford to pay for it themselves because they have no means, to pay for it. We should provide it collectively, as a public good.

Huw Merriman: The hon. Gentleman, who I know worked for the BBC, makes a good point. I agree that the BBC is a public good, but there are other public goods that one can think of where we require people to pay or we means-test them.

I have a fundamental issue with it. I am sorry to use these words, but I think it was an election bribe. Once something is given for free, it is difficult to ask people to start paying for it. I recognise that challenge. I ask all right hon. and hon. Members to consider this: if this is always going to be a cost, and we have to make decisions, then should the welfare state be providing something for people who can readily afford it, so that we are unable to spend more on those who really are at the borderline? I say that not to get electoral gain; I represent a constituency that has the second highest proportion of over-75s in the country, so I commit electoral suicide. It is important that we address this; if we do not, we will find that other decisions will be made or will not be reviewed. I am particularly worried about inter-generational fairness; people are missing out because we preserve benefits for people on the basis of age rather than means.

My last point is to the Minister. She is an excellent Minister and she has inherited this package, if I can call it that, from predecessors in the Treasury. I believe that we need to look at this again. It is a big challenge. We made a commitment in our manifesto that we should stick by it. As for the future—and that gives us time to think about the future—I would like us to address whether it is affordable to give people a benefit that they would be able to pay for themselves.

5.46 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I too will speak in support of the petition for the restoration of TV licences for the over-75s. Like many other hon. Members, I was deeply concerned by the announcement that the TV licence concessions for the over-75s would now be linked to pension credit.

Some 3,770 households in Newport East are set to lose their licences under the changes, and across the wider Gwent region that rises to 23,450 households, with a total annual cost across all households of over £567,000. As other hon. Members have said, TV licences are an important benefit for older people, who suffer disproportionately from isolation and loneliness. As the excellent Age Cymru has said, for millions of over-75s the TV is not just the box in the corner; it is their constant companion, their window on the world and their main form of company.

TV is also an essential source of information for people who are not online, and it plays a crucial role in their ability to be an active citizen in our democracy. Research from Age Cymru shows that only 29% of over-75s in Wales use the internet. The shift to information being online has already made it more difficult for older people to keep informed and to access key services. Removing the entitlement to a free TV licence would add substantially to these difficulties.

Linking the concession to pension credit is also hugely problematic. Estimates by the Department for Work and Pensions suggest that two in every five people eligible for pension credit are not claiming the benefit. In Newport East alone that is almost £5 million of unclaimed pension credit that is not reaching the people who need it each year. Until the Government act to ensure that everyone who is entitled to pension credit receives it, a huge number of older people risk losing out on two benefits at once if the TV licence proposals go ahead. That is the problem with it not being universal.
As Age Cymru has highlighted, there are many reasons why older people do not claim pension credit: they may not know the benefit exists; they may feel they are not entitled to any help; they may be put off by the process of claiming; they may struggle on alone, assuming that others are worse off than them; or they may be living with dementia, as other hon. Members have mentioned. In practical terms, there are serious questions to ask about how the BBC will ensure that people with dementia will be able to pay their licence fee and, if they do not, how non-payment will be enforced. It does not bear thinking about. Age Cymru has said that there may be 850,000 people affected by that.

I want to finish by citing an example from my constituency. In the week that the licence fee proposals were outlined, candidates in the Conservative leadership election began to outline their plans to cut taxes for the wealthiest in society. Days later I was contacted by the neighbour of an 86-year-old armed forces veteran in Newport who is set to lose his TV licence under the new proposal. I know that Defence Ministers are concerned about that. The contrast underlines and amplifies the fact that the Conservative party has a serious question to answer about where its priorities lie and the kind of country it wants us to live in. I echo the calls from campaigners and charities such as Age Cymru for the UK Government to take back the funding and administration fee for the free TV licence scheme and let the BBC focus on its job of being a brilliant national broadcaster. TV licences are a social benefit that should not have been outsourced.

5.50 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. Like some of my Conservative colleagues, I am, broadly speaking, a supporter of the BBC, but I readily admit that that is weakening somewhat. My right hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) and my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) outlined some of the great benefits of the BBC, ranging from support for the Proms and orchestras to, of course, the BBC World Service, where my hon. Friend was an eminent producer, or perhaps director. I would happily pay the licence fee for Radio 4, local radio and “Test Match Special”, to name just three—but, as has been pointed out, we can afford it. I rather wish that Radio 4 would go silent at 6.30 pm, when it broadcasts inane entertainment. On the question of celebrity and sports star pay, I am sorry that Gary Lineker and the £1.75 million paid to the BBC needs to reflect. I am content with the present system continuing for at least the foreseeable future. I suspect that if I am home by 10 o’clock tonight I shall watch the 10 o’clock news on the BBC rather than the Daily Express. It is perhaps not so much that there is bias; of course the BBC will say that it gets as many complaints from one side as the other, so it must therefore be getting things right. However, there is a rather superior intonation in some of the questions from interviewers, as if to say, “Do you really think that people would vote for Brexit?” That is an insult to the 70% of my electorate who voted for Brexit—and very wise they are too.

Andrew Bridgen: Does my hon. Friend agree that the potential for BBC bias is not only in how it reports what it reports, but in the fact that 70% of the public rely on it for much of their news, and the BBC has the power to decide what is or is not reported in the news?

Martin Vickers: My hon. Friend makes a good point. There is no doubt that many important events in this county and around the world go unreported, when items that in the great scheme of things are perhaps more trivial find their way on to the airwaves, and perhaps that is a reflection of the organisation itself. I am still, broadly speaking, a supporter of the BBC. I would like it to continue in some shape or form, if that is realistic in this multi-channel age when sports rights, for example, cost the earth. Lesser sports, shall we say, are now coming on to the BBC, and I have no problem with that. It is only right that they should get an airing. However, after the success of the Lionesses in the recent women’s World cup, there is no doubt that Sky, BT or someone else will come sniffing around by the time of the next women’s World cup, and it will be lost to the great majority. We saw only yesterday, with the cricket world cup, how free-to-air brings the country together on great sporting occasions. I suspect that if I am home by 10 o’clock tonight I shall watch the 10 o’clock news on the BBC rather than any of the other offerings, but I think that the BBC needs to reflect. I am content with the present system continuing for at least the foreseeable future. I am not entirely convinced that the majority of my constituents would agree. That should cause the BBC and the Minister to reflect on the present structure and whether it can continue.
Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson, and to take part in the debate opened by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who gave an outstanding introduction, as usual. She talked about the “not me, guv” Government, and she is right, because their consistent modus operandi with public services is to slash a public authority’s funding and blame it when it is unable to deliver the service. Alternatively, when the public authority has to put up its prices to compensate for the lack of money from central Government, they will attack it politically for doing so. We have seen that happen with failures of local government services, such as the fire service and the police. The epidemic horror of knife crime is apparently nothing to do with the 20,000 fewer police officers, or the cuts to children’s services. Apparently it is all the fault of the Mayor of London. A similar thing can be seen in the debate about the BBC licence fee. The BBC was presented with huge cuts to its budget and was forced to take the blame when it had to charge the licence fee to over-75s. It is part of a consistent practice by the Government that needs to be exposed and resisted.

[DAME CHERYL GILLAN IN THE CHAIR]

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) talked about some of the services that would be affected were the BBC to have to take on the whole amount. In total that could be £700 million a year. That would be the cost of BBC 2, BBC 4, BBC News, BBC Scotland and BBC Radio 5 Live and, crucially, local radio stations. Given the crisis in local newspapers, the BBC is in some areas often the only real provider of the quality local news that binds communities together. It can do that because of the licence fee.

There is what is known as an ecosystem in broadcaster funding. Each broadcaster in the UK is funded differently. ITV is funded largely through advertising, with some production work. Sky has a subscription and some production work and advertising. It all knits together particularly well. I must say that, if we move away from the current model to one where the BBC or parts of it had to either use subscription or enter into advertising, I am pretty sure not only that existing channels would be unhappy but that it would damage their operations. That is not to mention the question how we take on the influence of the global giants based on the west coast of the United States.

I, too, have a problem with the size of some of the salaries paid to BBC presenters. I have a particular problem with the use of the word “talent” to describe on-air performers and presenters, whether on radio or TV, because it suggests that the whole attraction of a particular broadcast is based on the individual who presents it. Make-up artists, production designers and junior producers are all talented, and the quality of the programming is vested in all of them and not simply in the person who is in front of the microphone or the camera.

Why on earth did the BBC accept this cut to its budget and the enforced taking on of the licence for over-75s? The simple truth, as other hon. Members have already mentioned, is that it was forced to do so. If we speak to senior BBC management, we hear that they were left in no doubt that this was being forced on them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly), who was on the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport with me, called it a “drive-by shooting”. A Treasury Minister—I think this was while George Osborne was Chancellor—told the BBC, “This is the way it’s going to be, so make the best of it.” When BBC management said that they were quite happy with the solution, that was not the case—but what else could they say when they had a gun to their head?

There is also another, more sinister reason. I was on the DCMS Committee when Rona Fairhead, the then chair of the BBC Trust, attended a pre-appointment scrutiny session for the position of chair of the new BBC board. Before she appeared before us, we were informed that after her meeting at Downing Street with the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, she had a private meeting with him without any civil servants present. That was put to her, and she admitted that it was the case. As it happened, the Committee declined to confirm her appointment, but the situation does give rise to the question why the BBC governors at the time did not resist the idea of the over-75s licence fee being deposited on them. Coincidentally, Rona Fairhead was shortly afterwards appointed to the House of Lords and made a member of the Government. I am not suggesting that those two incidents are linked—

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): But of course you should be.

Christian Matheson: My hon. Friend suggests that I should be. It does not give off a particularly pleasant smell to have a part of the Government giving out favours to get a policy through. It stinks, and it ought not to be allowed. Even the perception that a deal was done—because that is one of the possible perceptions—ought not to be allowed.

The BBC licence fee, as we have heard, represents so much more than simply a broadcasting service for older people in particular. I simply ask: if we do not provide the service and social isolation continues, what is the cost then of having to look after more people with more advanced dementia? What is the cost of having to provide social services elsewhere for older people whose quality of life is deteriorating? There are hidden costs involved, and we find once again that the BBC licence fee gives huge value for money in a much broader context than that of simply listening to the radio or watching television.

6.4 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Cheryl. As has already been mentioned, I need to declare an interest; unlike the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), I rejected the advice of my father, who said I had a great face for radio, and decided to become a BBC TV reporter. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on securing this crucial debate.

What could be more crucial in this period of political instability than the question of BBC bias, which is what I will address in my speech? I think hon. Members will be pleased to hear that I will not mention “Panorama”, I do not need to. This is a target-rich environment. When it comes to BBC bias, or impartiality and the BBC, we often find, as in this debate, that there are a lot...
of contradictory claims and counter-claims. That is partly because the BBC produces a vast amount of content, featuring a range of people and opinions, meaning that everyone will at some point see something to complain about.

Unfortunately, at times that has led representatives and defenders of the BBC to dismiss all criticism of its reporting. “If we are attacked from both sides,” the argument goes, “then we must be doing something right.” However, when faced with conflicting claims, we cannot just dismiss them all and assume that everything is fine; we must assess which are accurate—or which are more accurate.

When it comes to climate change, there is a weight of evidence among the scientific community, and then there are the ideas put about by right-wing think tanks, newspapers and politicians. Similarly, when it comes to debates about the BBC, there are the allegations of bias advanced by many of those same right-wing interests, and then there are the findings of independent academic research. What does the social scientific evidence tell us about BBC impartiality? One consistent finding is that the BBC allows the press and senior politicians to set the agenda for its reporting. In the BBC’s Bridcut report of 2007, it acknowledged that impartiality should mean representing a range of views in society, not just the perceived political centre ground or the balance of opinion in Westminster.

However, research by Cardiff University found that, five years later, BBC News was still dominated by elite sources with—and this is key—an over-representation of Conservative and Eurosceptic views. During the EU referendum, that “impartiality as balance” paradigm, which seems always to lean to the right, was scrupulously applied to the two sides of the referendum campaign, but with the right dominating both. Research by Loughborough University found that Conservative and UK Independence party representatives accounted for 74% of all party political appearances on television news. Cardiff University found an even higher level of prominence, with Conservatives and UKIP together accounting for almost 80% of politicians.

The striking domination of our political debate by the right is exacerbated by the influence of right-wing newspapers. One of the key functions of the BBC should be to act as a bulwark against misinformation and the abuses of private power, but how can it perform that function if its news agenda is set by an often unscrupulous, partisan press, owned by a handful of billionaires, which has spent decades misinforming people on every important issue of the day? Again, we can look at the research: Cardiff University found that more than half of BBC News policy stories during the 2015 general election originated with the press, with The Daily Telegraph and The Times leading the pack, and the right, once again, dominating overall.

Another crucial issue on which this has had an impact, alongside reporting on immigration and the EU, is austerity. There is now a fairly substantive body of work examining the reporting of the 2008 financial crisis, including, for example, Mike Berry’s recent book. Berry shows that the economic debate, at that crucial time for our country, was skewed toward the right, and that even mainstream economic opinion was marginalised in favour of the disinformation emanating from the Conservative party and its allies in the press.

I could go on, but the overall picture is clear: not only is BBC News overwhelmingly orientated towards the political and economic establishment but, in so far as it exhibits any political bias, it tends to be towards the right. The story behind that pattern of reporting is detailed in Tom Mills’s 2016 book on the BBC. The organisation has always been a quasi-state broadcaster, orientated toward officialdom and particularly vulnerable to pressure from the Government of the day, as the last charter renewal process showed.

The situation got much worse from the 1980s onwards, when the BBC became increasingly marketised and politicised. Independent reporting was curtailed as editorial and managerial authority was consolidated, funding was cut and services and programme making were contracted out. In short, the BBC’s public service ethos, which was always far too elitist anyway, was steadily eroded while the BBC was slowly privatised. None of that opened it up to a wider range of voices. The privately educated and Oxbridge graduates still dominate—just as they do the press, as a recent Sutton Trust report shows—but the BBC became an elitist organisation more in step with neoliberal Britain.

I have no doubt that the Brexiteers want a BBC that is even more right wing, even more vulnerable to Government pressure and even less economically literate in its reporting—or, alternatively, no BBC at all. Meanwhile, some on the left are so disillusioned with the BBC that they have given up on it altogether. That is a mistake. There are serious problems with the BBC that cannot be ignored, but they can be resolved by making it genuinely independent of Governments—of the left and the right—and accountable not to a narrow elite but to its own staff and to the communities it should represent. The left has always been a friend to the BBC, and should remain so, but securing a public and democratic media system with the BBC at its heart will require radical change.

6.10 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl, in this important debate for pensioners across the country. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for securing the debate and the 170,000 people who signed the online petition calling on the Government to protect free TV licences for those aged 75 and over. They join the 600,000 people who signed Age UK’s petition calling for the Government to act on this issue.

There is a real sense of public anger at the injustice of the decision to end free TV licences for all those aged 75 and over, with many saying that they will not pay. I have felt that public anger in my constituency. Many of my constituents cannot understand why the Government refuse to stand up for pensioners. I have spoken to constituents who will be directly affected by the Government’s inaction, coming from the more than 3,000 local households set to lose a free TV licence.

The Government have betrayed my constituents, along with the pensioners of this country. There was a clear promise in the 2017 Conservative party manifesto that free TV licences would be protected until the end of this Parliament, yet the Government chose to outsource the responsibility and the financial burden of free TV licences
to the BBC. They have successfully shifted the blame on to the BBC for the decision to end free TV licences for all those aged 75 and over. However, the Government must take responsibility. They made a cynical promise to pensioners that they had no intention of keeping. I have repeatedly spoken out in Parliament to highlight the fact that the Government’s promise to our pensioners now lies in tatters. When the Labour party held an Opposition day debate on this issue, the Government Benches were all but empty. The Government did not dare vote against Labour’s motion, because they know that they have betrayed the trust of pensioners across the country.

When I confronted the Prime Minister on the issue at Prime Minister’s questions, her answer could not have been weaker. She told the BBC to “think again”, but it is the Prime Minister, whose days are numbered, who must think again. She was the architect of the 2017 Conservative manifesto, which contained a clear promise to protect free TV licences for those aged 75 and over. In one of her last acts as Prime Minister, she should live up to the pledge she gave when she first entered Downing Street to tackle the burning injustices in our society. She should protect our pensioners by ensuring that free TV licences for all those aged 75 and over are maintained.

As things stand, from June 2020 free TV licences will be restricted to those aged 75 and over who claim pension credit. The BBC claims that this will ensure that the poorest pensioners are protected, but its own analysis suggests that just 11% of the poorest households would keep their free TV licence if it was linked to pension credit, and that the poorest 10th of over-75s would have to spend more than 2% of their total income on the TV licence.

There are also clearly issues with the take-up of pension credit. As has been mentioned, the DWP’s latest estimates highlight the fact that two out of five people aged 75 and over who should be claiming pension credit have not done so. Independent Age found more than £7 million of pension credit going unclaimed in my constituency of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill alone. If there is £7 million in my constituency, how much more is out there? However, the Government appear to be doing little to encourage greater take-up of pension credit among those aged 75 and over.

Let us be clear that the decision to restrict free TV licences will increase both poverty and, more importantly, pension credit among those aged 75 and over. The latest estimates highlight the fact that two out of five people aged 75 and over who should be claiming pension credit have not done so. Independent Age found more than £7 million of pension credit going unclaimed in my constituency of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill alone. If there is £7 million in my constituency, how much more is out there? However, the Government appear to be doing little to encourage greater take-up of pension credit among those aged 75 and over.

This decision will do nothing to stop the continuing rise of pensioner poverty across the UK. We are often told by the Government that they are on the side of pensioners, yet they still refuse to act to protect pensioners’ interests. It is time for the Government to stop blaming the BBC and start taking responsibility. It is time for them to keep their promise and protect the TV licence for the over-75s.

6.16 pm

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in your place, Dame Cheryl—having recently supported HS2, I am sure.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): I think the hon. Gentleman is very much mistaken on my support for HS2. [Laughter.]

Graham Stringer: Right.

David Plowright was one of the great leaders of commercial television. He was the chief executive of Granada Television for many years, where great documentaries and “World in Action” were produced, as well as groundbreaking drama and excellent regional news, and he went on to become the deputy chair of Channel 4. His criteria for the BBC—one of his main competitors—was that it was there to keep the commercial side of television honest. He wanted to support it, and he wanted it to be as good as it possibly could be. It is interesting that, all around this debate, people have to different degrees supported the BBC. Nobody would create it as it is today if we were starting afresh, but there is enormous support, respect and affection for it.

On bias and other aspects of the BBC, my worry is that there is a certain decadence within the organisation, by which I mean a decaying of standards in all sorts of areas of reporting, which, if it continues, might mean that if this debate took place in five or 10 years, there would not be as much support for what is in effect the state broadcaster, supported by a flat-rate tax. I agree partially with my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) that there is one obvious reason for that, although there may well be others: the people who run, report and work for the BBC are primarily drawn from London and Oxbridge, and they have a common view of the world that leads to certain conclusions.

Where I probably disagree with my hon. Friend is my guess that that gives them an almost coherent, homogenous view of the EU and what our relationship with the EU should be. Although this is more difficult to substantiate, I nevertheless think that it also means that, privately, they think they are right and that their view of the world is correct, and that the people who I represent—who are, by and large, not as well educated and do not have the same level of income or educational achievement—are probably wrong.

That is never stated publicly, and I have many friends who are BBC executives and reporters and who do their best. I would never question the integrity of individual BBC reporters. They are doing their best, but it is a fact that there will not be many people working in the BBC who are from the poorest parts of the United Kingdom and would give a different view on the matter. I think that is one reason why we see such high salaries. To someone in the organisation from the background that I have described, having a salary of nearly £2 million might not seem as obscene as it does to most of the people I represent. I do not believe that Gary Lineker was a great footballer; I do not believe that he is—whatever it is—20 or 15 times better at his job than Gabby Logan.

Huw Merriman: The point that I want to make is not so much about Gary Lineker; it is just the fact that the BBC operates in a commercial environment. If it does not pay its talent a commercial wage—many of them actually earn less than the commercial wage—it will lose that talent to other organisations, and then people will switch off the BBC and it will lose viewers.
Graham Stringer: That is a reasonable point as far as it goes. The BBC has not only paid very high salaries in a discriminatory way over the last five years; when it was found to be discriminating, it increased those salaries. It is the case that there are places within the BBC that have to compete commercially, but the fact that it has increased the number of people presenting sports programmes surely shows that there is not a shortage. It could get very high-quality people at a lower rate. Let us say that Gary Lineker goes to BT or Sky; I think that the people at the BBC who are earning a lot less are as good. I understand the argument advanced by the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), but I do not think that it stands up in that case or many others.

I think that John Humphrys is one of the best interviewers there has been on the BBC. He has dropped his salary, but I do not think that he was ever worth more than £600,000 or that the private sector was going to pay that amount of money for him. I have no idea what Andrew Neil gets paid at the moment, but it is a great pity that another great interviewer is leaving the BBC. I do not know whether that is down to commercial pressure or just because he is a bit cheeky and teases the BBC management, but it is a great pity. He gives politicians all round the clock a pretty tough and torrid time when he interviews them, and that is a great thing for democracy. But I think that, from that narrow base, we do get a distorted view.

Incidentally, I take the point made by the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle that £20 million would not pay the licence fees for the over-75s. I accept that; it is just simple arithmetic. But—it is a big but—£20 million is still quite a lot of money, and one of the aspects of the BBC that I appreciate is the quality of regional radio, which is massively underfunded. In regional radio, £20 million would go a long way. Compared with when I started out in politics, which was a long time ago, what is put out by BBC Radio Manchester now—its political coverage and the rest of its coverage—is not as comprehensive. The quality of the people doing it is excellent, but there simply are not as many of them and there is not as much. That is because of underfunding.

I want to give three or four examples, if I may, of where I think this cohort of south-eastern, Oxbridge-educated people get it wrong. I will say, and the point has already been made, that any organisation with human beings in it is going to make mistakes. The mistakes themselves are mistakes, but they do indicate a larger problem with the BBC.

The BBC procured and presented on BBC Three, when it was a channel, a series of programmes called “People Like Us”. That was based in the ward that I used to represent as a councillor and that is still in the constituency I represent. Frankly, it was poverty porn. It gave the most distorted view of one of the poorest wards in the country. Depending on how we count these things—it is not a competition that any ward or constituency wants to win—Harpurhey is the poorest or the third poorest ward in the country. Cameras went along and the people making the programme pretended—it was a pretence—that they were following how people in Harpurhey lived. They were not; they were distorting it. They paid girls to fight each other. They opened a pub and created a most peculiar party of transvestites. I have nothing against transvestites, but that kind of situation had never happened in that particular public house, which had been closed for a couple of years. They got a pretend landlord in to talk about how he was very happy for his tenants to take drugs. It was clearly a put-up job. And some of the people who said outrageous things were taken on holiday by the company doing this. It was a shocking and terrible thing, and I do not believe that if people from that kind of background had been part of the BBC, that programme would ever have been made. Fortunately, there was not a second series. The head of BBC Three was good enough to see me and Councillor Karney, who represented the ward. I do not know whether it was down to our lobbying, but there was not a second series.

I want to talk about two other matters. One is bias on the EU. My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South made a speech that I half completely agreed with and half completely disagreed with. There is quite a lot of evidence, in terms of the numbers of people interviewed about the European Union, that there are more pro-EU people. In the run-up to the referendum, virtually every business person who was interviewed on the “Today” programme was asked how Brexit was going to damage their business. In fact, it became a standard form of question or statement that “in spite of Brexit”, this benefit or that increase in jobs had happened.

A number of independent research groups have shown the bias in the run-up to the European elections. They have counted the number of people who were pro-EU compared with the number who were anti-EU, and the pros win by about three to one. In fact, one of the senior political journalists said, “We have no need to be balanced in this matter,” which I think is at odds with the BBC’s constitution.

The difference, during the run-up to the referendum campaign, was striking. The BBC did what it does in general elections: it was perfectly well balanced. That was in contrast with what happened afterwards and what happened before the period of the referendum. I think that that is partly because the people who run the BBC in London are essentially all pro-EU and think that there is something peculiar about people who are not.

My background is as a scientist. I believe in the scientific method and I practised for 10 years, running an analytical laboratory, so I am not, in the way some people mean it, a climate sceptic. However, some of the science from the likes of the University of East Anglia and in the leaked emails is a bit dodgy—very dodgy in that case. Some of the policies proposed to deal with climate change are expensive and one needs to be sceptical about the cost of those policies.

Not only is the cohort running the BBC from Oxbridge, but it is happier speaking about the subjective than the second law of thermodynamics. They have clear views on what the perception of science and climate change is. I will give an example, which I think is quite extraordinary. I appeared on a programme with Lord Lilley—with whom I disagree with about almost everything—about the Met Office, with Quentin Letts conducting the interview. Lord Lilley has a scientific background. He has a degree from Cambridge in physics. We agreed that climate change is happening and the planet is warming up a bit, but that the response is...
probably overblown. I said that the Met Office was very
good at short-term forecasting, but hopeless at medium
and long-term forecasts.

It is now impossible to get a recording of that programme,
because it is banned, like the Catholic Church in the
16th century. We are on a banned list, because we
agreed that the discussion was unbalanced. On the EU,
there is no balance, but on a relatively trivial matter, the
scientifically illiterate people at the BBC have decided
to ban us. There will be real problems in the future if the
BBC does not sort these things out.

I have spoken slightly longer than I intended. Finally,
I will speak about the issue of free licences. It is not
really worth a great deal of further thought. It is quite
obvious that the Government—not the BBC—should
be responsible for a benefit such as free television
licences for the over-75s. The licence fee, however, is
worth further consideration—not next week, but in the
near future. I find it strange that on my side of the
House there is enthusiasm and support for—I could
name many such issues, but I will not—flat-rate taxes,
which are regressive. If there is a public good and a
public benefit from television, which I think there is, it
should be funded by progressive taxation coming out of
income tax.

The argument against that often put by BBC executives
is that it damages the independence of the BBC. My
hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian
Matheson) knocked that argument on the head on a
very specific case. The people running the BBC are part
of the informal ruling class in London, and they scratch
each other’s backs, so there is not complete independence
there. Further, Governments have always set the level of
the licence fee, so every five years the Government have
a say. I do not see why we should not have progressive
rather than regressive taxation for what is undoubtedly
a public good.

The BBC has had a lot of support, but it has to look
at how it funds its regional organisations and how it stops
being a cosmopolitan elite, with all the narrow
views that that implies.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): I remind colleagues
that there is a possibility of votes in the main Chamber
during our proceedings, in which case I will suspend
and we will have to return. This will be the last speech
from hon. Members on the Back Benches, after which
we will move on to the Front-Bench spokespeople.

6.34 pm

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to
follow my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and
Broughton (Graham Stringer), who spoke about science,
which is an area in which the BBC has improved in
recent years. It gives me even greater joy to participate
in a debate started by my hon. Friend the Member for
Warrington North (Helen Jones), who always speaks
with such style and panache, which we can only envy,
whatever the subject.

Given that it is a summers’ evening and we have
hardly mentioned the great triumph in the cricket world
cup yesterday, which was broadcast by “Test Match
Special”, I want to find reasons to be cheerful, cherish
the BBC and suggest some interventions to help not
only the BBC but other public service broadcasters. I
will refer to some ideas mentioned by other hon. Members.

The hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers)—by
far the best town on the east coast, so I hear—mentioned
the loss of sports broadcasting rights for the BBC. We
have just had a tremendous weekend for sport. The
cricket world cup was watched by a peak audience of
37 million on Channel 4 and Sky, but it was beaten by
Wimbledon, which was broadcast on the BBC to a peak
audience of 9.6 million. That happened not by accident,
but because the Wimbledon tennis finals are part of the
listed events that must be offered to free-to-air television.

In future, we should not have to rely on the public
relations of Comcast or Sky to ensure that we can see
those events. The women’s world cup attracted more
than 11 million viewers. It is no good showing one event
every 15 years; the story of a tournament has to be told
over a number of months, possibly years. There is a
growing call for events such as the women’s world cup,
and the men’s and women’s T20 and 50-overs cricket
world cups—particularly games involving England, the
other home nations and the final—to be broadcast on
free-to-air TV. The deputy leader of the Labour party
made an interesting but underreported speech on this
subject the other day. We should make that intervention.

Ofcom has been looking at the prominence of BBC
channels and other public service broadcasting channels.
It has made some rather good recommendations, including
for public service channels to be prominent not only on
traditional TVs, but on set-top boxes, streaming services
and smart TV. I hope the Government will find time to
put those recommendations into legislation quickly, so
that the licence fee payer always finds it easy to see the
BBC and other public service broadcaster channels.

Ofcom has said it is minded to allow the BBC to keep
programmes on the iPlayer for up to a year. That would
be a good thing. It is reflected among some of the
BBC’s commercial competitors. Equally, I am hopeful
that Ofcom will agree to the proposals for BritBox.
Such services exist in the United States. It would entail
the BBC and ITV, and hopefully other public service
broadcasters, after a period, providing streaming packages
for their big-hit programmes, providing an additional
revenue stream. A similar project, Project Kangaroo,
was rejected by Ofcom 10 years ago. I hope that Ofcom
will recognise that the BBC is now operating in a
completely different market. Netflix spends £8 billion a
year on programming. There is also Amazon and Facebook
to compete with. The BBC must be allowed to compete
with those global media giants.

I have one or two other points to make. We heard
about people being jailed for not paying the licence fee.
The number of people who have gone to prison has
gone down dramatically, from 50 in 2012 to 17 in 2017.
They were sent to jail not by the TV licensing authority
but by magistrates, often for multiple debts in addition
to non-payment of the licence fee. It is wise to keep the
issue in context.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) made it
clear that he does not like programmes being switched
for the tennis, but when it comes to advertising he is
rather more pro. As my hon. Friend the Member for
City of Chester (Christian Matheson) said, allowing
widespread advertising on the BBC would totally destabilise
the traditional market. ITV and Channel 4 would lobby very hard against it, because it would destroy a large part of their income stream.

The question of bias was raised. Some hon. Members did not deal with the “Panorama” programme, but I am quite happy to mention it, and indeed the whole series. Recent and forthcoming “Panorama” episodes include one on relationships education, one on abortion in the United States, one on exiting the EU and on what a no-deal Brexit might mean, and one dealing with antisemitism in the Labour party. They are all perfectly legitimate programmes.

There is a gentleman who I think goes by the name of Seumas Milne, who I think works in the Leader of the Opposition’s office, and who I think might fit the public school-educated, south-eastern, Oxbridge profile that some of my hon. Friends are very agitated about. No doubt in all those institutions, as he was growing up, he was advised using a cricket analogy: play the ball, not the man. That is very sensible advice—attacking the credibility of a very distinguished journalist was not my party’s finest moment. I think of another Milne: Alasdair Milne, whose record Seumas should perhaps look back on. He was a man who defended the BBC against the Government, and probably paid for it with his job. That is a far better example to follow.

We have heard a lot about the voice of the BBC and about how its people come from the same background. That may have been true some time ago, but I think it has changed over the past couple of decades. Partly because of the move to Manchester, there is now a range of northern voices across 5 Live and BBC News. It is always a great pleasure to show BBC apprentices around Parliament; they reflect the diversity of our nation.

There is no point in repeating what other hon. Members have said about the substance of the petitions. I certainly think that George Osborne was to blame, but he was not the only Chancellor of the Exchequer who approached TV licence fee negotiations in the same way. I do not think that Gord on Brown, in his time, was particularly more forthcoming with consultation. It is up to this House to put greater rules in place for how the licence fee is determined. There should be more consultation, and everyone should know the time period; it should not just be the Chancellor or the director-general coming out of a meeting and an announcement being made.

The future of the licence fee and of the BBC is a big decision for the country. The BBC belongs to us all, not just to the Chancellor of the Exchequer of the day. That should be reflected in how we award the royal charter to the BBC and in how we set the licence fee.

6.42 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As always, Dame Cheryl, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair. I thank and congratulate all 15 Members who have made speeches in this important debate. In the confessional spirit that has been prevalent this afternoon, I put it on the record that I, too, am a former employee of the BBC—I was there for about a decade. However, I have already spoken extensively about my time at the BBC, so in the time available I will concentrate on the issue that has dominated our debate: the decision to means-test the licence fee for those aged 75 and above.

In the SNP’s opinion, it is absolutely outrageous that the UK Government have sought to shift a welfare policy decision to the BBC, thereby not only shirking their responsibility to support our older citizens, but shamefully breaking their manifesto commitment on TV licences for the over-75s, as we have heard so many times this afternoon. Their 2017 manifesto made an explicit promise—on page 66, to be exact—that they would “maintain...pensioner benefits, including free bus passes, eye tests, prescriptions and TV licences, for the duration of this parliament.”

I am glad that so many Conservative Members recognise that, particularly the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman).

I urge the Minister to explain why the Government are breaking their promise, and to commit to ensuring that our elderly population will not suffer because of such a damaging and ill-thought-out proposal. SNP Members add our voices to the ever-growing number in all parts of the House and the length and breadth of these islands, who are calling for the UK Government to reverse their decision and stop abdicating responsibility by putting it on the BBC, particularly at this time of rising pensioner poverty. I wholeheartedly agree with the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) and the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) that the Government were completely wrong to impose such a deal on the BBC in the first place—but then to criticise the BBC for doing what it was instructed to do simply beggars belief.

At a time when more and more of our older people are struggling to make ends meet, in many cases as a direct result of Tory austerity cuts, it would be a grave injustice to remove the free TV licence and expect older people to conjure up another £150 from somewhere. Scotland’s First Minister recently signed a letter to the Prime Minister urging the UK Government to guarantee that free TV licences for the over-75s would be protected. That letter was signed by every leader of Scotland’s major political parties, with the exception of Ruth Davidson of the Scottish Conservatives. Scotland’s First Minister and the other party leaders signed the letter because they know that the UK Government already provide one of the lowest state pensions in the developed world. Our older people need more financial support, not less, particularly at a time of rising costs.

Following its consultation process, the BBC announced that from June 2020 only those people who are aged 75 or above and in receipt of pension credit will continue to receive free TV licences. However, I argue strongly that means-testing on the basis of pension credit has been shown to be fundamentally flawed. I take issue with the assertion of the corporation’s director-general, Tony Hall, and its chairman, Sir David Clementi, that using pension credit means that the pensioners in most need will be protected. That is simply not the case.

It is currently estimated that four in 10 pensioner households eligible for pension credit do not receive it, for one reason or another. Just last month, the charity Independent Age found that more than 1 million pensioner households across the UK are living in poverty because the Government failed to act on unpaid pension credit, and that since 2017 the Government have benefited from £7 billion in unclaimed pension credit. As a result,
there will be hundreds of thousands of poor pensioners who should qualify but do not, and who will now have to find an extra £150 to pay for a TV licence.

What about those pensioners who just miss out on qualifying for pension credit? They are hardly living the life of Riley, and by no stretch of the imagination could they be considered wealthy, yet they will be hurt most by the decision. Perhaps Lord Hall and Sir David Clementi would care to reflect on the fairness and protection that they argue is being afforded to this group of people. After years of Tory austerity, and the deep financial uncertainty caused by Brexit, the last thing that our older people need is the extra burden of realising that the over-75s licence lies with the UK Government. As we have heard today, welfare policy should not be such a political football. As we have heard, those of us who have been here for many years, those who have spoken in this debate and I join those who have said that the over-75s’ licence is a welfare benefit.

However, there was something that my hon. Friend said that I disagreed with. She said that she thought that this Government were the Arthur Daley of public administration. That is very unfair on Arthur Daley, Del Boy and others, because I cannot imagine for one moment that they would have tried to pull off a scam such as the over-75s scam that the Government have tried to pull off by outsourcing social policy in this way.

My hon. Friend also pointed out the extra costs that older people face, in relation to extra heating and so on, which I thought was a new and original point in the debate, although it is not often taken into account when discussing the importance of free TV licences for the over-75s. Also—I think people should take note of this—she quite rightly predicted that the scammers, conmen and fraudsters will soon move in on vulnerable older people when free TV licences for the over-75s are ended if the Government do not reverse this very poor decision.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) revealed a new and interesting fact, because we had not known that in years gone by he was part of the BBC’s talent, and that he had even been big in India, which I had not anticipated. As for the substance of his speech, he seemed to suggest that advertising should perhaps be more widely used in the BBC as a funding model. I am afraid that is something that Labour Members disagree with.

My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) quite rightly pointed out that free TV licences for the over-75s is a social policy, and that if the Government want to change a social policy they should have the guts and commitment to make the argument themselves and put it in their manifesto. They should argue the case in Parliament themselves, take it to a vote here, have a consultation with the public—all the things that every Government should do when changing social policy. They should do that themselves, rather than taking BBC executives into a darkened room with a rubber hose and duffing them up until they agree to do this, under the threat of future Treasury cuts to BBC funding.

Even having done that, which was wrong in itself, for the Government subsequently to put into their 2017 general election manifesto the proposition that the free concession would be retained, when they had already outsourced it to the BBC, really was an example of the most egregious misuse of a general election manifesto—no wonder the manifesto went down like a lead balloon.

The right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey)—unfortunately, he is no longer in his place—who is a distinguished former Minister in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, rightly referred to the wider work that the BBC does in our cultural and social life. To the many things he listed, I would add podcasts, which are becoming more and more important. I have just listened to “Shreds”, a brilliant podcast about the so-called Cardiff Three and the murder of Lynette White. I recommend it to right hon. and hon. Members as a fine example of public service broadcasting, as we used to call it, although I suppose in this case it is public service streaming or downloading. Brilliant content is being made available to licence fee payers by the BBC in a way that is new and innovative.
The right hon. Member for Wantage also asked, quite clearly and straightforwardly, whether reforming free TV licences for the over-75s would be the BBC's role, and he said that the answer is no. I therefore say to the Minister who is here today—the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries, the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Margot James)—that the right hon. Gentleman, a former Minister, made that absolutely clear. He was even a Minister in the Department when this decision was made, but he is absolutely clear that this is not a role that the BBC should play. That is her own right hon. Friend making that statement.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who unfortunately is also no longer in her place, mentioned her own 89-year-old mother—indeed, I have an 89-year-old mother who also relies on her television licence. My hon. Friend pointed out the amount of pension credit that remained unclaimed just in her own constituency of Swansea East, which is one of the more deprived parts of the country. She said that there was £6.5 million of unclaimed pension credit for her constituency alone, which prompts a question: what will happen if pension credit is claimed by a greater proportion of the population, as we all hope it will be, than is the case currently?

If that happens, the Government might find that, as a result of this policy, more people are claiming pension credit, which would be a good thing, but the Government would have to pay it. However, the increase would also mean an extra burden on the BBC, because of the greater number of free TV licences. I put down a written question to the Government to ask what estimate they had made of that effect and the answer was, “None whatsoever”. It is as if they are making all this up on the back of a fag packet as they go along.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) described the TV licence as “archaic”. I simply say to him, because he has obviously read and even swallowed some books on market economics along the way, that there are some things in life that are the opposite to the usual rule: they work in practice but not in theory. That is the case with the TV licence, which works in practice and has broad public support, as is clearly evidenced in the statistics that have been cited. It does not work in any economic theory textbook, but so what? It actually works very well and very effectively.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), who unfortunately is also not here for the wind-ups, told us about the positive response that there had been to the petition in her constituency. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), who does a lot of work in this place on issues affecting the BBC, described it as “much-loved” but an “anomaly”. In some ways, he is echoing some of the sentiments that I would like to express from the Opposition Front Bench. However, he also admitted that the BBC had not really been funded to pay for the free TV licence concession and that the commitment in the Government's manifesto up until 2022 should be honoured.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) mentioned, very importantly, the impact that this change could have on people with dementia, and the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) said that it was “inevitable”—I think I am quoting him directly here—that the BBC “would opt out at the first possible opportunity.”

The Government are trying to maintain the fiction that they did not need to opt out at the first opportunity, and that the BBC should continue to run this concession despite the fact that the funding has not been supplied.

My hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) pointed out that the outsourcing of blame is a speciality of this Government, and that this is a fine example. He also made the very important point that “talent” should not be used to refer just to on-air employees of the BBC. As we in the Opposition like to say, talent is everywhere; opportunity is not. We are here to try to extend opportunity much more widely than it currently is.

My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) quoted research from Cardiff University, and being from Cardiff, I have to accept it at face value as a very good piece of research. He made some points about BBC bias and so on, but I would say to him that the BBC is still the most trusted source of news among the public, and is also subject to Ofcom regulation and has to meet standards. He is right that we should hold the BBC to account but, imperfect as it is—I know that he accepts this point—it still plays a role in maintaining the gravitational pull of standards in this country’s broadcasting that is rarely matched in other parts of the western world.

We all give my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) our sympathies for the loss of his mother. He appealed to the Prime Minister, even at this late stage, to act on this matter. I would say to my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) that he should not put everybody from Oxbridge in the same category. There are working-class Oxbridge graduates—I include myself in that category, as well as the final speaker, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan). He was at Oxford at the same time as me, and also came from a working-class background, breaking through the typical mould that my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley, who has mentioned this, that he should not put everybody from Oxbridge in the same category. As usual, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley talked a lot of sense about the future of the BBC.

At the moment, the BBC is under attack from a number of different directions, and it is very sad that on the issue of the over-75s licence fee, the Government are joining that attack. It is sad that they are joining in the predictable attacks that come from some sections of the tabloid press, often owned—as my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South said—by a small number of individuals. The Government should do more to stand up for the BBC and support it, not try to outsource their responsibilities to our national broadcaster. As Joni Mitchell once said, “you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone.”

We should cherish the BBC as a uniquely British institution that works very effectively. Yes, let us hold it to account and try to improve it, but let us not use it as a whipping boy because of the Government’s own failure in their social policies. Finally, the Government’s handling of the over-75s licence fee is a disgrace. With the change of leadership, perhaps now is an opportunity for a change of mind.

7.3 pm

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl, and I congratulate the
[Margot James]

hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on securing this important debate on these three petitions. I agree with the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), that the hon. Lady’s opening speech was an excellent account of so many of the issues that drove those petitions, and her own response to them.

Before I address some of the issues that have been raised, I will echo the huge positivity from across the Chamber about the role, importance and value of the BBC. We in this country are extremely fortunate to have the BBC, for all the reasons that right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned; it delivers an enormous public service, with hugely successful productions such as “Bodyguard”, “Strictly Come Dancing” and the “Today” programme. I would add a recent one, “Gentleman Jack”, which is absolutely fantastic.

Mr Vaizey: Oh, I loved that.

Margot James: I am glad my right hon. Friend loved it. It was a series that illustrated the importance of diversity in the BBC: a regional series set in Halifax, written by a BAFTA-winning director and playwright, Sally Wainwright—also from Yorkshire—and co-produced by BBC Studios and Lookout Point. I wish that such a series had been aired when I was growing up in the 1970s.

Of course, it is the licence fee that delivers that public value and allows the BBC to reach UK audiences everywhere, from the TVs in our homes to all the gadgets and devices that we carry around with us. The BBC is also required to represent and cater for all sorts of niche interests that may not attract so much attention as a channel that depends on advertising, or even broad-based subscription revenues, for its identity and position. The BBC received close to £3.7 billion in licence fee income last year, and its unique position of providing distinctive content in under-served genres to under-served audiences is vital.

Right hon. and hon. Members will know that we carefully considered the question of the licence fee as part of the BBC charter review process in 2015 and 2016. We found that independent research demonstrated a great deal of public interest in the licence fee. Some 60% of people surveyed backed it as the least worst option, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) mentioned. For 60%, the licence fee was the mode of payment that they most supported, with fewer than 3% backing either an advertising model or a subscription-based model. Those figures are quite powerful, which is why we have committed to maintaining the licence fee funding model for at least the duration of this new 11-year charter period, which will bring us to the end of 2027. That provides the BBC with the funding certainty that it needs to thrive and deliver its mission and public purposes.

The media landscape is changing all the time, and citizens and consumers have more choice than ever before, particularly in the form of subscription-based services. However, the BBC’s content remains hugely popular. Some 91% of adults in the UK use its services each week, spending an average of 18 hours watching, listening to or using those services. Such figures demonstrate the continuing importance of the BBC in the fast-changing and increasingly competitive media landscape. In addition, the BBC directly invests over £2 billion in the UK’s creative industries each year, and invests billions of pounds in the digital and high-tech industries that support content creation and distribution. It is therefore a very important contributor not only to our shared experiences and public life but to the economy.

I now turn to the over-75s’ licence fee concession. Of course, the Government recognise the importance of television to people of all ages, particularly older people. We have heard a lot today from Members who, having talked to their constituents, have recounted what we all know: that the television can provide a lifeline to older people, particularly those who are recently bereaved or live alone, as a way of staying connected with the world. Right hon. and hon. Members have made that point clear, and I wholeheartedly agree with those sentiments.

However, if we cast our minds back four or five years to the time of the 2015 funding settlement, the Government had an expectation that all public services and public institutions had to find some economies and play their part in reducing the budget deficit overall and bringing some stability and sense to the public finances. Older people, like everybody else, mostly agreed with the need to do so, although they did not necessarily agree with all the means that were identified as routes towards restoring that stability and sense. However, it was agreed with the BBC that the responsibility for that concession would transfer to the BBC by June 2020.

In return, the Government closed the iPlayer loophole so that more people paid the licence fee. Many more people now pay the licence fee, leading to an uptick in the BBC’s revenues. The Government also committed to increase the licence fee in line with inflation during the charter period, which for the first time gave the BBC a more sustainable income for the future. At the time, the Government and the BBC agreed it was a fair deal.

Indeed, the director-general said: “The Government’s decision here to put the cost of the over-75s on us has been more than matched by the deal coming back for the BBC.”

Parliament debated the issue extensively in passing the Digital Economy Act 2017 and approving the transfer of the legal responsibility for the concession to the BBC. I was a Whip in that Government, and I can tell Members—I am sure you will remember this too, Dame Cheryl—that we had to compromise greatly on a number of very contentious issues, but this was not one of them.

Kevin Brennan: Rubbish!

Margot James: I will take an intervention from the hon. Gentleman if he likes.

Kevin Brennan: I will not let the Minister get away with that absolute rubbish. We tabled extensive amendments in Committee and on Report and opposed the proposal throughout. It was a highly contentious matter.

Margot James: To be fair to the hon. Gentleman, he has a fair point—that the matter was contentious—but the proposal got through without the Government having to make compromises, unlike other things. For example, Members might remember the proposals to change Sunday trading laws. That is one of several examples of
legislation that the Government had to change because opposition was so great. This transfer of responsibility did not attract the same level of opposition. Enough Members voted it through and Parliament therefore approved it, which is something we have to bear in mind. The responsibility was therefore passed to the BBC with parliamentary approval, and it was accepted by BBC governors and the director-general, no less.

I am willing to take more interventions on the other points that I have addressed, but I will turn to perceived bias and the BBC. Under its royal charter, the BBC has a duty to deliver high-quality, impartial and accurate news coverage and content. Members have already mentioned that 90% of the public value the news coverage of the BBC and believe in its impartiality. As with all other broadcasters, the BBC is subject to the Ofcom broadcasting code, which includes requirements on accuracy and impartiality. Ofcom is now firmly established as the new external regulator for the BBC. It will act to safeguard the high standards of impartiality that already exist at the BBC.

The Government are clear that the licence fee is the right funding model. It is clear that Ofcom’s robust approach to regulation will safeguard the impartiality that the BBC has a duty to observe. The licence fee concession was passed over, so I do not criticise the BBC for making the decision that it did. The BBC accepted the responsibility, and we should now let it get on and deliver at least a free licence to those over-75s who qualify for pension credit. Those 37% of people over the age of 75 who are entitled to pension credit will now have another incentive to claim it.

7.14 pm

Helen Jones: This has been an interesting debate. I thank all Members who have spoken on the various petitions that we are discussing. Some extremely interesting points have been made, but time does not allow me to go through them now. I thank the Minister for her sterling defence of the licence fee. In particular, I point out to her that I doubt whether that excellent programme “Gentleman Jack” would ever have been made by a commercial broadcaster. A pitch to a commercial broadcaster for a programme about gay women in early 19th-century Yorkshire would never have got beyond first base. It is an excellent programme.

However, I am sorry that the Minister did not respond—in fact, she probably cannot respond—to the real concern expressed about pensioners who will lose their free TV licence. That matter must be taken up higher up in Government by the Treasury. We need to ensure that our pensioners are protected. We certainly opposed that change at the time, and I know that other Members did too. We must admit that the current situation does not work and that the BBC should not be deciding social policy at all, and we must change the system to protect our pensioners.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petitions 234627, 234797 and 235653 relating to the BBC.

7.16 pm

Sitting adjourned.
It is rare for us to be able to discuss money in this way. It is a pleasure to lead this important debate on defence spending, and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting us time to discuss the funding of our nation’s defence at a time when our world is more unstable than ever and detractors wish the western liberal way of life and our values harm.

It is rare for us to be able to discuss money in this place. Today, we must consider what value we place on our nation’s defence, how the huge sums of money allocated to it are used, the interconnectivity of the Foreign Office’s assessment of global instability, our world-class military tacticians’ understanding of how we can protect our citizens and allies, and what we need to have in place to do so. We need to understand why projecting our cultural and economic values and ethos, and promoting Britain’s and our allies’ economic stability and prosperity, is vital.

The question is: is a percentage figure the way to judge whether we are investing enough? We need to look ourselves in the eye and ask why there is so little appetite among politicians to invest properly in defence spending. The issue is simply not in our postbags. The NHS is now in receipt of a huge extra budget of £20 billion a year by 2024. The Prime Minister agreed to such an enormous increase because it was clear from the hundreds of colleagues who spoke up on the matter that their constituents had too much unmet need and that resources needed to be increased. We needed to address old age—that great success story of the NHS—and mental ill health, because we want a healthy and happy population, and we now realise that it makes economic sense. In wishing to improve the lives of our constituents, the Government assessed that a step change in funding was required.

Defence, on the other hand, does not feature in our postbags. Commanding officers are not allowed to talk to MPs about the problems they are experiencing, including a lack of investment in the sites that they manage and resources to support their serving personnel, who have no choice about their location and environment. There is no mechanism to share concerns about kit provision or whether we will be able to sustain a long conflict. Due to secrecy or national security, the politicians who should be speaking up about whether more investment in defence is needed have too few facts to assess the reality of the situation.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Gentleman pre-empts some of what I am going to talk about. He is absolutely right.

Our doctors and nurses tell us directly and bluntly if the funding systems for the NHS are not working properly so we can do something about it and advocate for them. However, that is not an option for our defence chiefs, so it is hard for us to know whether their resources would be sustainable and resilient if there were a major crisis. The question is not only whether enough funding is going into our defences but whether we are spending it correctly—a narrative that ran successfully after the strategic defence and security review in 2010, when the country was in dire financial straits and the former Member for Whitney had the unenviable challenge of trying to put it back on to a stable financial footing. SDR ’10 declared—conveniently, perhaps, to match the financial crisis—that the Ministry of Defence is not being very clever. Going down the capital route, rather than the revenue route, would be much more efficient in the longer term.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As ever, the right hon. Gentleman is a great defender of his party’s financial position. I would not choose to pick a fight with him, because he is a staunch defender of all matters defence.
Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) on the use of the word “efficiency”. It is a fact—there is no reason to hide from it—that the Conservatives in the coalition Government cut the defence budget by 16%.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments.

The challenge is that the premise of SDSR ’10 was not just financial; it was that there was no longer an existential threat to the UK. It said that Russia was no longer a nation that we had to watch and fear. That has turned out to be a false premise, if it was ever anything other than an excuse to reduce defence spending. We were told that, owing to the sudden outbreak of global neighbourliness, we could return our Army from Germany. The freedom to move safely around international waters was assured because the middle east had become stable and unthreatening to the 20% of the UK’s energy requirements that travels by sea through the strait of Hormuz, so a reduction in the size of the ageing fleet was a perfectly sensible idea. Global airspace was going to be full of fluffy clouds and rays of sunshine, so there would be less need to patrol the skies or deliver force from the air to those who wish our allies harm, and we could reduce the number of airframes we would need. All that has, perhaps not surprisingly, turned out to be a false premise.

The Government seemed to make a conscious choice conveniently to forget that new equipment, recruitment and high-tech training takes time and money if we are to maintain our military advantage by having the best and most advanced equipment with the best-trained men and women in the world. I am afraid that SDSR ’10 was allowed to set out that false premise due to financial pressures. There was a realignment, as those in post realised that the position that was set out was not right. The work done for SDSR ’15 started to assess more honestly the instabilities across the globe and their risks to UK safety and prosperity, but the cash needed did not follow that strategic assessment.

It is a pleasure to see the Minister for the Armed Forces in his place; it is not him whom I challenge, but our Treasury Ministers. The pertinent question is, after setting out what was eventually understood to be required to meet minimum security risks in SDSR ’15, why have we not funded it properly to get the outputs that we know we need? We must be able to look our constituents in the eye and promise them that we can defend them. This is about not just the level of GDP that we use to know we need? We must be able to look our constituents in the eye and promise them that we can defend them.

In SDSR ’10, the MOD declared that we should reduce RAF aircraft numbers substantially while pushing forward with the aircraft carrier class of warship, but by SDSR ’15, those decisions had evidently proved incompatible, given that we need to increase aircraft numbers once again. We need to think holistically about transformation—the time it takes, the training requirements to achieve it and the best value-for-money methodology for doing it. As the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) said, that is the invest-to-save model, and the Treasury needs to help the Department. Short-term decisions for annualised cash-flow rules simply do not work for our defence programme and produce an output that meets our defence needs or our value-for-money rules.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech, and I congratulate her on securing this debate. Her point about through-life costs is very powerful. Does she agree that there should be more scrutiny—possibly independent—of the increase to the overall cost of projects caused by changes early in the cycle? I am, of course, thinking of the decision to delay the vote on renewing the deterrent submarines, which has added a significant amount of risk and cost to the project. Many of us said that to the Government at the time, but there was no ability to assess independently what the increased costs would be.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Gentleman’s point is well made. I will refer to submarines later. We need to challenge the Department continually on whether Committees such as the Defence Committee and the Public Accounts Committee, on which I sit, have the tools to look pre-emptively at the risks of those sorts of decisions.

There is also a mantra that technology is changing how we do everything and that it will, as if by magic, solve all challenges. It is implied that it will make everything cheaper, and that we can stop doing things the old way because there will be a whizzy, less manpower-hungry solution. Although it is true that world-leading UK defence businesses are creating extraordinary cutting-edge kit, that is not the only tool for solving our defence challenges. From Florence Nightingale and her medical advances to Alan Turing, the urgent need to gain advantage over the enemy has always brought out the brilliance of our citizens’ inventive genes. Defence has always been at the forefront of innovation because defence in action stretches human ingenuity under the insane pressures of war.

John Spellar: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her excellent speech. However, for industry to be able to respond, there needs to be an industry. That requires the British armed forces and the Treasury to put orders into British factories and British yards, rather than applying a model of international competition that takes no account of the prosperity agenda and no account of the long-term sustainability of the defence industry and its ability to innovate.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: That question of sovereignty and the prosperity agenda—the third pillar of defence’s remit—is one we need to continue to challenge. As a Brexiteer, I am happy to say that I think we will have more authority to speak in how we choose to do that—

John Spellar: That’s not true.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Well, that is my opinion. Leaving the EU will give us more flexibility to bring the various parties together and will enable UK businesses, which are world leading, to make their case as effectively as possible.

John Spellar: The hon. Lady should not allow herself to be misled by Treasury-speak. In both European regulations and the Treasury Green Book, the Ministry
of Defence has all the tools it needs to support British industry. The problem is a lack of will. It does not help to blame the EU. The problems are in Whitehall, not in Brussels.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. The Minister will have heard his perspective.

One of the key issues for defence is its people, who are flexible, selfless, uncomplaining and serve willingly—indeed, alongside the Minister, who puts his life on the line to serve his country. Equipment changes constantly—if it did not, we would still be sending our Navy to sea under sail—but the quality of our people is always critical. We spend more than a third of our defence budget on people. I say that that is an investment, since they are highly trained and we invest in their training throughout their careers, in a way almost no other employer does. However, we classify them as a cost, so departmental behaviour fails to look after them—our human capital—as assets.

We would not fail to repaint a warship—clearly, that would make her less seaworthy or less capable of dealing with the scars of battle—yet we are perfectly content to fail to invest in the personnel who serve, by not looking after their families and by failing to demonstrate what the armed forces covenant should mean: that if someone has served or is serving, this country genuinely thinks they and their family should not suffer disadvantage. It is imperative that we change the financial models the MOD is allowed to use so that our human capital can be classified as an asset. Service chiefs cannot determine how to reward their personnel, because they are not allowed to use their budgets freely to maximise the benefit to their people and their service. For small change—in both senses of the word—the behavioural changes achieved by flexibility would be substantial and immediate.

I believe the reason change is not happening is that the Department and the Treasury fail to understand the nature of military preparedness, and do not seem to question our resilience if we need to put our military under pressure. Although we put kit that is small, plentiful, cheap and speedy to resource on to the soldier, we put highly skilled men and women, who take years to train, into equipment in the Royal Navy and the RAF that takes years to build. A modern warship or fast jet cannot be whipped up in a few months. It is at the mercy of international supply chains, the risks of which, as the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) mentioned, perhaps are not properly understood.

Importantly, that equipment would take a long time to replace if lost. Although bullets for small arms can be produced at speed if necessary, the missiles sustaining our warships and Air Force cannot be churned through a production line at speed if they are suddenly required. Training a submarine commanding officer or fast jet pilot takes years of investment—it takes time. Too often, it feels like the Department’s financial models simply refuse to acknowledge that and fail to understand the human capital investment that is being made, leaving us with huge risk from poorly assessed decisions.

We must consider the key tenets of successful defence and assess whether we are investing enough to sustain them. The first is deterrence. Deterrence works. Nuclear is the ultimate deterrent, but we must never forget that conventional deterrence has greater utility and that strong power generates respect. Let us consider for a moment our nuclear deterrent in its 50th year in our Royal Navy. Our continuous at-sea deterrent is an extraordinary feat. I always refer to it as our best weapon of peace, because the threat of nuclear war has ensured that we have had no more global wars. Humanity understands genuine existential threat, and the CASD is the embodiment of the UK and USA’s global policing, which reminds any rogue state why using a nuclear weapon would be a bad decision. But do we invest properly in our submarine service?

John Woodcock: indicated dissent.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head violently. I have talked about the CASD repeatedly in the House since I was elected in 2015. It strikes me as bizarre that the long-term nature of that critical weapon of peace is stuck in a funding framework that stubbornly refuses to allow long-term planning and flexible funding. All credit to the former Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson), for persuading the Treasury last year to bring forward £600 million of funding to bring forward the Dreadnought—additional funding but simply to reduce future financial risk—to assist in making efficient decisions to move the Dreadnought programme forward a little more effectively. Deferred cost is always increased cost. I speak as an accountant who has done this many times.

Mr Kevan Jones: The money the hon. Lady refers to was already in the contingency budget. Does she agree that the delay under the coalition Government in making a decision to build the Dreadnought class of submarines not only delayed the programme but added cost to it?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I agree completely. Deferred cost will always be increased cost in such big projects. We need more financial flexibility to get better value for money. Why did we have to battle so hard last year to get the Treasury to move on that £600 million? Why is the Treasury not doing its long-term cash-flow thinking in a rational way? If we are going to keep the CASD—there is overwhelming support for that across the House and the nation—it would make financial sense to allow a multi-year rolling financial commitment so Ministers can make rational decisions.

John Woodcock: The hon. Lady is making a superb case. Is there not a case for going so far as to make good on the commitments, which have been made at various points of the successor programme but then conveniently forgotten when there have been changes of personnel, to properly insulate the programme and remove it from the conventional defence budget? That would allow it to be managed as a proper long-term national endeavour capital commitment, rather than being subject to the in-year in and out of defence spending on other programmes.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I completely agree. Both I and the hon. Gentleman have pushed that campaign. I would not dare to suggest that I want another general election in a hurry, but we attempted to put that in the Conservative manifesto at the last election to bring about a change. I will continue to do that as and when the appropriate moment arises.
The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the MOD is not like any other Department of State. It has these 20-year programmes, which should be funded in a different way—a more intelligent and stable way. We need to get the Treasury to hear us and realise that the financial models need to be separate so that, exactly as he says, those programmes are treated as national endeavours. In the same way we funded Crossrail through a separate fund so it could roll forward as effectively as possible, despite the often challenging technical issues as we create state-of-the-art kit, we should give those working on these programmes the best financial framework to work within.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op):
The hon. Lady is making a very effective case for multi-year spending and the need to reappraise entirely the Green Book principles. Does she agree that, in this instance, the restrictions on multi-year spending for programmes—particularly the Type 26—put at risk our sovereign capabilities, such as the electric motors factory in Rugby, which manufactures critical components for anti-submarine frigates? That may have been lost had the MOD not responded. We cannot continue to fight a war of attrition; we need a strategic approach.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I completely agree. We must continue to hammer home the importance of sovereign capability and work with industry to build opportunities. I say again, despite the criticism of the right hon. Member for Warley, that there will be opportunities once we have left the European Union to think more coherently than we have before—I think we have chosen not to do that—and for us parliamentarians to challenge the system more aggressively on the question of what sovereign capabilities, such as the electric motors factory in Rugby, which manufactures critical components for anti-submarine frigates? That may have been lost had the MOD not responded. We cannot continue to fight a war of attrition; we need a strategic approach.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Some time ago in her speech, the hon. Lady mentioned the Army covenant. I am sure she agrees it is vital that the covenant is implemented in full to servicemen and women in Northern Ireland. Doing so may cost a little more money, but the benefit to those people suffering from post-traumatic stress and mental health issues far outweighs that.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I absolutely agree. In my role as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant, I have spent some time in Northern Ireland, where we have some real challenges at the grassroots level—not the political level—to try to help those who need day-to-day support to look after themselves. I have met some extraordinary women and extraordinary wives—I take the opportunity to say they are extraordinary—who are looking after very damaged former soldiers, some of whom are the hon. Gentleman’s constituents. They deserve all credit.

The world is not a safer place, and while the nature of warfare may be changing, at the end of the day we need to be able to reach wherever the threat is, bearing in mind that, as my son always reminds me, five sevenths of the globe are covered in water. Ships are therefore a critical tool, and our shipbuilding strategy must reflect the importance we play as a United Kingdom, and a critical part of NATO.

The key point is that presence is influence, and with influence come positive outcomes. We cannot do deterrence if we are not there. We saw that demonstrated in stark images on our TV screens last week when HMS Montrose, in the strait of Hormuz assured the safe passage of a BP tanker, protecting it from the insurgent threat of Iranian military attack. If Montrose had not been there, I dread to think what might have happened. Freedom of navigation around the world’s seas and oceans is critical to our economy: 95% of all our imports come by sea, and it is NATO’s navies that keep the sea lanes open for commercial traffic. We would all be very cross indeed and notice quickly if Felixstowe or Dover were shut down by enemy attack. In the same way, just because we cannot see the huge areas of oceans from which our goods and energy are being brought to us, that does not mean we should forget that we need to police those waters, too.

Jamie Stone: What the hon. Lady is saying about the Royal Navy is music to my ears. I look forward to participating in the armed forces scheme next year.

The F-35 is a splendid aircraft that I fully support us buying from the Americans, but the bitter fact is that, as we all know, we will never own all the intellectual property of that aircraft. We will never know exactly how it works because of security aspects. Why should the Americans tell us? That is one reason why keeping manufacture here in the British Isles as much as we can is crucial. Only if we make it, or do so in partnership with others, will we know everything there is to know, with that information being secure.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Gentleman’s point is well made.

The question today is defence spending. Let me therefore share with the House the assessment the Public Accounts Committee made of the latest equipment plan:

“In May 2018 we reported that the Ministry of Defence... did not have enough money to buy and support the equipment it needs.”

Bear in mind that buying is 50% and supporting is 50%. Our report continued:

“the Department has made little progress, continuing to delay the difficult decisions needed to make the Equipment Plan...affordable, particularly around which programmes to stop, delay or scale back. It now estimates a most likely affordability gap...of £7 billion across its Plan... It also estimates that the gap could widen to £14.8 billion, but even this looks to be unlikely and overly optimistic. The escalating and continuing affordability issues have led to short-term decision making which has only worsened the longer-term affordability risks.”

We continue to watch that on the Public Accounts Committee, but the sense of anxiety just builds as we keep seeing a lack of change in policy frameworks. Instability across the globe is increasing, so if we do not build the equipment we need to achieve our SDSR ’15 goals, let alone what those in SDSR ’20 might look like, we will simply not be able to meet politicians’ requirements.

Politics is about making choices and we need to think carefully about this one. Our military will always offer their political masters choices and solutions as required,
but they may have to bend themselves out of shape with collateral damage, gaps and risks elsewhere in order to do so. I do not believe that we can expect them to do so if we, the politicians, do not give them the funds they need to meet at least the SDSR ’15 asks. If we do not show confidence in our military personnel with, in the scheme of things, a very small amount of cash investment in human capital, which is utterly vital to success in warfare, we will continue to lose too many people who have been willing to commit their lives to defending us and our families.

We must not leave our armed forces with the impossible decision of robbing Peter to pay Paul. Short-term decisions on finances can have long-term implications on recruitment, retention and equipment capability and availability. Defence is an insurance policy, so if we get our deterrence right, it stops wars and attacks on us or our allies. That is success, but it costs to achieve that, and it is invisible. No soldiers on our TV screens battling in the desert does not mean that we are not maintaining a global presence to deter those who would wish us and our allies harm. Military personnel are defending us and our way of life invisibly 24 hours a day.

We all have house insurance not because we expect our homes to burn down, but because a roof over our family’s head is so important that we plan to protect ourselves just in case. Our armed forces are our nation’s “just in case.” I worry about how our political leaders sleep soundly at night thinking that we have only a budget insurance policy and hoping that we will never have to claim on it. The budget is large at £40 billion a year, but, without the right decisions and an acceptance that that is not quite enough for what is needed to keep us all safe, the shortfall in funding and financial frameworks leaves us horribly exposed to unknown threats.

We must bring the defence budget up at least to the point where the political ambitions set out in our own SDSR s are matched by the funding for our military experts to deliver those for us. To do that, I estimate we need an increase of some £4 billion a year to the budget and, equally importantly, flexibility to fund long-term projects intelligently for best value and speediest output. It cannot be right that we allow our military personnel to be put at greater risk than they need to be by failing to invest properly in our Army, Navy and Air Force.

I do not mind if the Treasury wants to invest more because it is morally the right thing to do to ensure we can protect our people, our trade and our allies, or simply because it is the right financial method to make better use of taxpayers’ money over the long term to get real value for money. If the financial models set out in the Green Book do not deliver that, we should change them so that they do.

We are in charge of our country’s destiny and we can set the framework to maximise the positive outcomes for this great nation of ours, which is respected around the world for its military prowess and its people. I thank the Minister for his loyal support of our armed forces, and I hope that the Treasury is listening.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. There are slightly more speakers than we had anticipated, so I will introduce a time limit of three minutes to try to get everyone in. We may have a squeeze at the end if people do not follow that.

9.56 am

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): There is one thing the Conservative party is, and that is consistent. Its Members call for more defence expenditure while in opposition, and when they come into power they cut defence expenditure. In 2010, defence was not immune from austerity and the budget was cut by 16%. The smoke screen the Government put up—that they had inherited a £38 billion black hole in the defence budget—was complete. It was utter nonsense.

Mr Jones: No, I will let others make their speeches.

Ministers kept repeating that claim. I kept asking them about it, but never got an explanation. I think it came from a National Audit Office report from 2009 that said that if the equipment budget was flat over the next 10 years, that might get us to £36 billion; if it rose with inflation, it would be about £6 billion in the defence capital budget. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) was talking about the two budgets conflated.

We then saw slash and burn, with stupid decisions such as the scrapping of Nimrod and the Harriers, vicious cuts made to people’s pay, and redundancies. That led us to a situation where we have an Army that, at 82,000 personnel, is the smallest it has ever been. No one has yet explained to me how that figure was set.

We are told that the defence budget is rising, but the foundations are shaky. If we look at the 2015 SDSR, we see a huge amount of it is based on billions of pounds of efficiencies that have not yet been and cannot be met. To return to the claim that Labour somehow left a £38 billion black hole, if the situation was so terrible, it is strange that two years in, the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond) eliminated it overnight.

In defence, we need honesty. There is a degree of consensus across the House on the support needed for members of our armed forces and for defence. What we need now is an honest stocktake, looking at our commitments and what we want to do in the world, and ensuring that, as the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) said, we fund not just the capital side—equipment is important—but the people. I hear all the time that we can do more with more sophisticated equipment, but as any military technician will say, mass and people are still important. We must invest in them over the long term.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): The hon. Gentleman can have an extra minute, because the Front-Bench spokespeople have agreed to take only five minutes, so hon. Members have four minutes each.

Mr Jones: I always liked the Minister; he is very good.

Investment in people does not just mean balancing the in-year budget, which I suspect is what has happened. How was money taken straight out of the defence budget in 2010? It happened in two ways: by taking equipment out, as the Government did by putting a wrecking ball through the Nimrod and Harrier programmes; and by slowing the recruitment pipeline.
[Mr Kevan Jones]

That will lead to problems in future years as people develop and we find that we have capability gaps, not in equipment but in people's skills, which are important.

Regarding the Conservative party's commitment to defence expenditure, let us hope that the promises made by the two contenders to become the next Prime Minister hold water. I will support any Government who want to increase spending and, more important, invest in the people we rely on every single day for our peace and security.

10.1 am

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In the four minutes available, I propose to make two points. First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) on a masterly introduction to the debate. Her timing could have been better—to secure a debate so close to the arrival of a new Prime Minister is perhaps chancing her arm. Nevertheless, if we are to get the issue in the news, we need to link it to that, so I will quote the responses of the two remaining candidates in the race to be the next Prime Minister to my letter of 26 June, which asked about their defence policies.

On 2 July, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), the former Foreign Secretary, replied:

"The armed forces have done some exceptional work of late in attempting to live within an increasingly stretched budgetary environment. I can give you an absolute commitment to fund defence fully. I believe military spending should be dictated by the threats we face—and, it is clear that these threats have multiplied in both scale and complexity in recent years. I guarantee, of course, that we will exceed the minimum 2% NATO spending target and the Defence Budget will continue to grow at a minimum of 0.5% annually."—made available, I think he means—

"for new capabilities and not simply plugging gaps in existing plans. Were I to become Prime Minister, I would consider the path of further increases in spending once the 2.5 per cent had been achieved."

That is their position.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Lewis: I had better not, because of time pressure.

Secondly, to coincide with the debate, the Defence Committee has updated its April 2016 report, "Shifting the Goalposts? Defence Expenditure and the 2% pledge", in which we set defence spending in context. We showed that, while we spent similar amounts on education, defence and health in the mid-1980s, we now spend 2.5 times more on education than defence, and 4 times more on health.

Our latest report, which was published today—HC 2527, for those who are interested—has recalculated the figures for the last few years and brought them up to date. It shows that, in the last three years, we have spent 2.1% on defence, if we calculate it from NATO's point of view and bring in extra things such as war pensions, which never used to count towards the total. If we exclude them, the new report shows that our like-for-like defence spending is only 1.8%. Is that credible in an age when the profile of the threats we face includes an adversarial Russia and the revival of a terrorist threat in the form of Islamist terrorism? When we compare it with the 1980s, when we regularly spent 4.5% compared with 1.8%, or 5% compared with 2.1%, we can see the shortfall.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Slightly unusually, if an hon. Member takes an intervention, I will not add on time, because that would push somebody else out at the end and they would not be able to speak.

10.5 am

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is good that the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who I call a friend, has secured the debate. We disagree on nearly everything except defence, so it is a good place to be.

As Devonport's MP, I talk a lot about defence and defence spending—and rightly so, because it is the country's largest naval base. It is home to the Type 23s with tails, which are soon to be replaced like for like by the new Type 26s; our amphibious capabilities, Albion and Bulwark, although sadly we lost the HMS Ocean due to Conservative cuts earlier in this Parliament; and the baying for the fantastic and underevaluated flag officer sea training arrangements. In Babcock, we have a refit capability that is second to none around the world; it is currently refitting HMS Vanguard and our hunter-killer class.

Devonport is also where we tie up old nuclear submarines; there are 13 awaiting spending to ensure their safe and sustainable recycling. That is why a defence spending debate is important, because those nuclear submarines—those big expensive tickets—frequently drop off the bottom of the priority list. They get left and tied up not only in Devonport but in Rosyth. That is why we need to get our defence spending level right.

The argument that I and the hon. Members for Berwick-upon-Tweed and for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), who represents Rosyth, have made is that we should use a different funding mechanism to support the recycling of those submarines. We know that the defence budget does not have enough pennies in it and that there will always be a greater priority than recycling old nuclear submarines. Our cross-party argument is that, instead of putting pressure on the Minister, who already has many demands on his time and on the pennies in his budget, the civil clean-up programme that is cleaning up our civil nuclear power stations should be extended to those nuclear submarines.

We have to find a way to recycle those submarines. If we wait for the Ministry of Defence's budget to provide the funds, I fear that we will wait as long again as we already have—many decades. The first submarine was tied up before I was born; we cannot wait that long again for it to be done sustainably. That is why we need to look at the issue carefully.

I agree with the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on the need to value the whole-life costing and to invest to save. That is certainly
what we need to do with our submarine programme and our future capabilities in naval warfare in terms of the basing arrangements.

I look forward to meeting the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), to talk about the refit of the Stonehouse barracks as an interim measure. It is not right that when at home, not on operations, our Royal Marines are being asked to reside in blocks without hot water or decent heating. That is not acceptable to Plymouth, which is a military city that is proud of its Royal Marines, and it should not be acceptable to any hon. Member. I hope we can put cross-party pressure on Ministers.

We could go into the line-item spending on defence, but we need to start from the top. What are we trying to do with defence? Where is our strategy for it? The 2010 and 2015 strategic defence and security reviews were fronts for cuts; all hon. Members present know that, because we are the defence-focused MPs from every party. They were excuses for cuts and did not portray a decent strategic analysis of where we are as a nation or the threats against us. The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed was polite in her description of the 2010 SDSR, but we need a proper review that looks at the real threats that face us and that has a properly funded plan to address them, including long-term industrial strategies for combat air, naval procurement, autonomous marine and autonomous aerial. There is a lot to get right, and we should start with a decent strategy that enables us to look at it properly.

10.9 am

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) on securing this debate and introducing it with such brio. I am delighted to see how many colleagues are present to debate these important matters.

On the defence budget, I was reassured to hear from the Chair of the Defence Committee, my right hon. Friend for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), that my Right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), who is most likely to win the leadership election, told that Committee—

"I can give you an absolute commitment to fund defence fully."

In the nicest possible way, we should bank that and endeavour to hold him to it if and when he becomes our Prime Minister.

Having been a Defence Minister—I have great respect for the Minister, as he knows—I have always believed that there is a kind of asymmetric conversation between the Ministry of Defence and the Treasury. I will exaggerate slightly for effect, but it essentially goes as follows.

The MOD view is, “Those people over the road don’t know what they’re doing. They don’t understand us. They don’t realise the relentless operational pressure that we have been under for 20 years, or the pressure on our people. They ask us to scrimp and save at every possible opportunity to make false economies that are injurious to the defence of the realm.”

The Treasury view goes something like this: “Those people across the road don’t know what they’re doing. They have £36 billion a year. They don’t manage it very well or control their contractors properly, and waste a vast amount of it on procurement programmes that go way over budget and come in years late. All they ever do is bleat like children for more money so that they can waste it on more procurement programmes that go wrong.”

Those are the asymmetric views, and the truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. If we are to deal effectively with the defence of this country, rather than that adversarial relationship, which is how I have seen it happen for so long, we have to get those two Departments to work together positively for the benefit of our country and its defence. In fairness, the MOD does have to be better at managing its budget. Some contracts are shocking and the MOD has been deficient in holding contractors to account. The military flying training system is a disaster, partly because of the unavailability of Hawk, and on that, BAE Systems needs to look to its laurels.

The Defence Infrastructure Organisation is not the most efficient part of the Ministry of Defence—the maintenance contract with Amey is awful. The other day, the DIO told the Public Accounts Committee that there was a 64% satisfaction rate, but there is not. In the armed forces continuous attitude survey, the satisfaction rate is actually 32%, which is an appalling statistic. The A400M has been an absolute procurement disaster—it is known as “the dog” by the crews that operate it at RAF Brize Norton—at a cost of £2.6 billion for aircraft with an appalling reliability rating, bad engines and gearbox, and an inability to deliver paratroops. Finally, as the Minister knows, it would be unlike me not to mention my great friends “Crapita”—whose army recruitment contract is utterly hopeless. While the number of applications goes up, the number of people joining goes down.

There is a way through this: whoever they may be, the next Defence Secretary and the next Chancellor—I wish our outgoing Chancellor the very best of luck in his posting in outer Mongolia—need to work together for the benefit of this country’s defence.

10.13 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in these debates. I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) on setting the scene, and thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed.

Like others in this Chamber, I am massively concerned about defence spending, as every hon. Member in this place should be. We are known as a world leader, and for that to be in any way meaningful, it must follow that our defence is top class and that the men and women who wear the uniform of this great country—the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—are irreputably the best in the world. The very clear fact is that we do not do as well by them as they do by us.

We sit at the NATO target of 2% GDP for defence, but I cannot quite figure out why that figure means that we are doing okay. Some have outlined to me that while the paper trail can look like 2% GDP, the reality is very different. The Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), mentioned the figure of 1.8%, which would not be in order.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that when looking at historical defence expenditure, the UK’s defence spending as a
percentage of GDP has been reduced by more than 50% over the last 40 years? That is a real indictment of Governments of all types and descriptions. We need to do better by our armed forces.

Jim Shannon: I would adhere to and agree with my hon. Friend’s figures.

The obligations on our armed forces are incredible. From war zones to giving aid in peace zones and every area in between, such as simply helping Commonwealth nations to do the right thing on the world stage, as we often do, our men and women are the first on the scene doing the best job, but we stretch our resources in every operation or every time we lend a hand. I put on the record that some of the other NATO countries need to make an effort to meet their obligations. Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania have met theirs, but where is Germany on its NATO contribution?

All that heaps pressure on the everyday running of the forces, on their recruitment processes, and on the training for the next generation. I am not stuck on a figure for military spending, although I would aim high, and while I understand that a bottomless budget is impossible, an adequate one is not—it is essential.

Between 2018-19 and 2019-20, defence spending is planned to increase by an annual average of 1.4% in real terms. Defence spending in 2019-20 is planned to be £1 billion more in real terms than in 2016-17. That is good news, but if that is the figure we are aiming for, will it do the business? Is it enough to ensure that our armed forces personnel have the right equipment at the right time for the battle, the right training for the situation and the right support for when the fighting is done?

At present, what I am hearing is that we simply are not there. Recruitment officials cannot afford to run high-end campaigns to attract the next generation. We do not have the funding to give new recruits the appropriate training in different situations to ensure that they are as prepared as possible. On the frontline, we are certainly lacking in top of the range and fit-for-purpose equipment.

On recruitment, the armed forces have always recruited highly in Northern Ireland, and I understand that the campaign there is going well. Will the Minister give some idea of the recruitment figures? I commend the gallant Minister for his service and for his commitment and interest. I know that when he responds, we will get a reply that we will be happy with. Are we sourcing as much equipment as possible from our own shores to support local industry? Will the Minister ensure that everyone across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland benefits? We also need funding to address the mental health of veterans of all ages.

Our Navy, Air Force and Army are simply the best. We need to do better by them and that is why I support the calls for an increase in defence spending above and beyond the schedule and the target.

10.17 am

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) on securing the debate. As someone who represents RNAS Culdrose in my constituency, I cannot stress enough that base’s value to our local area, to our community and to the skills and opportunities afforded to our young people and those who work there.

My hon. Friend was right to challenge us to understand the full value of defence, both of the realm and of UK plc. I do not want to repeat what has already been said, but I will touch briefly on the issue of recruitment and retention of armed forces personnel, starting with where they live and work.

I have seen for myself the standard of accommodation that we expect our armed forces personnel to live in. If we value them as we say we do, and if we want them to join and stay in the armed forces, we must find the money to improve where they live. I challenge the Minister to challenge Government on how serious they are about the climate change emergency, because the Committee on Climate Change clearly recommended an improvement of our accommodation. It is right that we challenge the Government to fund quickly the improvement and retrofitting of armed forces accommodation. That would not come out of the defence budget, but would meet our national and international commitments. Is the Minister prepared to challenge the Government on their commitment to improving the living accommodation of our servicemen and women and their families?

On the working environment, one does not have to go to many bases—I have been to a few—to see that real investment is needed in the places that our armed forces work. There has been a multimillion-pound investment in RNAS Culdrose—it is an amazing piece of work but it has taken us an extremely long time to get there. We used to have hangars that had not been useable for some time. I am pleased to see the work going on there, but I recognise that more is needed there and elsewhere. That is not an easy thing to do when also trying to provide the right kind of kit—the technical expression for our carriers and so on—but it is right that wherever our armed forces are based and work, we give them the safest and best working environment possible.

I will touch on one other area briefly. The armed forces community, as defined in the armed forces covenant, includes regular personnel, reservists and veterans, but not the merchant navy or the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service. That is relevant to my constituency. The merchant navy is not the armed forces, but it is tough on the children. Mums and dads can be away for the entire school holidays, which will be the case for some of my constituents this summer. They can be caught up in aggressive and intimidating situations around the globe, in particular with attacks by pirates and other rogue individuals elsewhere on the planet. As a result, schools in my constituency have to handle difficult situations. That is not about defence spending, but I would like the Minister to consider whether modern-day threats and the modern-day role of the merchant navy justify including the merchant navy—such as those of my constituents who serve—in the armed forces covenant.

10.21 am

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Betts, for calling me to speak. It is a pleasure to do so in this debate, which was ably introduced by the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan).
The figures are stark. Certainly in my lifetime, over the past 30 years, the defence budget has halved as a percentage of GDP. During the austerity programme in the UK over the past decade alone, it has in effect been cut by a quarter. Furthermore, looping in additional spending items such as pensions, as alluded to previously, is fanciful in the extreme as a way to save from embarrassment by padding out the defence budget. It is certainly not reflected in operational capability, which is at the core of what the budget should be a measure of. Nor was I particularly enamoured of the claims by the possible successors to the Prime Minister of their commitment to defence spending. Even the most extravagant proposal will only return defence spending to the level under the previous Labour Government when they left office in 2010, at 2.5% of GDP. That is not a dramatic transformation of the defence budget, because even then defence faced significant resourcing challenges.

One of the biggest aspects of defence expenditure—and the measures applied to it by the Treasury—to have a deleterious effect on operational capability is multi-use and generational spending, as alluded to by the hon. Lady. That was a critical part of Sir John Parker’s report which, unfortunately, did not make it into the final national shipbuilding strategy—I wonder why. The critical piece of advice, or observation, on the failure of existing capital programmes was to do with the lack of an assured capital budget, as well as a lack of a grip on in-year budgets. That acted further against increased efficiency, throughput and, ultimately, combat effectiveness, and against the increased size of the Royal Navy.

That is the ultimate absurdity in the vicious cycle perpetuated by the existing funding model. That is why I welcome the Labour party’s commitment to tear up the Green Book, because it is thoroughly unfit for purpose when it comes to major defence equipment programmes. We therefore need a thorough review of how we ensure assured capital budgets for major defence procurement programmes. I hope that the Minister will allude to how the Type 26 programme’s increase from 18 to 24 months is an effective use of public money.

Also, why are this Government not invested in the upper-quartile shipbuilding facilities necessary to further major projects? What is the government’s position on these? One of the most keenly awaited developments is the Ministry of Defence expenditure, which could double the competitive position of the UK’s shipyards. Getting our processes and methods correct—world-benchmarked against other shipyards around the world. Getting our processes and methods correct—world-class—was militated against by the need to balance against the increased size of the Royal Navy.

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by Leonardo employees but by those whose companies are part of the supply chain. Beyond the purely economic, the Defence Secretary was right to highlight the role that our armed forces play in increasing social mobility, binding communities together and exemplifying those real values which they are called on to defend.

The three objectives set out in SDR ‘15 remain of paramount importance: protecting our influence; projecting our global influence; and promoting our prosperity. As we take stock of whatever Brexit resolution is achieved in future, it is vital that it does not undercut either our commitment to the security frameworks that have guaranteed peace on our continent, or Britain’s ability to project its power in defence of our values and interests.

10.29 am

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) on securing this timely and important debate, and on her enthusiasm and support for and her commitment to our armed forces and veterans. That is fantastic.

I must respond to the remarks of the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), whom I consider a friend, on how when Conservatives come into office we have to make some pretty tough decisions. The reason for that is very simple: every single Labour Government in history leave a mess to clear up, and we cannot defend our country if we are broke. As we regain our status as a sovereign, self-governing country—[Interruption. I did not interrupt the hon. Gentleman. So I ask for the same respect.]

It is important that the UK is both a credible partner and a reliable ally. That means that the UK has to remain a tier 1 military power. We must retain a global reach and, if necessary, a sustainable level of effort either as a coalition partner or unilaterally. To achieve that, we must be able to field top-of-the-range equipment that can go up against any near peer competitor. We must not return to the situation when we deployed troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, where our forces were nicknamed “the borrowers” because we did not have adequate funding from HM Government to deploy and protect our people on those operations. We must also understand the threats that emanate from non-state actors or terrorists who seek to undermine our way of life and denigrate our resilience by attacking our critical national infrastructure in a cyber-attack. All that requires investment and a sustainable defence budget.

In the time I have left I will focus on the benefits of defence spending to our economy. The Royal United Services Institute estimates that for every £1 spent by Government on orders in the UK defence sector, well over a third—36%—is returned to the Treasury via taxation. The UK defence industrial sector is one of the world’s strongest, with an annual turnover of £22 billion, and it supports 260,000 jobs, many of which are highly skilled and well paid. I am proud to represent a constituency that is home to many of our world-class defence manufacturers, as well as the Ministry of Defence’s defence acquisition service at Abbey Wood, which employs roughly 8,000 people.

I am passionate about social mobility and apprenticeships. The Ministry of Defence is the largest provider of apprenticeships in the country; it has enrolled 53,000 civil service and armed forces apprentices since April 2015. Over 90% of military non-commissioned personnel now gain an apprenticeship as part of their trade training and first assignment. In 2018 the UK defence sector employed 4,400 apprentices. They are crucial to develop and continue our sovereign defence capability, and to develop the skills of our military personnel so that when they go back to civilian life after their service, they have the electronic and cyber skills and all the things they could need in future. As I said, 250,000 jobs are supported, so there is a huge argument for having a sustainable, properly funded MOD when we get to the comprehensive spending review.

Most of us would agree that we should, at least, maintain our minimum commitment of 2% of GDP: most would argue it should be nearer 3% to sustain what we are trying to do on a global stage and to continue our global reach. For social mobility, apprenticeships are a vital route to provide engineers and scientists, of which we are already short, and to give employees the necessary skills for our country for the future.

10.32 am

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) on her passionate advocacy on all occasions and on the very valuable and insightful points that she made.

In the 1990s, we saw a supposed peace dividend. I suggest that was illusory then and, in the face of a revanchist Russia, is folly now. We live in a world of great power threats, where there are diversifying, multiple non-state actor threats, too. It is right that we invest properly in our armed forces.

We tend always to have this debate in the context of kit. I welcome the fact, as the Minister will probably remind us in due course, that we are due to see two new aircraft carriers coming on stream, and the F-35s too. Of course, we need enough to make sure that we can operate both carriers, but that may be a point for another day. I welcome the Poseidons coming on stream; the first British-marked example flew only last week. I very much value that, but we must not just see all those as expensive baubles that are signature-tick projects to show we are investing in defence. We need a holistic approach to our armed forces.

I am grateful that my hon. Friend mentioned deterrence—she is quite right—but she will realise, as I am sure most hon. Members do, that we need layered defence deterrents for them to work at all. It is no good simply relying on the nuclear deterrent, because that is devalued hugely if there are not the layers to support it. What we have done in the past is simply to salami-slice the defence budget—chop a programme here and a capability there, in order to make ends meet. That simply will not do. We need a strategic assessment of the threats we face and what kind of power we want to be: do we want to be a full-spectrum tier 1 power? If we do, we need to fund our forces appropriately for the threats we wish them to defend against.
We have to see the value of the kit beyond just the capability it provides. I always refer to the glory of the 1960s aviation industry in this country—multiple companies producing wonderful multiple young men; but that world simply does not exist anymore. We could buy cheap, capable kit off the shelf from the Americans. That is one philosophical approach we might take, although I do not think we should and I doubt many of us do, because we would lose our sovereign capability and investment in industry.

We have to accept, therefore, that if we want sovereign capability, it requires the Government to invest not just in money but in strategy. In the past, we have taken neither approach; we have bought a bit of kit; we have invested in some kit; we have built some kit ourselves; we have collaborated in other kit, but with no overall holistic approach. My view is unequivocal: we should have that sovereign capability for reasons of national defence and because it employs hundreds if not thousands of people in our industries. We are very good at it, and it provides the skills that our young people would like, but it requires Government investment in planning.

I very much welcome the shipbuilding and combat air strategies but, as has been referred to, we need plans for a number of other things, including autonomous capability, helicopters, transport tankers, carriers and training—there are probably others. Above all, we need the Treasury to recognise the value of defence and not the cost. I see that when representing RAF Brize Norton. It is difficult to expect bright young people to serve if they cannot get a hot shower in the middle of winter, or if they see that their accommodation is nowhere near as good as what their friends have in the private sector. Those bright young men and women do have options.

I will just make a plug with the Minister for the REEMA sites at RAF Brize Norton, which need redevelopment—I know it is not his fault. We have brownfield sites there. It is having an effect on west Oxfordshire’s housing stock and on the young men and women who serve at RAF Brize Norton. I appreciate that is not the Minister’s fault but the Treasury’s. The Treasury must see the value, not the cost. It needs to revalue the Green Book and see defence not as a cash drain but a net gain to the UK economy.

10.37 am

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) for securing this important and most interesting debate.

It is crucial that the UK has robust and reliable combined armed forces that are well trained, properly equipped and ready to respond as required to keep our nation and its people safe and secure. That is ever more important as the threats to our nation evolve in intensity, intertwined with ongoing scientific and technological advances. Hopefully, the modernising defence programme launched in January 2018 is taking account of those somewhat fast-moving developments.

Having worked in the emergency services, I appreciate that our armed forces personnel are going into situations that other more comfortable options are too difficult for them to escape from. Added to that, they will engage in conflicts where the norms on law, order and safety no longer apply. The Government must consider their duty of care to armed forces personnel prior to, during and after committal; no doubt, their health and wellbeing underpins any successful mission. Armed forces personnel may be called on to put their lives on the line to protect us from harm, and we need to afford them the best protection available. That certainly will mean spending more money on personal protective equipment or military equipment. Surely, it is preferable for all involved to spend money by choice than to be decreed by a court to pay compensation, which has an impact on the morale of our service personnel and those wishing to join.

The Government have taken much needed and welcome measures, as has been mentioned, to improve housing provision for armed forces personnel, increased allowances and tax reliefs, and facilitated access to rehabilitation centres. However, I hope they will not rest on their laurels, but continue to review that important aspect of defence spending as part of a continuous improvement programme. We heard earlier that there is much more to be done on housing for our service personnel.

Our involvement is further afield, too. As was the case with our forebears in the two world wars, our armed forces may be called upon to assist in defence partnerships with other nations. I hope—like many others, I am sure—that responding in anger will seldom be required in future, but with that will come a greater focus on peacekeeping assistance throughout the world and the opportunity for the armed forces to bring their unique skills to bear on local civil contingencies. That said, for our children and grandchildren, cyber-space may be the war zone of the not too distant future.

Let us be clear: funding for our armed forces depends on a strong economy, which only the Conservative Government can fund; not the fairy tale finances that we hear about from other quarters. UK defence spending over the last five years has been stable at around £36 billion in real terms, increasing this year to around £38 billion. Minister, is that really enough?

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Despite the future of RM Condor in my constituency and jobs across Scotland being secured by the UK Government, does my hon. Friend recognise that we have not seen a firm commitment from the SNP that they would still be secure in an independent Scotland?

Bill Grant: I recognise that there has been little or no comment about defence for Scotland from the SNP, but I welcome the investment in Scotland by the Ministry of Defence, not least in my hon. Friend’s constituency.

Finally, in relation to the defence transformation budget of £160 million ring-fenced from the defence budget, I would be grateful to know if the Minister expects the stated possibility of a further £340 million to be raised as part of the spending review.

Our regular servicemen and women, in addition to the reservists who balance a civilian life with commitment to the armed forces, are talented people from a diverse range of backgrounds. They deserve our fullest support. That means investment in our armed forces and those who serve in them.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): We now come to the contributions from the Front Benches. Please do not exceed the guideline of six minutes, as that allows a minute for the mover to wind up.
10.41 am

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is always good to see you in the Chair, Mr Betts. I sincerely congratulate the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) on securing the debate and the fine way in which she opened it.

The hon. Lady invited us to consider the issue of defence spending in its purest sense. How does one fund a public service, the most critical public service that the Government can fund and preside over? In her opening remarks, she urged us to consider not just the sum of money spent on defence but how that money is spent across the Department. As we say in Scotland, there has been a fair kick of the ball on that issue here today, but we again find ourselves with the Defence Minister—it is always good to see him on the Front Bench—and not with a Treasury Minister. For those who are new to defence debates, although most of us here are regulars, that is something we have yet to use our collective ingenuity to achieve.

When considering defence spending, in my mind there are three clear elements that the process should contain. The first is to analyse the threat picture. It has been mentioned this morning that it is increasingly complex, fast-changing and differing day to day, hour to hour. There is then a decision to be made on the capability that is required in order to meet the threats that we face. The third step is to fund, fund and fund that necessary capability.

There is an entirely legitimate political debate to be had—indeed, the public would expect no less—over how well served we are by the current set-up. It is a debate about which Members here today, certainly those in my party, have tried to encourage some thinking outside the box. At the moment, we have a Department that is constantly chasing its tail and is ill-served by political posturing, some of which regrettably has been on display here this morning; there are warring political factions in the governing political party and Government Departments are set off against each other.

Indeed, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) said that the Treasury does not understand the Ministry of Defence. I will come back to that, but he said something even more revealing: he asked us to go to the bank with a promise from the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), the likely next Prime Minister, that he would fund defence fully. Well, he is hardly going to say he will fund defence partially. The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford might run to the bank, but we need detail, and we have not had that from either of the prospective Prime Ministers, despite the warm words.

If we go back to the first step in how I see devising how much is spent and how it is spent, we need a greater, more robust and more sophisticated discussion in the House about the threat picture that we face. When we get on to how we fund the capabilities required, we need a shift to multi-year defence agreements—something I raise in just about every debate we have.

There have been interesting and subtle shifts in the language used, particularly by Conservative Members when they talk about multi-year arrangements. I have asked previously if the Government are looking at bringing in proper multi-year defence agreements, similar to the model used in Denmark, for example. The previous Minister for Defence Procurement, the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb), said that was being looked at; the current Minister for Defence Procurement says that is being looked at. I ask the Minister, when can Parliament expect to hear some more detail? I think that would lead to the end of tin-earred design and outcomes, such as the closure of the Royal Navy base in Rosyth, which is the only Royal Navy base in the north-east of those islands.

I disagree vehemently with other Members about nuclear weapons: look at how they have done nothing but haemorrhage money as though it were going out of fashion. That is before we get to other issues, such as submarine decommissioning, that I know the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed has an interest in. We would have an end to National Audit Office reports, detailing a black hole of up to £15 billion in the equipment plan.

People are the greatest asset the Ministry of Defence has; they are the real deterrent. When she opened the debate, the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed adumbrated the need for a long-standing SNP policy—perhaps she did not mean to—of having an armed forces representative body to better represent those in the armed forces, veterans and their families, and so get better outcomes for them. It is often said that defence does not win votes, but it can certainly lose them. I fear that collectively this House is getting that wrong.

Last, I encourage Members to read an excellent academic paper called “Military Strategy of Small States: Responding to External Shocks of the 21st Century” before they come to the next defence debate. It is written by three Swedish academics, and it is about the relationship between the threat picture, the money that is spent and the political discussion, which needs to be more sophisticated in this place.

10.47 am

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) on securing this important debate and on setting out the case. She highlighted the fact that defence does not feature in our postbags, as we are all aware, and as a result it does not get the focus it needs. She also talked about the conscious choice by Government in recent years to reduce Government spending on defence, which, as she said, was based on a false premise.

There were some excellent contributions to the debate, from my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), the right hon. Members for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) and for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), as well as the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for St Ives (Derek Thomas), for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton), for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), for Witney (Robert Courts) and for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant). One point of consensus that all the speakers highlighted in different ways was the need to increase defence spending.

Labour is committed to spending at least 2% of GDP on defence, in line with our NATO commitments. The last Labour Government consistently spent well above the 2% figure. Sadly, since then we have seen a sharp fall
in the real-terms value of the defence budget. Independent analysis by the House of Commons Library has shown that defence spending in the last financial year was £9.3 billion lower in real terms than when Labour left office.

The debate is ongoing on the appropriate level of defence spending, with both candidates for the Conservative leadership adding their thoughts. That is particularly galling when both of them have consistently voted for budgets that have slashed defence spending to what it is today.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster):
In his haste to criticise the leadership candidates for their commitments to increase defence spending, can the hon. Gentleman point to a single speech where the Leader of the Labour party—not its defence spokesman—has indicated that he wishes to increase defence spending?

Gerald Jones: I was not attacking the comments of the candidates for the Conservative party—they are welcome. I was saying that it is galling that they voted for cuts. The Leader of the Opposition has highlighted, as did the last Labour party manifesto, our commitment to a 2% minimum for defence spending, in line with the NATO commitment. He has also said that we cannot do defence on the cheap. He is as committed as our party to spending on defence.

Added to the squeeze on defence spending is the fact that the MOD’s purchasing power has suffered from the fall in the value of sterling after the Brexit vote. Of course, what matters is not just what is spent, but how it is spent. As we debated last Thursday in this Chamber, we need to use the defence pound to support UK prosperity and to back UK defence workers. Labour wants more MOD defence contracts to be awarded here in the UK, and we would like to start with UK-only competition for the fleet solid support ships. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) highlighted, that is a matter of political will. Not only is it vital that we support the UK defence industry to retain our sovereign capability; we also know that investing in the UK leads to additional revenue coming back to the Exchequer in taxation, higher national insurance contributions and lower social security payments—not to mention the value of apprenticeships and spending in the wider economy.

We know from reports by Oxford Economics that the UK defence industry has an output multiplier of 2.3, which means that a £100 million investment in the UK industry generates some £230 million to the UK economy. Its reports have also highlighted the fact that each additional job created in the manufacturing element of the defence industry results in a further 1.8 jobs being created in the wider economy. I am sure that the Minister will want to convey that message to the Treasury. Of course, sufficient levels of defence spending depend on an economy that is growing, so I hope that the Minister will join the Opposition in opposing that the MoD will pick up on another point where we all agree—that it is the Treasury that is the enemy; but I cannot possibly say that. With a reshuffle coming next week, I do not want to limit my options too far. They are already pretty narrow, so let us not go further.

Mr. Kevan Jones: DEFRA beckons.

Mark Lancaster: I doubt it.

As has been said, the first duty of any Government is the safety and security of the British people at home and abroad. I am proud that the Government have delivered on their NATO pledge to spend at least 2% of GDP on defence. They will be spending more than £186 billion on equipment and equipment support between 2018 and 2028. Aside from ensuring that our armed forces have the latest and best capability, our investment of around £19 billion a year underpins a world-class British industry, providing direct employment for 115,000 people and nearly 400,000 more across the wider supply chains. That substantial and sustained investment is not only vital to our national capability and prosperity and to supporting economic growth. It is also vital to our ability to counter the rising threats that menace us and all NATO members, including a resurgent and increasingly assertive Russia, and extremist terrorism across the world.

This year NATO celebrates 70 years as the foundation of our mutual security. The UK is one of very few NATO members that meet both their core spending guidelines by spending 2% of GDP on defence, of which 20% goes on major equipment and associated research and development. Defence spending in many NATO states is still too low, and although our allies are making progress on burden sharing, they must do more. The increase mirrors rising defence spending across the world, which makes it vital that the UK maintains its position as a leading player on the world stage.

The upcoming spending review is an opportunity to reprioritise our national investments across defence, ensuring that we can meet whatever the future may throw at us in an era of intensifying threats. The Department has done a great deal to drive out inefficiencies in defence, and there is more to be done, but we must also invest in new capabilities and in transforming the way defence operates, so that we can continue to defend the UK and project our influence.

First, we must mobilise defence to meet rising threats. The international situation is darkening. The rules-based order that has kept the peace for so long is under constant pressure and the external threats that confront us increasingly come from multiple directions. Despite
the coalition’s success in degrading the power of Daesh, the threat of terrorism is still with us, while malign cyber-warfare and proxy warfare are rapidly changing the face of conflict. The nation’s approach to future spending decisions must reflect those new realities.

Secondly, we have to modernise and innovate—to embrace new technologies to ensure we have a competitive edge over our adversaries and to identify opportunities to sustainably reduce our cost base, which will require some up-front investment. The Department is investing about £800 million through the defence innovation fund to keep us ahead of the curve, and ring-fencing £160 million of its budget this year for the new transformation fund. Thirdly, on efficiencies, defence has to transform the way it does business by liberating new industry thinking and tackling the behaviours and practices that have racked up excessive costs in the past. That means tackling the mindset of short-term decision making that leads to poor value for money. We must invest in technology now for long-term savings.

I want to answer a couple of points raised in the debate. The MOD does not collate defence expenditure figures for regions, but the average spend per person in the UK was £290 in 2017-18, and the MOD spends some £19 billion a year supporting 115,000 jobs. That means that one in every 220 jobs in the UK is in defence. On the accusation that there have been cuts under the present Government, since 2014 defence spending has increased year on year and we now spend £39 billion—rising to £40 billion by 2020. [ Interruption. ] I would also say to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), having served in Afghanistan in 2006, that the sort of commitment that we had, with so many of our troops serving on operations overseas in Iraq and Afghanistan, made for an environment very different from today’s. With the different threats we face at any one time, it is sometimes difficult to compare like with like. Our relationship with strategic suppliers in the UK defence and security sector is vital. The armed forces support an industrial base in the UK, providing employment to about half a million people.

I was delighted that many Members raised the issue of mental health in the debate. In the autumn Budget the Chancellor announced £10 million to support veterans’ mental health and wellbeing needs, and in January the armed forces covenant fund opened a £3 million funding programme to fund innovations and improvements to veterans’ community centres. We are considering investing more in veterans’ mental health. Accommodation is another key issue for many service personnel. We are looking closely at the new accommodation model, which is aimed at giving choice to service personnel. Equally, on pay, the Armed Forces Pay Review Body has recently presented its latest findings, to which the Government will respond in due course.

I end on a note of consensus again. I am delighted that in this Chamber at least we are committed to armed forces personnel, and to a rising defence budget.

10.58 am

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank all colleagues and the Minister for their continuing commitment to the armed forces and for speaking out so that those who have no voice of their own know that many of us in the House understand the incredibly difficult role they play in our defence. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) said, they run towards danger as most of us are running away from it. It is extraordinary that there are people willing to do that—as he did as a fireman—in defence of our nation, security and children. The issue is not a percentage figure; it is about making sure we can meet the operational requirements, whatever problems arise.

As ever, I thank the Minister for his support and his willingness humbly to agree that it is the Treasury we need to continue to fight. We will find a way, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) said, to bring the Treasury to us to listen to the arguments. I think we all agree that funding for defence is not like funding for any public service Department and we must find new, more effective ways to spend taxpayers’ money. Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered defence spending.
Public Health Funding: Enfield

11 am

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (IGC): I beg to move,
That this House has considered public health spending in Enfield.
It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts.
I requested this debate to highlight some of the harsh realities stemming from the Government’s decision to slash the public health grant to our community, and to draw attention to the fact that the ongoing uncertainty around long-term funding is prompting a crisis in public health. Our council’s ability to deliver a range of public health services aimed at preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting good health is being seriously affected.

The Government’s national health service long-term plan may have put prevention at the heart of its policy but, to quote David Finch, senior fellow at the Health Foundation:
“The sustained cuts to the public health grant clearly run counter to these aims. The public health grant is not a nice-to-have. Without urgent reinvestment, we will continue to see a direct impact on people’s long-term health.”

Last month, the Health and Social Care Committee said that cuts to public health services were a “false economy”. Cancer Research UK and more than 80 other organisations have come together to call on the Government to provide a sustainable solution for public health. Ministers must take immediate and positive action to increase investment in public health, to reduce health inequalities and to support our health and social care system.

I will take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of the Enfield Over 50s Forum and its president, Monty Meth, who is sitting in the Public Gallery today with many of the forum’s members. Their typically dogged campaign to highlight the cuts to Enfield’s public health grant and the disparity in per-person funding between Enfield and other councils in London has forced this issue to the top of our community’s agenda.

The Minister should be well aware of the forum’s work on this matter, given the number of letters that its members have written to her and her Department in recent weeks and months—although, sadly, their letters have not received a considerate ministerial response. Instead, they have received a reply from the Department’s correspondence unit that, to put it mildly, leaves a lot to desire.

One constituent with impeccable manners, who forwarded me a copy of the letter he received, described the response as “baloney.” Another resident labelled the reply “meaningless” and “full of Whitehall gobbledegook”, and it is hard to disagree with that analysis when they are treated to phrases such as:
“The formula is designed to generate target allocation shares of a funding envelope”.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, because the baseline funding has been set from 2013, it takes no account of changes in the population of Enfield to do with age, poverty and other factors that might hugely affect the funding that Enfield actually deserves right now?

Joan Ryan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; that is a key factor in this whole scenario.

On the kinds of responses that constituents are receiving, surely responses from Government Departments to citizens raising legitimate concerns on important issues should seek to clarify and not to cloud matters? I do not raise this point as an attack on civil servants, but to urge the Minister—and it is her responsibility—to provide some clear and full responses to the concerns I raise today on behalf of the Enfield Over 50s Forum and our whole community in Enfield.

Given that the population in London boroughs—including Enfield, as my hon. Friend has said—is growing twice as fast as in the rest of the country, the pressure on already strained public health resources is only set to intensify over the coming years. Enfield has some of the most poverty-stricken and deprived wards in the country, and we all know that poverty and poor health are inextricably linked.

According to a recent report by the Child Poverty Action Group, our borough is one of the 20 local authorities in the UK with the highest levels of child poverty after housing costs are taken into account. There are almost 40,000 children in poverty, or four in 10 children in the borough. Obesity rates for children in reception class are higher than the average in London and in England, and more than four in 10 year 6 children in Enfield are either overweight or obese, the eighth highest rate of all London boroughs.

However, it is not just children affected by serious public health issues in Enfield, but adults and the elderly too. Our rates of diabetes are higher than the London and England average. Cancer Research UK recently revealed that being overweight is a bigger cause of bowel, kidney, ovarian and liver cancer than smoking.

More than six in 10 adults in Enfield are overweight or obese, a significantly higher rate than in London in general. Our bowel cancer screening rates for people aged 60 to 74—one of the best ways to diagnose bowel cancer earlier—are only just over 50%. That is lower than the average in England and far lower than the rate of 75% of eligible people taking part recommended by Cancer UK.

One of the most pressing issues facing our community and our country at the moment is the impact of serious violence and knife crime. I held a packed community meeting on Saturday on this issue, talking about how to keep our young people and our streets safe. Earlier this year, Enfield had the highest rate of serious youth violence in the capital. In 2018 alone, North Middlesex Hospital had to deal with the consequences of 1,457 assaults, including stabbings and gunshot wounds.

To protect staff and patients on site and reassure the local community of their continued safety whenever they visit the hospital, North Middlesex increased its security spend by an additional £149,000 and had to hire two additional overnight security guards in its busy accident and emergency department, at a cost of £3,000 per week. North Middlesex Hospital had to use its already stretched budget to address a situation that is not of its making. Every penny that is spent on these interventions is money that is diverted away from essential patient care.

Both the Government and the Mayor of London want to tackle the knife crime crisis with a public health response. That is an important and welcome initiative,
but if the Home Secretary is going to implement a legal duty on the police, councils and the NHS to share information and intelligence, then those bodies will need the resources to make it effective.

The public health system is already at crisis point. We require a public health budget that addresses the desperate needs of our community in the immediate and long term. But where is the support from the Government? The Prime Minister has declared that austerity is over, so where are the resources to reverse the cuts suffered by our public health services?

The current Health Secretary has said that prevention is one of the three pillars of his stated priorities. He also said:

“We also know we need to...support prevention and public health, both for the benefits they bring in themselves and to relieve pressure on NHS care.”

In 2018, the then Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), told the House that “there cannot be a transformation of the NHS without proper emphasis on public health.”—[Official Report, 18 June 2018; Vol. 643, c. 61.]

The current Health Secretary has said that prevention is one of the three pillars of his stated priorities. He also said:

“Each year, we are spending £97 billion of public money on treating disease and only £8 billion preventing it across the UK—that’s an imbalance in urgent need of correction.”

What urgency has he shown to fix this imbalance? That statement was made more than eight months ago.

While parts of it were leaked to the press over the weekend, we still await the formal publication of the Government’s Green Paper on public health and the future of funding. Analysis by the Health Foundation shows that the public health grant is now £850 million lower in real terms than the initial allocations in 2015-16. Last month, the Health Foundation and the King’s Fund stated:

“With the Spending Review likely to be delayed, key funding decisions will be postponed and as a result, the grant will face a further real-terms cut of £50 million in 2020/21 under provisional plans...With population growth factored in, £1 billion will be needed to restore funding to 2015/16 levels.”

Enfield is one of the communities to really bear the brunt of these savage cuts. Our borough’s grant is the 9th lowest in London, at £48 per head of population, compared with the London average of £71—a gap of £23—and we are getting £2 less per person this year than last year. In total, we are receiving £440,000 less from the public health grant this year than in 2018.

In addition, Enfield is one of five London boroughs that make up the NHS’ north central London sustainability and transformation partnership, which has pledged to reduce health inequalities for its 1.5 million residents. Haringey, Camden and Islington receive £70, £99 and £104 per head respectively for public health funding. I recognise that these boroughs also have considerable public health needs, but I do not understand how the disparity in public health funding between boroughs in the same area can be so large. There is then the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, which is allocated £130 per person for public health—almost three times more per head than Enfield. Where is the evidence that Kensington and Chelsea’s public health needs are almost three times worse than Enfield’s?

It is not as if Enfield Council can step in and plug some of the gaping holes in public health funding. Up to 2018-19, the core funding the council received from the Government to provide vital services was slashed by an average of £800 per household. Ongoing Government cuts and increased demand on services mean that the council has to find another £18 million of savings this year and then £12 million more the next. Austerity is clearly not over in Enfield. The cuts will continue to bite for the foreseeable future unless the Government do something about it.

What I find so frustrating is that the extent of these cuts to our public health system, and to local government, are so short-sighted; they have immediate and long-term adverse consequences. In April, when I asked the Minister for her assessment of the correlation between the levels of public health funding allocated to Enfield and the effectiveness of the provision of public health services in our borough, the response I received was:

“We have made no specific assessment of any relationship between funding...and the effectiveness of services in Enfield.”

Really? Maybe this type of assessment is required so that her Department can gain a better understanding of the public health situation in Enfield, as well as in other communities across the country. Will the Minister resolve to look again at this issue?

Given the pressing public health issues in Enfield I have outlined today, is the Minister willing to commit, at the very least, to reinstating the £440,000 cut in public health funding suffered by our borough this year? Does the Minister accept the need to increase the level of public health funding allocated to our borough to at least the London average each year? And does the Minister agree that Enfield urgently needs its public health system to be put on a sustainable footing? More widely, I want to hear from the Minister about the future of public health funding. Can she provide any indication of when the Green Paper will be released? Can we hold out any hope that the calls from the Health Foundation and the King’s Fund to reverse the £1 billion a year cut to public health funding will be acted upon?

There is a lack of clarity on the Government’s previously announced plans to phase out the public health grant to local authorities by 2021 and to instead fund public health through the proposed 75% business rates retention scheme. Cancer Research UK says that the continued uncertainty around the public health funding formula means it remains concerned about the potential negative implications of business rates on local service delivery. There is no point in Ministers extolling the virtues of a robust public health system if, in reality, all they do is weaken the prevention agenda by slashing funding for services. The success of the Government’s NHS long-term plan will be built on the foundations of improvements to public health, but these foundations will crumble, and the investment in the NHS’ long-term future will be undermined, if the Government fail to increase investment and make prevention a top priority.

Finally, I return to the work of the Enfield Over 50s Forum. Reading one of its recent newsletters, I was struck by this succinct but perfect encapsulation of why achieving fairer funding for public health in Enfield is so important:

“Improving public health is not just an over 50s issue. It concerns every single body and soul in the borough—toddlers, teenagers, every family with young children. This is one case when we are really all in this together.”

I look forward to the Minister’s response.
Joan Ryan: I realise that there is not a great deal of time today, but the Minister says that the funding given to Enfield Council is relevant to its needs. Is she saying that the funding that it has been given is adequate to cover the public health requirements in Enfield?
need to look very carefully at all the factors before the new formula is created. That will be assessed in the next spending review in the light of all the available evidence.

I am committed to working closely with local government, and with other partners and colleagues, to build on the achievements of the last six years. We need to act on a local, national and global level to meet the public health needs of the present and to rise to the public health challenges of the future.

Question put and agreed to.

11.25 am

Sitting suspended.

[Seema Kennedy]

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered children and mental health services.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. We could not be in better hands. It is a delight to have the Minister here. I know she comes to this issue with great personal interest and a commitment to deliver for all our constituents. It is fantastic to see so many right hon. and hon. Members from across the House here to take part in the debate. That is testament to the interest in this place and the concern across the country about mental health, particularly that of children.

I praise the Government for what they have done to date. When it comes to mental health, there is no doubt that this Government get it, making it a priority like no other. They have tackled the stigma of mental health and put in much-needed resources, but although they have done great work, like Oliver, we would all say, “Please, Minister, can we have some more?” because although we are getting on board with the issues, and royals, TV stars, politicians, and people from sport and all spheres talking about mental health, the problem is snowballing, getting bigger and bigger. Such are the pressures and stresses placed on our children’s mental health that this is an ever-increasing problem, which demands our attention, resources and commitment as a Government.

One in eight five-to-19-year-olds—12.5%, or 1.25 million children across the country—have a mental health difficulty, according to the Government’s own survey of November 2018, “Mental Health of Children and Young People in England”. The Local Government Association says that children’s services are seeing more than 560 cases of mental health issues every day. Some 75% of adult mental health illnesses begin before the individual turns 18 and over 50% start before the age of 14. Some 23% of the population are affected by mental health difficulties at some point each year. The economic and social costs of mental illness in England total £105 billion.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Gentleman on securing the debate. About 10 or 11 years ago I introduced a Bill that would have provided a specialist to a cluster of schools, to help teachers to identify children with health and mental health problems. Does he agree that the Government should think about that? Secondly, and most important, employers do not recognise the problems young people have with mental health when they start out in industry, nor do they recognise adult mental health problems. Does he agree that more could be done in that area?

Andrew Griffiths: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. It is a pity that more people did not share his foresight, so that we could have acted sooner. We are laying the foundations for mental health problems in adulthood. Childhood mental health has a lifelong impact, so it is important that we do not waste a moment. Rates of depression and anxiety among teenagers have increased by 70% in the last 25 years.
Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. My constituent Elodie Fleet, who is now 18 years old, experienced anxiety, which came to a head at the age of 13. She wanted to see the school counsellor, but her needs were not deemed to be urgent enough because “she hadn’t tried to hang herself or taken a blade to her wrists.” I hope the Minister will say how we can get more counsellors in our schools to deal with people such as Elodie, because she is not alone.

Andrew Griffiths: The hon. Lady makes a powerful point. It is true that her constituent is not alone. When I publicised this debate on my Facebook page, I was amazed by the number of parents who got in touch. I was overwhelmed by parents who have either battled through and managed to get to the other side, or are in the midst of fighting to keep their children alive, safe and well. As a parent, I realise what a scary thought that is.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): To reiterate that point, does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is a state of emergency? In my constituency, the parents of a 12-year-old boy are being advised that there is a 72-week wait for their son to get help, even though there is a risk of serious self-harm.

Andrew Griffiths: I agree that we are in a crisis. The Government are putting record amounts of money in, but the hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that that is an unacceptable wait. I will discuss waiting times later in my speech. Any parent would be terrified at the thought of that long wait and their child being further harmed by it.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The statistics the hon. Gentleman is outlining are horrific. Some years ago figures were released showing that across the whole of the United Kingdom, over 10,000 young people under the age of 10 were manic depressives. That is a horrendous figure. Such a situation puts horrendous pressure on parents and carers.

Andrew Griffiths: I have spoken about my own mental health challenges and my battle with depression and anxiety. As an adult it was very difficult to cope with, but for a small child it must be an incredibly hard to have to deal with.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): On the social and economic effect, does my hon. Friend agree that we need a more joined-up approach across Departments? Earlier this year, I met chief superintendent Paul Hepworth of West Yorkshire police, who is a fantastic guy. He mentioned that nationally there is a lack of forensic beds for children with severe mental health issues. He told me the story of a young girl who was in police custody with a severe illness; she was suicidal, self-harming and violent towards others. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must address this issue, to offer safe space and support for people in dire risk?

Andrew Griffiths: I point my hon. Friend to some of the work done in my area by Matthew Ellis, the Staffordshire police and crime commissioner, and the work done by the Prime Minister when she was Home Secretary on how we treat mental health in our police stations. That is very important, but it is even more important for vulnerable young children. She makes a valid point. I will canter through some more points before taking more interventions.

The Government’s own survey shows that one in four children with a mental health disorder are seen by a mental health specialist and over 400,000 children are receiving no assistance at all. The NHS is managing to see only a fraction of the young people who have problems. My hon. Friend talks about cross-departmental working. I am delighted that the Minister is here, because she has done a huge deal to bang heads together and make this a priority. It involves the NHS, local government, the police and so many different areas, which we need to bring together.

The Children’s Commissioner’s analysis of NHS figures from 2017-18 shows that 325,000 children were treated by community services, while another 5,000 are in hospital—less than 3% of the population. Around £700 million is spent on child and adolescent mental health services and eating disorder support. By comparison, services for adults received 15 times more, despite the fact that children represent 20% of the population. While it is important that we are putting money into mental health services, we are turning it on its head. We need to put more money into children’s services, not only because there is such a great demand, but because if we can nip problems in the bud by making that early intervention, we can avoid those services being needed later in life.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate; he is making some very good points. As he recognises, CAMHS are the Cinderella services of the Cinderella service—mental health is still woefully underfunded in comparison with many other parts of the NHS. Does he also recognise that CAMHS recruitment is a real challenge? The August 2019 fill rates for higher trainees in the UK stand at only 63% for those entering CAMHS specialist training and at only 23% for learning disabilities, which means that almost 80% of new posts in learning disabilities for new trainees will be unfilled. Does he agree that that is a key issue for the Government to address if they want to improve CAMHS provision?

Andrew Griffiths: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, whom I congratulate on his work in our NHS; I am grateful that he does such a great job on mental health work in the community. He raises the very important point that it is all very well wanting to deliver these services and putting the money in place, but if we do not have the staff to deliver on the ground, we will always be running to catch up.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is giving an excellent speech. In York, we have seen a 26% increase in referrals into CAMHS over the past five years. As a result of such high demand, one referral in four is turned away from the service, including children who are self-harming and have experienced abuse. Surely we need to focus on investment in the workforce, as well as on funding.
Andrew Griffiths: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and we must not underestimate the immense added stress and pressure for families whose child is self-harming. She makes a very good point.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. May I follow up on the point made by my colleague the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) about the figures for York? Are not parents under huge stress because of these referral figures? In York, CAMHS referral times are peaking and troughing, which has a lot to do with not getting the resources needed. Sometimes referral times are down to six months, but at other times they are longer than 12 months, which has a huge impact on the children involved. It also means that schools are having to take action and exclude young people before they can get the treatment they need.

Andrew Griffiths: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, not only about the impact on schools—I will say more later about what we can do in schools—but about the pressure on CAMHS and the massive importance of getting children seen as soon as possible. Just imagine if one of us were having a mental health episode and were told that we could see someone in 12 months who would then refer us for treatment. CAMHS are not the doctors or the psychiatrists who see the patient. They are not the help; they are the doorkeepers to getting help—the triage, as it were. Even when someone gets through the CAMHS door and jumps over the very high bar for getting treatment, it could be many months before they receive it.

It is a great challenge. I know that the Government take it seriously; their 2017 Green Paper “Transforming Children and Young People’s Mental Health Provision” outlined their ambitious new plans for delivering mental health support in schools, and the announcement this week of the mental health services trailblazers is a welcome part of that strategy. I am delighted that my area, Burton, is to be in the second phase of those trailblazers, which I genuinely believe will make a difference. However, figures from the Children’s Society suggest there has been little expansion in the provision available in schools since 2015, so we are starting from a low base. In particular, the figures point to a worrying lack of awareness among parents about the counselling offered in their children’s schools: just under a third are not aware of what is available at all.

I am pleased that the Government have announced that every school, college and alternative provision across England will be offered training as part of the £9.3 million mental health services and schools and colleges link. However, even though my area is one of the trailblazers, priority access to mental health training for schools and colleges will not be available in my constituency until next year. It is clearly needed now. There are so many MPs, constituencies and constituents who want access, so how can we roll it on quicker? To use my “Oliver!” analogy again—

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. May I ask him to reflect for a minute on the particular issues for rural communities, including the distances? The lack of broadband means that the opportunities for dealing with those distances are missed. It seems to me—perhaps we will hear more from the Minister about this—that the Government could use technology more effectively in rural areas. We will certainly not get the help we need in time otherwise. My schools will not be getting help under the new scheme any time soon—we are not even one of the pilots. My teachers are very concerned that they will have more burdens, rather than an added resource.

Andrew Griffiths: My hon. Friend, who is always a champion for rural communities, makes an important point about rural isolation. We have known for a long time about the mental health challenges of farmers and rural communities, but it is all the more difficult for young people who are isolated from their friends. We talk about the social media pressure on young people with Facebook, Twitter and so on, but it is even more difficult for kids in isolated rural communities, because they are even more separated. That social media connection is often their only chance to talk to their friends.

Dr Poulter: My hon. Friend is making one of the best speeches that I have heard in this Chamber for some time, and is going into granular detail to make his case. In the medical workforce, the numbers of mental health nurses have fallen nationally over the past decade, and we know that there are challenges with CAMHS and LD recruitment. We cannot deliver mental health care without bodies on the ground. Unless we get the workforce right, it will just be rhetoric. We need to start turning rhetoric into reality by recruiting the right number of staff on the ground to deliver high-quality mental health care.

Andrew Griffiths: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is about not just the psychiatrists and the doctors, but the mental health nurses out in the community. I have witnessed their great work at first hand, so I know just how important they are.

The extensive roll-out—as the Government rightly claim it to be—over the five-year pilot is great, but it will address just 20% to 25% of the country’s need. So many young people will miss out on support until at least 2023 or perhaps even later. The mental health training for schools and colleges announced in the past week is fantastic, but under the NHS long-term plan, an extra £2.3 billion is due to be put into mental health services by 2023-24. That is a lot of money, and I want us to make sure that as much of it goes into children’s mental health services as is humanly possible. If we spend it wisely, it can have a double-whammy effect.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree about the importance of bereavement counselling for children with mental health issues? As shadow Police Minister, one of the most common factors that I see among young offenders is a close family bereavement in their childhood, yet so many children languish on waiting lists for bereavement counselling. Indeed, I had a young constituent who waited for bereavement counselling for three years. Unfortunately, his life was taken by another teenager. That just shows the absolute importance of getting in there and delivering that mental health care.
Andrew Griffiths: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Trauma in young people’s lives is often the trigger; whether it is sexual abuse, domestic abuse, violence perpetrated by other young people or domestic violence. All those triggers set off a train of deterioration in young people’s mental health that is often lifelong. It is so important that they get the access they need.

Several hon. Members have mentioned waiting times for CAMHS. I have certainly found that my constituents cannot get on Facebook quick enough to tell me about their CAMHS experiences. I do not want to denigrate CAMHS, which have great people doing great work; the problem is that there are just not enough of them and they are under too much pressure. As the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) noted, CAMHS are turning away nearly a quarter of children who are referred to them. In 2017-18, they turned away 24.2%, meaning that at least 55,800 children were not accepted for treatment. Of those who were referred, the average waiting time was 34 days for an initial assessment and 60 days for treatment—significantly longer than the four-week standard set out in the Government’s Green Paper. We can all point to examples of much longer waiting times in our constituencies.

One constituent contacted me to say that her son had been self-harming for years. It took them months to get an appointment with CAMHS, and when the appointment happened, her son suffered a meltdown. That is not unusual, due to the pressures that those appointments put on young people. Because he is 15, their GP cannot prescribe anything for him. My constituent has had to watch her son throughout the night to make sure he does not do any permanent damage to himself. Another parent told me how her daughter was discharged from CAMHS, with it saying there was nothing more it could do to help with her anxiety.

Young people have told mental health charity Mind—I am very lucky to have Burton and District Mind in my constituency, which does a great job—that the wait for support is one of the most difficult issues they face. They say that sometimes, they find that their mental health deteriorates while they are waiting; the wait actually makes it worse. In England as a whole, half of those accepted for treatment during 2017-18 were still waiting for treatment at the year’s end. That proportion was lower in my area, east Staffordshire, where it was just over one third. However, that is still a substantial figure.

A school counsellor from my constituency contacted me to say that the waiting lists for referrals to child services outside of school can be months long. She believes that when it is established that a child needs help, a counselling session needs to happen within 48 hours. She goes on to say that too much red tape is preventing children from getting the help they need. I think we all recognise, as the Government have done, that support in school, delivered in a way that is accessible to young people—they feel comfortable asking for it, and know of other young people who have accessed it—is a real help.

One parent told me that she decided to fight to get her son’s care commissioned outside of the county they lived in because of her disappointment with the support she had received. She says that early intervention is key, and that there have been too many endless reports and not enough action has been taken. Another parent in my constituency said that she took her daughter to the GP two years ago. She was referred to That Place in Burton, which is a fantastic facility; she took her for assessment, only to be told that her daughter was not old enough to be accepted. Yet another constituent told me that after a referral for her daughter, aged nine, it took three years for them to see a psychiatrist. That kind of wait is difficult, and all the time, the young people are getting worse.

There is also a problem with the transition from childhood to adulthood. According to the British Psychological Society, about one in six 17 to 19-year-olds have a mental health disorder; according to the Children’s Society, 16 to 17-year-olds are the biggest service users of mental health services. However, young people often face barriers to accessing support, and end up falling through the cracks of adult and children’s services as they transition. Some young people who are discharged from children and young people’s mental health services at 18 find it can be very difficult to get a referral to adult mental health services at all, and can end up completely isolated. In some circumstances, young people are not accepted into either children and young people’s or adult mental health services, due to them falling between the gaps.

Again and again, I hear that CAMHS discharges young people on their 18th birthday, and that there is no provision at all for them. The challenges those young people are facing do not magically disappear when they become adults. Just last Friday, I met with a constituent who was getting ready to leave CAMHS and had been left to organise her future on her own. She was not automatically transferred to adult services, and had to organise a private therapist in order to get the ongoing treatment that she needs.

One of my constituents sums the problem up better than I could:

“All the time the kids are getting no support, becoming suicidal, becoming adults with even more complex issues, families are breaking up because of the pressure, parents quitting work to do the job of education/social care/health, and all of this causes more and worse financial pressure later on. No one sees the bigger picture because they can’t afford to. No one sees long term because that’s too expensive. Early interventions are crucial but they aren’t funded. We will reap the whirlwind then wring our hands and say ‘how could we have prevented this’.”

That is absolutely pertinent.

The Government have set a five-year forward view for mental health, which is for one in three children and adolescents with a mental health disorder to access NHS mental health community services by 2020-21. In the new long-term plan, they have set a target that 100% of children and young people who need specialist care will be able to access it by 2028-29. However, that is so far down the track.

Anne Marie Morris: I totally agree with my hon. Friend: it is so far down the track. Does it not further concern him that in that same 10-year plan, the NHS talks about “parity of esteem”, but that is in 10 years’ time, and it is very unclear what will be done about the timelines for getting there? As my hon. Friend has said, 10 years is much too long to solve the problems we have today.

Andrew Griffiths: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. During that time, babies become children, children become adults, and the problem gets worse and worse. I
do not deny the Government’s commitment and determination in this, but it is just not happening quickly enough.

The other thing we need to bear in mind is that, although we have heard about CAMHS and the pressures on the workforce, a huge number of brilliant voluntary sector organisations are also delivering these services. I am very lucky to have in my constituency an organisation called Youths Emotion Support Services, which delivers in schools in Uttoxeter, as well as Burton and District Mind. There are so many great organisations. However, even in my own patch, I have heard that a tendering process is currently going on in which the bar is so high, the requirements so difficult and the boxes to tick so numerous that third sector organisations simply feel unable to compete. The challenge is that the tender to provide the facilities goes to a private company, and the experience, dedication and benefits of those voluntary sector organisations are lost.

I was staggered to learn that some of the children’s mental health charities operating in my constituency are providing 85p of frontline services for every pound they receive. That is tremendous value, representing help for young people, and few businesses could get anywhere near matching that. However, the tender process that we go through makes it impossible for voluntary sector organisations to compete. I hope the Minister will look into that; I will be raising with her my particular issue in Staffordshire.

I think the Minister recognises that in this place, we are simply voicing the real concerns and fears of parents up and down the country. Like a snowball coming down a hill, young people’s mental health is under greater pressure than ever before, and as a result they are self-harming, committing suicide, or getting themselves into a situation in which they will, in future years, suffer from greater mental health disorders, addiction, and so many other long-term problems. I hope that the Minister will go away feeling that she has great support across this House for her campaign to get even more resources and focus on mental health services, particularly for children, because quite frankly our children’s lives depend on it.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): I do not propose to enforce a formal time limit of four minutes, but I ask colleagues to be mindful of the number of people who wish to contribute to the debate.

2.58 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Thank you for calling me early, Mr Pritchard; it is a pleasure to serve under you. I apologise to the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) for arriving late. I was in the main Chamber for the domestic abuse statement, which unfortunately ran over a little. I commend him and those who made interventions on what I heard them say. I am sure that throughout this debate we will be given shocking examples of how this is truly a nationwide crisis. Any Government of any hue must, as a first step, be honest about the scale of the problem and how much is being stored up for future generations, as was said eloquently by the hon. Gentleman.

I will give the Minister and the Chamber a couple of the many examples I have received from constituents who have got in touch. Drew is a nine-year-old boy whose mother contacted us in March last year. His and his mother’s lives were in a desperate state. On a weekly basis, Drew talked about killing himself; he would regularly go so far as to put a rope around his neck. Obviously, they were seeking urgent medical help for Drew.

Fifteen months later, Drew had his first appointment with CAMHS. That was 15 months when that child was at risk and that family was going through something—it is really hard for parents to imagine their child in distress, desperately reaching out for help and just being put on an interminable waiting list. Drew’s mum is left wondering how best to house her family. Her benefits have been reduced because of the bedroom tax. The need for Drew to have a separate room is not acknowledged, despite the fact that he is aggressive and sometimes violent towards his sibling. His mum is now forced to confront the prospect of Drew sharing a bedroom with her. That is deeply inappropriate and a sign of a system that is broken locally.

Another example is a child who was deemed to be a clear suicide risk. A significant amount of resource was placed into multidisciplinary team meetings for the child, but in meeting after meeting, for whatever reason, CAMHS did not show. The process to provide appropriate help for that child could not go ahead and deeply scarce resources were being burned up. It was only after the intervention of our team that we managed to bring CAMHS to the table.

Professionals want to do things. No one goes into this field wanting to do the wrong thing: they go into it to help, but the resources are not there and often the system is inefficiently resourced. I briefly pay tribute to the work of the local commissioning group, which as of last week has put in some resource for mental health professionals to work across schools, but it does not come close to the level needed. I beg the Minister to listen and to do what she can to get the Government to act.

3.2 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) on securing this debate. I concur very much with all that he said in his opening speech. Because we have only a small amount of time, I want to address one specific issue that has been brought to my attention. We all agree that we have a growing challenge with mental health conditions among young people across the country. It is right to acknowledge that the Government recognise that and are acting. We are grateful in Cornwall that, as I speak, a residential unit for children with mental health conditions is being built, after many years of not having a residential unit and our children having to be sent all over the country to be cared for. That unit will be open soon, which is very welcome.

I am particularly concerned about the amount of pressure we are putting on our schoolteachers when it comes to caring for children with mental health conditions. We are expecting more and more of teachers in that regard when it is not their role or responsibility. I am concerned about the impact that is having on our teachers.
I am also concerned about another aspect of education, which is authorised absence. I know that is not the Minister’s direct responsibility, but I hope she will take the remarks on board and feed them back to the Department for Education. Many parents are coming to me saying that they are struggling to get the school to support them as a family when they need to take their children out of school because of mental health concerns and conditions, including to attend appointments with CAMHS or other organisations.

In one case, the school was refusing to recognise absence from a particular child who was suffering from a mental health condition until that condition had been formally diagnosed by CAMHS. As we have heard today, it can take many months—I have heard it is up to 18 months—to get a diagnosis from CAMHS. The school was sending warning letters home to the parents about the amount of time the child was having away from school and threatening to take legal action against them. All that was doing was exacerbating the problem and putting more pressure, more stress and more distress on the family at an already difficult time.

Through the Minister, I appeal to the Department for Education that we need our teachers, and our headteachers in particular, to be more understanding and more compassionate. They are being driven by a heavy-handed approach from Ofsted in meeting attendance targets. It seems that those targets, above all else, are the most important thing for schools. No recognition or allowance seems that those targets, above all else, are the most important thing for schools. No recognition or allowance is given for the real challenges many families face when they have a child who is suffering with mental health conditions and is therefore unable to attend school regularly. They are being put under huge pressure.

Many children are aware of what is going on, and I am concerned that they are encouraged to bury the issue and go to school because they do not want the pressure put on their parents, rather than opening up and getting the help and support they need. We need to ensure that schools work with parents and families when they have a child facing these issues. They should not add to the problems or the pressure that the family is under. I ask the Minister to take that on board. We can do better in getting schools to recognise the concerns and conditions that many families find themselves facing and in working with families, rather than exacerbating the problem.

3.6 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I applaud the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) for securing this debate. Children and young people’s mental health is incredibly important. I appreciate the contributions of other Members. I have similar situations of children suffering in my constituency, but I will not repeat them.

I want to focus on three issues that are important to the mental health of our young people. First, I want to raise the issue of young people’s mental health within our judicial system, which I spoke about in this Chamber only a few months ago when I highlighted how young people with mental health issues had been forgotten in the Government’s response to the Justice Committee’s report on the disclosure of youth criminal records. I emphasise that when we look at the Government’s funding plans for young people’s mental health—they are welcome, but could stand to go further—we should not forget the vulnerable young people who have been taken out of mainstream schools and placed under the care of the UK’s judicial system. Many of those young people may not understand why they are there, and they are placed under stress and pressure that even as adults would struggle to cope with. We must ensure that does not lead to the degradation or further degradation of their mental health, which may damage their chances of rehabilitation.

Secondly, I want to raise the issue of personal, social, health and economic education—also known as PSHE, and formally known as citizenship—for those young people still within our education system. Frankly, the provision is woefully inadequate for the issues it is trying to tackle. There is little to no guidance from central Government, and how the provision is conceived and delivered is almost completely up to the school. That has produced an almost laughable system where each school can have a completely different interpretation of the curriculum and its requirements. One school might require just 15 minutes a week during form time, yet 30 minutes down the road, another school might give an hour’s lesson once a week.

Within that time, teachers are expected to cover everything from mental health to how mortgages work, to sexuality, to how Government and this place works, all with little to no guidance. Many schools simply do not provide the time required to tackle the subjects properly. The lesson material is often put together by a teacher who happens to have the time or by a third-party company that knows little to nothing about it. Neither of them may have the necessary subject matter expertise. I call on the Government to get to grips with the issue and make PSHE a statutory subject with guidelines on the content of the subject area, so that the situation does not essentially amount to, “It’s up to you.” There should be a key focus on mental health, which is too important to have such vague guidelines.

Finally, I want to touch upon the subject of loot boxes in video games. For those who do not know, loot boxes are a mechanic in video games that require someone to pay money to get a box or a pack. Within the box, they might get a piece of very good equipment, a rare boost or a character that will give them an edge when playing online against other people, or they might get something that is rubbish. If they already have it, it is virtually useless to them. To put it in plain English, loot boxes or “surprise mechanics” are essentially gambling. The mechanics also have no impact on the age rating for a game, meaning that young people of all age ranges can be exposed to what are basically gambling mechanics.

I am not someone who believes that video games are bad for young people and rot their brains, as some would put it, but such gambling can have a negative effect on young people’s mental health and cause addiction. There is a reason why we have age restrictions for fruit machines and gambling websites. Even then, we can see the negative effect on adults. I therefore call on the Government to follow the lead of countries such as Belgium and step in to deal with gambling mechanics and their impact on the mental health of our children.
3.11 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. One in nine young people aged between five and 15 has a diagnosable mental health condition, so I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) for securing this vital debate. The issue becomes more pressing as figures suggest that those children are twice as likely to carry mental illness into adulthood. However, the Government are taking some action and have invested £1.4 billion to improve specialist services for mental health, but we are playing catch-up.

Pressures on the younger generation are at a new high with the advent of social media. There is a constant pressure to keep up on platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook, which is compounded when we look at their exposure to image and celebrity culture. Although social media can be a power for good, it is clear that such platforms can have a detrimental impact on children’s mental health. We have already had some truly devastating cases, such as that of Molly Russell, whose suicide sparked this important conversation nationally. I welcome the current review by the chief medical officer, Dame Sally Davies, who is assessing the impacts that social media has on a child’s mental health.

Another mental health condition on the rise, especially in young people, is eating disorders. I recently met a constituent, Lizzie Speller, here in Parliament, with the charity Beat UK, which supports people with eating disorders. Lizzie spent several years fighting anorexia. She overcame her long battle and got the help that she needed. It is fantastic that four fifths of young people with eating disorders now receive treatment within one week. Lizzie is doing a lot to help others. She has set up Mental Health Mates walks, a Chichester community group that has a monthly city walk. My husband and I joined them earlier this year. It is an opportunity to meet and talk about things that concern people. The role of Beat is important in spreading the network across the country.

Another Beat ambassador is my goddaughter’s sister, Isabella Tee, who worked hard to overcome anorexia as a teenager and now works to support others at York University. Schools have a vital role in offering support and spotting the signs when people need help. Many schools in my constituency—Chichester High School and Bourne Community College, to name just two—have done a lot to support mental health in schools and have trained mental health first aiders and pupil mental health ambassadors. On the ground, visible services are exactly what we need, and I look forward to seeing the impact of the new mental health support team pilot in my area, as the Coastal West Sussex CCG is taking part in the first wave.

Getting to grips with mental health is important, as the consequences of not doing so are unimaginable. On 17 July 2017, one of my constituents, Jo Marsden, had her life turned upside down when her 20-year-old son, Ned, took his life at Witley station. Ned had been excluded from school earlier in his life, and over the years had withdrawn from his family and friends. His mental health issues were well masked and not identified at school or later when his doctor tried to identify signs. I have met Jo several times now, and she is an inspiring woman. She has created Ned’s Fund, which offers vocational courses to young people who drop out of school. She said:

“My dream is to help as many children as I can by funding vocational training. I’m not a fairy godmother but nothing would bring me greater happiness.”

The impact of suicide on a young person is truly devastating, as my family knows from personal experience because my young cousin, Sallie Gibson, took her life some years ago.

People across Chichester continually come together to improve each other’s lives. Tackling mental health issues needs a comprehensive approach where, in every part of a young person’s life, someone is available to give a much needed helping hand.

3.15 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) for securing this debate. It is important because the simple way to change attitudes around mental health in this country is to talk about it. The more we do it in Parliament, the better. I pay tribute to all those, including charities such as Rethink Mental Illness, that have made a real step change in the way that we consider mental health in this country. I also give credit to the Minister. She obviously does not know what will happen next week with the change in Prime Minister, but she has been a great champion for mental health in not only doing the work that she does, but caring about it. Sometimes we get a Minister who simply goes through the motions, but this Minister cares deeply about the subject and has made a real difference.

The point about finance is important in mental health. That point has been made over the years not only in respect of adult services, but in respect of children’s services, and it has been made again today. Having the proper workforce is also important. I do not want to relegate those two issues because they are very important in this debate, but the other thing that often does not get spoken about is having a proper pathway into a service, which is a mess at the moment, partly as a result of reorganisations in the health service. We have also had cuts to local authorities and they can no longer afford to fund voluntary sector organisations. Sure Start centres have been cut, and the cuts are having an impact on people’s access to services.

I pay tribute to CAMHS. They get a bad name, but they are trying their best in the impossible job that we give them. We have to try and turn down the pipeline of people going into CAMHS services. The only way we can do that is if we have a proper triage system before going into CAMHS, so that people know whether they can get help elsewhere. We often over-medicalise mental health conditions. The Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys mental health trust in my area has a good pilot that pays for a psychiatrist to sit in a GP’s surgery so that a mental health professional can triage cases as they come in. I do not want to criticise GPs, but they are not mental health professionals. They should have a mental health professional who can triage the cases that need to go through to CAMHS or other adult mental health services and then they can try to help the others.

We need a local network of support organisations, whether it is the voluntary sector, as the hon. Member for Burton rightly pointed out, or others that do fantastic work. He put his finger on the issue of how we tender
for mental health services. I am sorry, but the ones that I speak to in County Durham have contracts that are too big and they do not have the capacity to take them on, but they do valuable work in the community. In some cases, it is a way of taking pressure off the pipeline going into CAMHS and adult mental services. Parents want to know where to go, so we need signposts and pathways so that people do not wait 12 months or longer to get into CAMHS, thinking that will somehow answer their questions.

Andrew Griffiths: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. Gentleman for giving way and for his great speech. Does he agree that one of the reasons why they tender in that way is because they want to have a uniform approach across the whole country? In reality, if someone wants access to a service, people understand the local charity and are much more aware of it, and more likely to go to it for that very reason.

Mr Kevan Jones: I do agree. In my experience the best local examples of mental health support are what is being done by local charities, most of which, frankly, run on a shoestring. They do not ask for huge amounts of money. I think it would be cost-effective for the taxpayer if we directed services into that, but we need that joined-up system. If we do not have it, we can pour as much money as we like into the system and it will not work.

I want to mention one last thing—students’ mental health, which is being highlighted in universities. Will the Minister contact Northumbria University, which is doing innovative work on using new technology to track students and highlight those who are vulnerable? I saw it a few weeks ago on a visit to the university. It is a new model, which could have implications nationally, and I think it is worth looking at. I will finish by just saying, let us keep on talking about this subject.

3.24 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) for obtaining this important debate. I imagine that not a single Member of the House would diminish the importance or severity of this issue. We all want every child to get the best possible start in life, but that is an empty commitment if we do not make sure that the right level of support and help is available for children who suffer from mental health conditions, just as we would for children with physical injuries. We would never allow a child with a broken leg to suffer alone, without professional treatment. Nor should we fail to provide a child suffering from depression or anxiety with the support they urgently need. In the past, the issue has not been given the priority it clearly deserves, so I am glad that finally a consensus is starting to build around the importance of improving mental health services for children and young people.

Despite the acknowledgement of how much needs to be done, the Government have failed to act decisively on the issue. Identifying a problem is all well and good. What we need is real leadership, concrete solutions and properly funded services. At present they are failing on all three fronts. Not enough has been done to address the inadequacy of funding for services or to reduce the number of children who do not have access to mental health support at all.

The Government’s children’s services early intervention grant has been reduced by almost £600 million since 2013. It is projected to decrease by another £100 million by 2020. Children’s services now face a funding gap of £3 billion by 2025. That underfunding is taking place in the context of a rising demand for children’s mental health services. Underfunding leads to a vicious cycle, as the support necessary for good mental health—provided through services such as housing, education and family support—is gradually cut away. When those resources are unavailable, early intervention becomes impossible and mental health problems are left to fester and deteriorate, until finally they require urgent medical intervention. Children are not suffering from more mental health problems at random: the conditions for mental ill health are being created by austerity.

That is why I support the recommendations of the Local Government Association’s “Councils Can” paper, which calls for the empowerment of local government to lead communities and improve young people’s mental health and wellbeing. The point about signposting pathways and helping charities is important. Properly funded housing, education and family support services need to be given priority to ensure the wellbeing of children and young people. Councils are uniquely placed to do that. That is why they need to be properly funded and at the heart of our efforts to address the issue.

Inequality is also a huge issue in the delivery of mental health services for children and young people. Research this year from the mental health charity Mind found that vulnerable people in some regions struggle with little more than half the NHS funding of those in the best-resourced areas. For example, in Surrey Heartlands health and care partnership, the average annual spend on mental health services per head of population is just under £125, but in South Yorkshire and Bassetlaw sustainability and transformation partnership the figure is over £220. The Government need to act as soon as possible. The crisis is absolutely huge.

3.24 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) on obtaining the debate and on his excellent speech, which I almost wholly agree with.

I carried out a constituency survey on mental health services for young people and the responses showed that my constituents are worried and concerned and feel that the situation is getting worse. Of the top issues when we analysed the results, No. 1 was that people get care only after self-harming, and No. 3 was that the police were having to intervene to protect at-risk young people. The young people were coming to the notice of the services far too late. For example, a parent said they had had to visit the GP three times and it was only after their child self-harmed that they were referred to CAMHS. Another, speaking of her daughter, said:

“Her future has been robbed by mental illness and the NHS didn’t have the staff or resources to make a difference when it counted.”

The hon. Member for Burton and others have clearly outlined the need for more funding. If the Minister needs ammunition to help her with her arguments in the
spending review, just think of the cost to the nation of not adequately funding early intervention and CAMHS before things reach crisis level for young people.

I want briefly to discuss early intervention in schools. Universal services—in education, family and youth services, as well as voluntary services—are a vital part of early intervention, identifying at-risk children and signposting them towards dedicated services. That is why we need fully funded universal as well as specialist services. However, cuts to Sure Start centres, youth services and school funding mean a loss of welfare support and other forms of support. The people in those services are the ones who pick up issues, give support and make referrals. That is why austerity in the context of mental health is not just an issue affecting CAMHS; it is about all those services. My local authority, the London Borough of Hounslow, has lost 40% of its total income through a cut of more than 80% in Government grants. That has meant that it has had to cut direct and commissioned services. Now we can see that cut after cut has a detrimental impact not just on young people’s life chances but on their physical and mental health.

Schools are a vital part of early intervention, as other Members have said. When we discuss the role of education in relation to mental health, we need to remind everyone that our schools are facing a funding crisis. They have had to implement a real-terms funding cut of 9% since 2010. In further education it is worse. FE colleges are losing an average of 20% in funding. That is certainly happening at my local FE college. It affects their ability to support young people in crisis. Teachers and school staff are already overworked, and welfare and teaching support have had to be cut. Often teachers can spot problems, but they are not trained to treat mental health issues. In addition, because of the nature of teacher training, there is often no space for teachers to learn about neurodiversity—dyslexia, dyspraxia, autism, ADHD and so on. It takes even teachers a while to recognise what the problems are. That in itself causes mental health problems. Even when they do identify at-risk students and refer them, those students face long waiting times.

We are lucky in Hounslow. We have been successful in getting £820,000 in grant funding for specialist mental health staff based in hub schools, which is good. It is one of 25 pilots. However, that is not enough and I am afraid I do not agree with the Government when they say they are spending a record amount in this area. There have been so many cuts that I believe a lot less is being spent than was funded under the Labour Government.

3.28 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) on securing this important debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who secured a debate on the issue in the main Chamber last week.

Good mental health is important to us all, especially in childhood and adolescence. If mental health problems in childhood and adolescence are not properly treated, they can continue into adult life. It is not a problem for just one part of the country. It is truly a national crisis. I appreciate that much of the debate will focus on children’s mental health services in England, but I want to highlight the situation in Scotland. The number of young people in Scotland who took their own lives increased by 50% last year—I repeat: there has been a 50% increase in suicides among young children in Scotland. We are losing young people, who have so much to offer, but who find themselves suffering in silence. It is a national tragedy across the UK. The Scottish Government pledged to reduce the number of suicides in Scotland by 20% by 2022. If that pledge is to be met, there needs to be some serious action to improve mental health support for children and young people in Scotland.

The children and young people’s mental health taskforce made a series of recommendations, including joint working between the Scottish Government and local government, to reform the way that mental health support is provided. I urge the Scottish Government to enact those recommendations in full. I back the call of the Scottish Children’s Services Coalition for an increase in investment in specialist mental health services, and I hope that the Scottish Government respond positively.

Investment alone is not the answer; however, we need to tackle the underlying causes of mental health issues among children and young people. Some 60% of young people in Scotland say that the pressure to succeed has led them to feel overwhelmed or unable to cope. One in five young people say that they are ashamed of the way they look. Others have experienced mental health issues as a result of their school environment.

We have to look for new ways to support the mental wellbeing of children and young people, which is why I welcome the “Give Youth A Chance” petition, started by the families of three young men who took their lives in Lanarkshire. The petition calls for suicide prevention and mental health support programmes to become mandatory in schools across England and perhaps the UK. That would be a positive step to ensure that the mental health support needed by children and young people was more readily accessible.

The state of children and young people’s mental health services is a national crisis. They are being let down across the UK by inadequate funding for specialist services and growing waiting lists. It is time for the Scottish Government and the UK Government to listen.

3.32 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) on securing the debate.

It is a tough time for children to be children. When I was a child, which was not yesterday, I went to school, came home and did my chores, then went out to play with the rest of the children. We did not have much, but it was all we knew. That is not the case now. Children are under so much pressure to have the best gear, go to the right places and look and behave a certain way. There is no closing the door at night to get away from the pressure; social media follows them everywhere.

I was horrified, but not surprised, to read that one in 10 schoolchildren in Northern Ireland has a diagnosable mental illness, and that 35,000 children had been treated by child and adolescent mental health services in 2018.
The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has just done an inquiry on education and health that reinforced those figures. Indeed, I have had parents in my office whose child is on the waiting list for the CAMHS team and who cannot get on it, and there are many more who should be on the list and are not, so the real number must be well above 35,000.

Schools find themselves on the frontline of dealing with day-to-day anxiety and trying to help, but it is not enough. An article quotes Dr Phil Anderson, a consultant psychiatrist in CAHMS with the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, who says:

“The research shows there has been an increase in the emotional difficulties in children, a 50% increase since 2004.”

That is an absolutely horrendous figure. He continues:

“There are various reasons given for this. One is social media and the rise of cyber bullying and screen time. Some people have said it’s as a result of rising economic inequality and, of course, academic pressures.”

We do not have the tools to deal with that, but our young people are crying out for help.

A young lady in my constituency, Katie Graden Spence, who recently shadowed me in this place, has been open about her struggle with anxiety and mental health. She published a poetry anthology, “Searching for freedom”, which paints the scene of emotion in many young people. Katie was a finalist in a prestigious category of the Pramerica Spirit of Community awards in recognition of her poetry and fundraising for Action for freedom”, which paints the scene of emotion in many young people. Katie was a finalist in a prestigious category of the Pramerica Spirit of Community awards in recognition of her poetry and fundraising for Action Mental Health, as well as her work to outline her proposals on peer-led mentoring in schools to the Department for Education and the all-party parliamentary group on mental health. She is inspirational and inspired.

She is fighting those battles for herself and for others her age whom we are failing. We must ask ourselves about that.

I am thankful to the hon. Member for Burton for raising the issue, but I will be more thankful to learn how we are going to radically change how we deal with children’s mental health in the UK. Children are struggling. They need us to do more. I look forward to hearing how they will put funding in the right places and guarantee controls on social media to prevent cyber bullying and trolling, to ensure that young people know that they are loved and important, and that they matter in their home, their community and here in this place.

3.34 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) for securing this extraordinary debate, in which there have been many contributions from both sides of the House and many child psychiatrists, which show that the issue is a high priority in our constituencies. It is important that the subject was brought to this Chamber. His speech was detailed, extensive and passionate. I congratulate him on being an assiduous representative of his constituents.

We have heard about the main issues; I will not go through them all again but point some out. Workforce is obviously a problem, as are training, access to services, prevention, treatment, trauma and eating disorders. We have also heard about social media and how technology can be helpful in signposting people, but can also undermine mental health in young people, so appropriate safeguards must be put in place.

We have heard constituency cases from across the United Kingdom. The Office for National Statistics shows that the highest rate of suicide is in north-east England and Wales, but all Governments across the United Kingdom need to make tackling suicide a priority. I thank the Minister, who has been working hard on it and has made significant progress. The problem is, however, that we had such a long way to go that we are not yet where we want or need to be.

I thank the British Psychological Society and the Paediatric Psychology Network UK for sending me their updates and views. They pointed out the problem with access to child and adolescent mental health services and that the services continue to be run on medical models, so if a young person presents with suicidal thoughts or behaviours, unless they have a concomitant mental disorder such as depression or an eating disorder, they do not always gain access to the treatment part of CAMHS. That is wrong, because not every young person will be medically classified as having a disorder, but may need access to coping skills, treatments, counselling and perhaps family therapy. They may have social issues, rather than a condition that requires a medical diagnosis, but they still need access to crisis care to prevent suicide.

That has been brought home to me in the last couple of weeks, as we have suffered our own tragedy in East Kilbride. Ryan Coleman, a young man with his whole life ahead of him, took his own life. This weekend, I am going to a tribute event to mark his life and what he had accomplished in such a short space of time, and to support his family and friends. Families should not have to go through such tragedies, however, and Parliament must do more.

I thank the Trust Jack Foundation in Stonehouse, which has set up young people’s services to bridge the gap and make sure that something happens between a referral to CAMHS and being seen by CAMHS. It gives young people access to support from other young people who experience mental health issues and to support-based activities and therapies. Again, that came out of a personal tragedy—the loss of Jack—which his mother, a wonderful woman, has turned into a positive thing for other children across the area. I cannot thank her enough.

Transitions are important; we need to focus on the transition from child to adult mental health services, and services in colleges and universities. Will the Minister think about the children who have lost a parent serving in the armed forces, and update me on that? A couple of weeks ago, I went to an event with the armed forces parliamentary scheme where I found out that there is a lot of work going on in the US to support young people who lose a parent in service, but there is no such support, which is a high issue and access to services in the UK. Obviously, children who lose a parent serving in the armed forces also lose their home and support network. They have to make dramatic adjustments, and for young people, that is a critical time.

Governments across the United Kingdom are trying their best to improve services, but we have a very long way to go. I want to help everybody in Westminster and the other Governments to achieve the progress we need.
3.40 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) on securing this important debate. I thank hon. Members on both sides of the House who have contributed with extremely moving testimony from their own lives and their experience as constituency MPs. I will refer to some of their contributions during my speech.

Fundamentally, children’s mental health services are in crisis because the funding is inadequate and prevention has been cut at a time when the pressures on children are higher than they have ever been. Difficulties in childhood, such as growing up in poverty or experiencing neglect, abuse or childhood bereavement, which my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) spoke about, can have a huge impact on a child’s mental health. There are also new pressures that affect all children, which many of us did not experience, such as the increase in exams and tests at school and the rise of social media, which has created new forms of bullying and has put new pressure on children in relation to their self-image and how they feel about their bodies.

I want to explore the issue of childhood trauma a little more, because it plays an important role in developing higher incidence of childhood mental ill health. There are three high-risk factors that indicate that a newborn baby’s life chances will be dramatically reduced: having a parent who is addicted to drugs or alcohol, having a parent with severe mental ill health, or witnessing a parent being subjected to domestic violence. Any one of those three factors creates a significant risk for the child, but shockingly 16,000 babies are born every year in this country to parents with all three of those risk factors.

Without intervention and support, those children have very little chance in life. They will become the young people committing knife crime. They will end up in the care system. They will fill our prisons, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) pointed out. They will end up living on the streets, develop mental ill health and die younger. My hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) pointed out the alarming increase in the rate of suicides.

One in three mental health conditions relates directly to adverse childhood experiences. A study by Safelives shows that more than half of children who witness domestic violence develop behavioural problems and have difficulty forming relationships later in life. Their fragile young minds are deeply traumatised by seeing their mother beaten up by a violent and abusive partner in their home, which should be a safe space in which to grow up. Professionals do not always recognise that the problem underlying what they may term “difficult behaviour” may be mental ill health caused by traumatic experiences in earlier childhood. Professionals who work with children are not routinely trained in how trauma can affect behaviour, so the child does not get the help they really need. We need services to get dramatically better at identifying when challenging behaviour comes from trauma so we can treat the problem at source, rather than continuing to fail the child, who had precious little chance from the moment they were born.

Mental ill health affects not only the most vulnerable young people, of course. As we have heard, one in eight children experiences mental ill health, yet for the recent NHS mental health prevalence survey found that only one in four young people with a mental disorder is seen by a mental health specialist. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) is right to call for better access to care. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) said, on average it can take three visits to a GP before a child is referred for specialist assessment. They then have to wait an average of six months for treatment to start. Of course, there are far worse waiting periods. My hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) spoke about a 72-week wait, and my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) referred to a £3 billion funding shortfall, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) referred. That means that the lack of early intervention work is now reaching an absolute crisis point. This country is failing some of the most vulnerable children in our society and then blaming them for our failure to provide the help that they needed. Thousands of young people did not have a chance from the moment they were born.

I have the highest regard for the Minister from our previous interactions on related issues. I know that she is deeply committed to these issues, so I hope she will act on what she has heard today. I have some questions of my own to ask before she responds. Will she ring-fence NHS mental health budgets and require that they be spent on mental health services, rather than being reallocated elsewhere, as we are currently seeing? Will she invest in prevention and early help, rather than waiting for mental health problems that develop early in a child’s life to turn into crises as they grow up? Will she ensure that children’s services professionals are trained to recognise trauma and provide appropriate care that meets the child’s needs, rather than blaming them for behaviours that have arisen because of the trauma that they have experienced? Will she make sure babies born to parents with the highest risk factors get the support they need from the moment they are born, rather than allowing their lives to be written off and wasted? I hope very much that we will hear positive responses from the Minister, because no country that loves its children can tolerate the suffering that children currently face.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this afternoon’s debate, which has given me a lot to think about and a lot to address. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), who gave an excellent exposition of the challenges before us. I welcome the contributions of all Members. We have covered a lot of content, and I will do my best to address all the points that have been made—there are a hell of a lot.
As the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) said, for a long time we have not talked about mental health enough. It has been a taboo subject, and these issues have been left to fester. As a consequence, mental health has been a Cinderella among public services. People with mental ill health have suffered discrimination at the hands of the state in many ways.

We have identified that children’s mental health services have been underfunded for generations, and we will have to fix that—of that there is no doubt. Unfortunately, that takes more than a magic wand. It requires investment and all commissioners to step up to the plate. It requires good partnership working between NHS organisations, local authorities, schools and everyone involved in the system. It is, frankly, a massive culture change, but we need to deliver it. We have heard examples this afternoon of individual children who are being failed by poor service. Frankly, that is the state’s failure, and we are all duty-bound to put it right.

I am grateful that hon. Members have given me these examples, challenging though they are, because they are a helpful reminder to the system that these are individual people. People like Drew should not have to wait 15 months for an appointment. The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and I have talked about the challenges in Cumbria. In terms of delivering the transformation and improvement we are aiming for, we are seeing a real lack of consistency in the speed and quality of services as they are rolled out. Again, that is a challenge for us as a system. In my contacts with NHS England, I am keen to ensure that we get more uniformity in provision.

In answer to the point the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) made about ring-fencing funding for mental health services, NHS England will challenge CCGs very directly about how much money they spend on mental health services. We are very clear that they should spend more than the increase in their budgets. Although we have always rejected the suggestion of a funding floor, we are clear that we want that to happen.

There is so much to cover that I am sure I will miss something, but there are some points that I really want to emphasise. The right hon. Member for North Durham talked about the role of the voluntary sector. That was music to my ears. I have said repeatedly that good support for people with mental ill health does not necessarily have to be medical—in fact, the wrap-around service that can be provided by just company and comfort is far better delivered by organisations in the voluntary sector, but it is part of our health offering. I am very challenging in telling CCGs and commissioners that they should be thinking about commissioning services from the voluntary sector. Taxpayer funding should deliver the outcomes we want, and the voluntary sector can do that better and cheaper than we can by medicalising the problem. I cannot emphasise that enough.

On delivering more efficient pathways, clearly, the ability to triage people to services that are not medical, are more fleet of foot and can react more immediately provides an opportunity for early intervention that will deliver the better outcomes we want for people.

Looking particularly at individual groups, we heard reference to people with neurodiverse conditions—people with ADHD, ASD and dyslexia. Often, those things go undiagnosed. We need to ensure that, in schools, those people are not just treated as difficult but signposted to places where they might get additional help. We know that earlier diagnosis of those conditions can be the difference between developing mental ill health and not, so we must do better on that. Obviously, the next wave of delivering a transformation for children will involve continuing our pressure on the need to deliver a better mental health service for children, but key to that for me is getting earlier diagnosis of autism and ADHD.

I am not shy about articulating the benefit of that for society: early diagnosis is not just for the benefit of those children, although of course they deserve the best services. We heard about the impact of trauma, and everyone who mentioned it was absolutely right. We have no excuse for failing those people and not putting support around them when they need it. Not only do they deserve that, but by doing so, we win as a society. As I said, those people end up in the care system at best and in prison at worst. Our prisons are full of people who have been failed by the state because we did not give them that hand up when we needed to. We must grasp this issue, and I am not shy about raising that challenge. Yes, it is good value for money—I am sure I speak for all hon. Members when I say that I would rather spend more on health than on prisons, thank you very much. We must ensure that we support people when they need it and recognise the impact of trauma.

Hon. Members will be aware of the work that my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) led when she was in Government on the support given to people in the first 1,001 days of life. She has a debate on that subject in the main Chamber later this afternoon—in fact, she is speaking now. I am sure she will echo some of the points the hon. Member for Croydon North made. We can see the children who are at risk. The state has every opportunity to support those people and, frankly, we should be a lot more assertive in doing so. As I said, those individuals will benefit, society will benefit and, of course, the taxpayer will benefit because we will not be spending money on failure.

The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) spoke movingly about the increase in suicide among young people. Collectively across Government, we need a better understanding of the pressures facing young people, which seem to be a lot more acute than they were when I was growing up. Bluntly, I used to play at “Charlie’s Angels”; I did not expect to look like them. That might seem a trite thing to say, but body image puts massive pressure on our young people.

We used to think that kids would be safer in their bedrooms than if they went out to play on their bikes. That is no longer true, because the way people are routed through content when tackling social media leaves them very much at risk. Although we can celebrate the revelations and opportunities that the internet and social media have given our young people, they bring with them risks, and we need to be a lot more on top of those. I am glad to say that I am now in regular dialogue with those companies. To be fair, they are stepping up
to the plate at this stage, but that is not to say that we should not consider legislation where we can see that that would bring value in protecting young people.

Obviously, we have made commitments to increase funding. We will continue to do that, because we need to ensure that we meet the unmet need that was alluded to. As I say, money spent early is money spent wisely when expenditure on acute service is so much costlier.

Waiting times were mentioned, and I will take that away. We need to get a much better handle on areas with particularly long waiting times. We have set targets. Some 80% of young people with urgent cases are seen within a week. Again, this comes back to the extent to which we triage services. The really important thing about early intervention and getting support to children at an early stage is our proposals for mental health support teams to work directly with schools—my hon. Friend the Member for Burton alluded to the project starting in his constituency. Those teams will be able to equip the schools themselves with more material and support to help them embed mental wellbeing throughout the curriculum, but they will also be the place for additional support and the place where services are referred.

I thank all hon. Members who contributed to the debate. We are on it, but I would be the first to admit that we still have a long way to go to deliver mental health services for children that we can all be proud of.

3.58 pm

Andrew Griffiths: At a time when the public look in on this place often with derision and sometimes with desperation about how we behave, this debate has shown Parliament at its best. There was lots of consensus, lots of cases were mentioned in a heartfelt way, and we heard lots of determination to make a difference. I think we all recognise that these issues involve young people in a desperate state and parents who are equally desperate about the future of those children. If we can come together and deliver the early intervention and support mechanisms that can make such a difference later in life, we can literally save the lives of those young people. I thank everybody who contributed to this really positive debate. I hope it is just a springboard for us to go further and ensure we deliver for all those young people across the country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered children and mental health services.
double hit would be too much for many farmers in my constituency and beyond. I cannot emphasise the dangers to the industry enough.

Both farming unions in Wales agree. John Mercer, Director of NFU Cymru, said:

“It is absolutely clear that a no deal scenario will be catastrophic for Welsh and indeed British agriculture. A scenario where Welsh farmers have to operate under the ‘no deal’ default of WTO tariffs will have devastating effects and will severely threaten the livelihoods and business of Welsh farmers.”

I am delighted to report that Mr Daiydd Jarrett from NFU Cymru is watching our proceedings.

Glyn Roberts of the Farmers’ Union of Wales said:

“It says it all that the prospect of a hard Brexit means a rich and highly developed state is stockpiling food and hoping to use an exemption to WTO rules on the Irish border which would more normally be applied in cases of war or famine. Yet this situation is not compulsory; this is a crisis which in fact we can easily avoid by acting in the best interests of our four nations; by withdrawing Article 50 and telling people honestly why Brexit must take place over a safe and realistic timetable.”

In July 2018, the British Government lodged proposed schedules with the World Trade Organisation setting out the most favoured nation tariffs that would apply to imports to the UK after Brexit. Subsequently, in March 2019, the British Government set out proposed temporary tariffs to apply in the event of a no-deal scenario, which would see zero tariffs applied to 87% of imports measured by value for up to a year in a temporary regime, while consultation and review on a permanent tariff regime takes place.

I am pleased that the British Government have exercised at least a degree of sensitivity in their treatment of the sheep sector, recognising the need to maintain tariff protection for lamb in the event of no deal by maintaining the full WTO tariff of 48% on lamb imports. However, what they give with one hand, they take away with the other. Tariff rate quotas will allow lower or zero tariffs to be applied up to a certain level of imports on some products. We know, for example, that New Zealand will continue to enjoy significant tariff-free access to the UK market for 110,000 tonnes of lamb annually. One of our principal competitors in the lamb sector will therefore enjoy more generous tariff-free access to our market.

**George Eustice** (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): I was involved in some of that work and the development of that schedule as a Minister. The existing New Zealand tariff-rate quota would be split in half, giving it less access to the UK market than previously. Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, in any event, in recent years New Zealand has used only about 70% to 75% of its current rate quota because it cannot compete with lamb produced in the north-west and south-west of this country even before it reaches that ceiling?

**Jonathan Edwards**: I recognise the former Minister’s expertise in the matter. We will have to wait and see what farmers have to say about that. I invite him to attend the Royal Welsh show next week and make that point. I am sure he would receive a welcome response to his comments.

The new Brexit date of 31 October will coincide with very high numbers of finished lambs coming on to the UK market.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Merionnydd) (PC): Will my hon. Friend take this opportunity to invite Ministers not just to the Royal Welsh show next week but to Balla Mart, which will be held on 31 October, when perhaps 800,000 small-body lambs will come to market at a time of considerable pressure on prices?

**Jonathan Edwards**: I welcome my right hon. Friend’s intervention, because it takes me to my next point. If we are locked out of European markets, there is no way in which domestic consumption could pick up the slack. Additionally, the final quarter of the year sees the sale of light lambs from Wales, which are traditionally destined for export. There is no way in which they could be redirected into domestic consumption. Economists previously assumed that the loss of the EU market would depress UK farm-gate prices by 30%.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for being so generous. The added threat of tariffs, as he suggests, is that British supermarkets will think they have farmers over a barrel because of the loss, in effect, of our export markets. Does he agree that Ministers ought to take action now and increase the powers of the Groceries Code Adjudicator to ensure that supermarkets cannot exploit the situation?

**Jonathan Edwards**: I am grateful for that valid intervention. Those are the remedial measures that the British Government should be looking at urgently to protect our domestic farm producers. We are all aware of the imbalance there has been in the supply chain over many years, with, as he said, producers under the barrel of the supermarkets. The situation may well be exacerbated by what comes in the following months.

To return to my point, economists believe that farm-gate prices will fall by 30%. With an additional 800,000 lambs on the domestic market at the end of October, farm-gate prices will come under additional pressure. I therefore call on the British Government to commit, on top of the measure mentioned by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), to additional funds for Wales to be able to implement contingency plans should the worst happen and we find there is unsellable surplus on the domestic market. There would be a disproportionate impact on Welsh agriculture.

In other sectors, the British Government have elected partially or completely to dismantle tariff walls on most products. Tariff rates of 45% for beef, 0% for eggs and 22% for poultry meat will apply for imports into the UK from the EU and the rest of the world, while our exports of those products to the EU will face tariffs of 84%, 19%, and 48% respectively. In the dairy sector, only certain products—such as cheddar with a 7% tariff and butter with a 15% tariff—will be afforded some degree of protection, with the EU applying tariffs of 57% and 48% respectively on those products.

**Liz Saville Roberts**: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his time. Does he agree with Dairy UK’s analysis that the toxic combination of WTO tariffs on exports aggravated by zero tariffs on imports will cause a massive shock to raw milk prices? That will affect big dairy sector employers such as farmer-owned South Caernarfon Creameries.
Jonathan Edwards: That was another valid intervention. The hit will not be just to core producers, but along the supply chain to some of the producer and production capacity as well.

Commodities such as skimmed milk powder, yogurt, whey, cream and liquid milk will not be protected by capacity as well.

The hit will not be just to core producers, but along the supply chain to some of the producer and production capacity as well.

Joan McAlpine: It is exactly what I was saying about the dual market: if you have one schedule for the north of Ireland and two factories in the Republic of Ireland, there will also be the problem of a major oversupply of liquid milk on the domestic market.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In my constituency we have Lakeland Dairies, which has two factories in Northern Ireland and two factories in the Republic of Ireland. Michael Hanley is the chief executive officer of that firm. He says that whether or not there is a Brexit deal, life will go on. In other words, the movement of milk across the border, either way, in liquid or powder form, will still take place. We need to be aware of what some businesses are saying. That comes straight from a firm in my constituency.

Jonathan Edwards: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s expertise; he is a farmer himself, I believe. However, if there is a no-deal Brexit, the European Union will have to protect its customs and market territory under all circumstances; otherwise, it would undermine the essence of the customs union and the single market.

Owing to our inability to discriminate between countries under WTO rules, the tariffs that we apply to the EU27 in the case of no deal will be the same as those we apply to countries with which we do not have a trade deal. At the moment, that is basically the rest of the world, apart from the Faroe Islands and a few other territories. That would mean that South American beef, which is currently subject to the EU’s common external tariff of 84%, would, in the event of a no-deal Brexit, be able to enter the UK subject to a 45% tariff and out-compete our domestic producers.

Many classes of imported product will be produced to standards that are currently illegal in the UK, and that will undermine our high domestic standards. As an unintended consequence, it will also hinder our ability to trade with our biggest market, which prides itself on high standards. The fact that the UK could be on the cusp of leaving behind a trade policy based on almost half a century of EU membership and swapping it for a trade policy based on WTO tariffs and protection for a handful of products is, to say the least, deeply concerning.

All that, and I have not even begun to countenance the north of Ireland. The UK temporary import tariffs are set to apply to products exported from Ireland to the British mainland but not to goods crossing from Ireland into Northern Ireland. Although protecting the integrity of the Good Friday agreement must be a priority, that fantasy solution has been branded useless by standards that are currently illegal in the UK, and that will undermine our high domestic standards.

On another point often used by the British state to defend its tariff schedules, although I recognise the importance of ensuring that food prices do not rise in the immediate aftermath of no deal, the second-order effects of a no-deal Brexit on the economy could well lead to the cost of living sky-rocketing, rendering that argument null and void. Surely, ruling out no deal in the first place is the best way of achieving food price stability and food supply. If the next Prime Minister insists on keeping the myth of no deal alive, I would urge him to prioritise revisiting the proposed tariff schedules, with a view to ensuring that protections are maintained rather than eroded or removed completely.

From a wider strategic perspective, what proponents of no deal do not admit is that the strategy is essentially a negotiating tactic. I do not think that even the mad caps of the Tory European Research Group want to base the British state’s trading relationship with the EU on the North Korean, Venezuelan, Cuban, Belarusian and Kazakhstani model. They believe that threatening no deal will secure favourable terms from the European Union. That has not been the case to date and is highly unlikely to change in the autumn, owing to the simple fact that the European Union holds all the cards in the negotiations.

I do not think our inability to secure such terms is down to insufficient effort by previous UK negotiators. The strategy is the international trade equivalent, as one expert put it, of placing a gun to our own head and telling our opponent that we will pull the trigger unless they concede. In that case, they are likely to say, “Go ahead.” The reality is that, far from being intransigent, I am amazed by the patience of our European friends as Westminster goes through a full-scale political nervous breakdown.

The strategy, however, has developed. Some in the Conservative party now believe that the crisis of a no-deal situation, which will face the British state on 1 November, is the best way to secure favourable terms in future negotiations, as opposed to doing things in a managed, grown-up way. It is a game of risk, in other words. Those advocating no deal are prepared to throw all their chips in the air in the hope that they fall on the right roulette numbers. Personally, when dealing with people’s jobs and living standards, I prefer a more strategic and nuanced approach.

Before the Minister starts blaming my side of the argument for keeping no deal alive by not voting for the Brexit deal, it is the case that the Brexit model and narrative in front of us today has shifted drastically towards a harder, more extreme Brexit. At the start of the process, directly after the EU referendum, a soft Brexit was perceived as staying within the framework of the EU single market and customs union, while a hard Brexit was widely perceived as Canada-plus. At the time, Plaid Cymru would have been content with the former. Indeed, we have voted for those options when they have been before the House. By now, the discourse of a soft Brexit looks more like Canada-plus, while a hard Brexit is widely accepted as being no deal. There is no way on earth that we could accept either of those options with a clear conscience.

The reality of the situation is clear: on day one of a no-deal Brexit the British state will have to negotiate a series of mini deals or face dire economic consequences. No deal is therefore a complete oxymoron. The European Union has said clearly that its priority before any meaningful negotiations would be settlement of the £39-billion divorce bill, citizens’ rights and the British border in Ireland. Considering the British Government will have to concede on those three issues no matter what they do, I am at a complete loss as to why anyone who supports Brexit voted against the withdrawal agreement.
Over the last year, the British Government have clearly outlined the dangers of a no-deal Brexit. On top of an economic recession equivalent to the great financial crash of 2008, highlights include troops on the street to deal with civil unrest; food shortages and higher prices as import supplies are disturbed, especially for fruit and vegetables; customs checks costing UK businesses £13 billion a year; no legal protections when buying products and services from EU countries, while UK courts no longer offer redress for consumers; flights from UK airports not receiving equal treatment when traveling to and landing at airports of countries who are members of the common aviation area; the Eurostar being disrupted until new arrangements are negotiated with each country along its routes; and fishing boats losing access to EU fishing waters, and being unable to land their catch at EU ports—and that is just what the British Government have chosen to share with us over the last few months.

Pascal Lamy, who should know a thing or two about such things as director general of the World Trade Organisation between 2005 and 2013, equates leaving the European Union single market and customs union and trading on WTO terms to leaving the first division and facing a double relegation to the third division.

Aware of the potential backlash to such a reality, no-deal proponents now argue that the British state could seamlessly enact article XXIV of the general agreement on tariffs and trade to keep the current tariff schedule. That argument was shut down last week by the WTO’s current director general, who said:

“Article XXIV of the GATT is simply the provision of global trade law under which free trade agreements and customs unions are concluded... If there is no agreement, then Article XXIV would not apply, and the standard WTO terms would.”

In other words, as we now famously know, paragraph 5(c) of article XXIV of GATT states that it applies only if there is a deal—the direct opposite of what the no-deal apostles are arguing for. For that reason, I have little doubt that, were the British Government to adopt no deal as its official policy, they would lose a vote of no confidence in this House. I for one am certainly committed to voting to bring down the British Government in order to defend the economic interests of my constituents. Diolch yn fawr iawn.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 4.30 pm. I will call the Minister at 4.20 pm. To speak for the next 90 seconds, I call James Cartlidge.

4.18 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Thank you, Mr Hollobone; I will be very brief. I congratulate the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) and thank him for allowing me to make a short point that is very important to me. I had a meeting with arable farmers in Shimpling in my constituency two Fridays ago. They are extremely worried about the prospect of no deal. Under the current proposal, we are suggesting nil tariffs on imported wheat and barley into the United Kingdom, while exports will be subject to an out-of-quota tariff of almost €100 per tonne, making their being unmarketable a serious prospect.

Obviously, there is no time to go into the potential impact of that. I am sure that the Minister, like me, does not want no deal, but were no deal to happen we must revisit the tariff schedule from the point of view of protecting arable farming. Otherwise, it could face a serious impact. In my view, we should respond with a reciprocal WTO tariff to ensure that the breadbasket of England, just like our farmers in Wales, is on a level playing field with the rest of the world.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) on securing this debate on the proposed tariff schedule for agricultural products in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

I reiterate the position of the UK Government: leaving the EU with a deal remains our top priority. I hear the hon. Gentleman’s justification for not voting for the deal, but the deal that I voted for three times already this year represented a compromise between people such as him, who seem to think that being in the single market and customs union is the only way to deliver Brexit—in my view, it would be Brexit in name only and would not give us the freedom to negotiate free trade deals around the world—and others, who seem to want some sort of pure Brexit. I believe the compromise was a good deal. Had we voted for it, we would have left on 29 March and would now be in negotiations on the trade arrangements with the rest of the European Union.

I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that 52.5% of the people of Wales voted to leave the European Union. They will be frustrated that some parties in Wales have not voted to deliver on that. He said it was a narrow margin, but the majority for the 1997 devolution referendum was 50.3%, and he seemed very happy to stick with that.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): That is something that has been raised on several occasions. Is the Minister aware that there was a further referendum on devolution in Wales in 2011, which saw the Welsh people overwhelmingly support granting further powers to the Welsh Government?

Mr Goodwill: I understand that a win is a win, which is why the results of the initial referendum and the referendum on Britain’s continued membership of the European Union should be respected and delivered on by all parties in Parliament.

As a responsible Government, we have spent more than two years carrying out extensive preparations for all scenarios, including no deal. Nowhere has the preparation been more assiduous and detailed than in my own Department. As we heard, the Government announced on 13 March a temporary tariff regime that will apply for up to 12 months should the UK leave the EU without a deal. In developing the policy, we have sought to balance the five principles set by the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Act 2018. The five principles include taking into consideration the interests of consumers, producers, external trade, productivity and competition.

We analysed a range of evidence, including information on average trade volumes, tariff data and Government modelling on tariffs in a no-deal scenario, supplemented with business stakeholder engagement. Under this policy, the majority of UK imports—87%—would be tariff free. However, tariffs will be in place for the remaining
[Mr Goodwill]

13% of overall trade, to avoid significant adjustment costs for certain agricultural products, where tariffs help to provide support for UK producers against unfair trading practices such as dumping, and to maintain our trade commitments to developing countries.

We have not had tariffs on cereals to any extent for a number of years. Indeed, I believe the protections that we are introducing through tariffs on imported poultry meat will help protect the cereal industry, because the major customers of our cereal producers will be producers of poultry and other meat products, which we are protecting.

Jim Shannon: I declare an interest in this issue as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on eggs, pigs and poultry, which has asked me to pose the following question. Does the Minister agree that it is absolutely essential that eggs and egg products are included in the tariff scheme, given that it is the most effective way to ensure that all UK egg producers can continue to make improvements and further welfare standards without the threat of being undermined by low-quality imports from third-world countries?

Mr Goodwill: I hope I can to some extent reassure the hon. Gentleman on the issue of shell eggs, which is the major egg market. Supermarkets have made it clear that they would not seek to buy lower quality products, and that they will continue to sell only Lion mark products. I have heard representations on liquid and powdered egg, which might be a problem, and we will continue to listen to the industry.

The no-deal tariff policy has been carefully designed to mitigate price spikes should we apply the full EU most favoured nation rates to our trade with the EU, which will result in large tariffs and potentially price increases for both consumers and producers. I will give a few examples. Should we retain EU MFN tariffs, it will result in tariffs on pasta of over 20%, and 12% tariffs on basic foods such as potatoes, cabbage and lettuce.

The policy has been designed with the objective of minimising disruption in the agricultural sectors, and it aims to strike the right balance between exposing sectors to an unreasonable level of disruption and liberalising tariffs to maintain current supply chains and avoid an increase in consumer prices. A mixture of tariffs and duty-free quotas will therefore be used for beef, sheep meat, poultry, pig meat, butter and some cheeses. The aim is for their impact on production and consumption patterns to be broadly neutral. A point was made on lamb imports from New Zealand, which will be maintained at roughly the same levels. Lamb production is of course seasonal, and New Zealand production has always filled a gap in the UK market.

Tim Farron: The export tariffs for UK farmers, including Cumbrian hill farmers, into the single market worry me the most. Would the Minister consider the potential for increasing the powers of the Groceries Code Adjudicator, so that it can prevent supermarkets from taking advantage of the loss of export markets by paying our farmers a pittance after 31 October, should we have no deal?

Mr Goodwill: Well, I will now turn to the sheep meat market, which is my single biggest concern about a no-deal Brexit. Supermarkets will operate only within the market. There is an idea that supermarkets will drive prices down. Should we have an oversupply of lamb—we could well have, as lambs come on to the market in the autumn, around the time that we could leave the EU without a deal—it will put tremendous pressure on the market. We have already seen that lamb consumption is pretty inelastic in the UK, with a 4% year-on-year reduction. We will also have the big store markets, particularly in hill areas in places such as Wales and Scotland. Hill farms that cannot keep their sheep over the winter will bring lambs to market, which could be affected by the impact of a no-deal Brexit.

As I said, the largest economic risk to the sheep sector is limiting or halting the export of lamb to the EU. The sector is unique among UK agriculture in relying heavily on exports to balance supply—indeed, we are net importers of most products. UK lamb exports will face both tariff and non-tariff barriers in the event of a no-deal Brexit from the EU. UK exports were worth £365 million in 2018, with 97% destined for the EU. To export to the EU, the UK must be recognised as a third country. Even then, the imposition of EU MFN tariffs—around 50% in ad valorem terms—would reduce the competitiveness of UK lamb on EU markets and consequently reduce our exports. Should the UK be listed as an approved third country, it will need to meet the EU’s additional requirements for third-country products of animal origin, including movement through a border inspection post, pre-notification of delivery, checks on marketing standards and export health certificates.

My boss, the Secretary of State, has said that he will support vulnerable sectors, should the price of sheep meat fall considerably. In the event that an aid scheme is deemed necessary, it is likely that we would use retained EU powers; hence the scheme would be exempt from state aid rules. As I said, UK lamb exports were worth £365 million in 2018, with most going to the EU.

Jonathan Edwards: In March, the British Government said they would have to undertake a mass culling programme of lambs and sheep in the event of no deal. Is that still the policy of the British Government, should they pursue no deal in November?

Mr Goodwill: That is not the policy of the British Government. As I say, we are looking at emergency measures, and various figures have been bandied about. The president of the National Farmers Union suggested that the cost of supporting the sheep industry—probably a system involving a headage payment based on the ewes that farmers had already declared—would cost around £150 million. We understand its scale, and I am sure the Treasury will be able to consider that. As I say, we do not want a no-deal situation; we need to get a deal over the line. Whoever the Prime Minister is next week, the best way to minimise the impact on farmers—particularly sheep farmers—is to get us a better deal that is acceptable to Parliament. Every single hon. and right hon. Member of the House will need to examine their conscience and consider how they have voted this year in a way that did not deliver on Brexit.

It is important that we deliver on Brexit. Confidence is waning in our democratic systems, and the Brexit party did very well in the European elections. We have
only ourselves in the House to blame for not delivering on Brexit, and sheep farmers will pay the greatest price. We will still get our salaries as MPs, but they will pay the price of our failing to secure an agreement.

In conclusion, I re-emphasise that leaving the EU with a deal remains the Government’s top priority, but the tariff policy has sought a balance between the impacts on consumers and producers in the event of no deal. We expect the impact on UK consumers as a whole to be broadly price neutral should these changes be transmitted to retail prices, and we will provide support for our most sensitive sectors.

On motion of myself, the motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

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**Drug Treatment Services**

4.30 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered drug treatment services.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. This is a very timely debate, because today we learned shocking new figures for drug-related deaths in Scotland. There were 1,187 drug-related deaths last year, which is an increase of 27% on the previous year and the highest drug death rate in the EU. We await the 2018 figures for England and Wales without much hope for better news or an improvement.

Today also sees the launch of a new report called “Towards Sustainable Drug Treatment Services” by the research-led biotech company Camurus, which has done some extremely interesting research on the state of drug treatment services, including anonymised surveys of 22 directors of public health in England. I thank Camurus for sight of that report and thank those who have sent me briefings from other organisations, including the Hepatitis C Trust, Release, the Alcohol Health Alliance UK, the Local Government Association, Humankind and the Royal College of Psychiatrists. I will not be able to refer to all those briefings in this relatively short debate, but a couple of themes emerge from most if not all of them.

First, there is worry across the sector that the whole drug treatment services system is under pressure—some would say under threat. Since around 2012, Government cuts have squeezed treatment services so much that they are under strain and struggling to cope with demand. In 2010, the coalition Government inherited one of the best drug and alcohol treatment systems in the world, with over 250,000 people treated every year. Drug-related crime was decreasing, HIV and AIDS were under control, and tens of thousands were overcoming addiction through opiate substitution or abstinence-based programmes. The Labour Government prioritised that sector in the late 1990s as part of their social exclusion agenda, and raised treatment budgets from around £200 million per year in 1998 to more than £1 billion by 2003.

When the coalition Government’s austerity really began to hit public services, the hardest-hit area was local government. When local authorities became responsible for the funding and commissioning of drugs services under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, they were already struggling with the reduction of approximately 37% in central Government funding between 2010 and 2016. Between 2014 and 2019, net expenditure on adult drug and alcohol services decreased by 19% in real terms. In 2017, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs warned that local authority funding would prioritise mandated services over non-mandated services, such as drug services,

“particularly if service users are stigmatised or seen as undeserving.”

All the stakeholders who contacted me have expressed their dismay at the impact of the cuts in recent years. More than a third of the public health directors surveyed by Camurus believe they will be unable to keep up with demand for substance misuse services in the coming year.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for bringing this important debate to Westminster Hall. The figures for Scotland
are horrendous, but the figures for the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, also show a rise. Does he agree that the current system is not equipped to deal with the level of drug abuse and need for treatment, and that the waiting times for dedicated facilities leave people without support for too long, which inevitably leads them back to their coping methods and further addiction? Those facilities need to be upgraded and made more available.

Jeff Smith: I agree with the hon. Gentleman; not for nothing is the UK labelled the drug-death capital of Europe. That should worry us across the UK.

The second theme that emerged from the reports is the real worry about the future of services after 2020 if the ring-fenced public health grant for local authorities ends and funding moves to general local authority funding. A report by the Select Committee on Health and Social Care showed that public health budgets have been cut every year since 2013, with alcohol and drug treatment services facing the biggest cuts. Councils have reduced spending on adult drug misuse by an average of 27% since 2015-16, and almost one in five local authorities have cut budgets by 50% or more since then.

The highest cuts have been disproportionately concentrated in areas with high rates of drug-related deaths, according to the Camurus report. More than half of the directors of public health surveyed believe that the removal of ring-fenced public health grants will result in further cuts. Service providers are struggling to maintain their current offer, and have even less capacity to make additional outreach efforts that are needed, such as offering proactive early prevention measures or engaging under-represented groups and communities who come less into contact with available services.

I wish I had more time to talk about hepatitis C, which is a really important issue. Stuart Smith, the head of community services at the Hepatitis C Trust, said:

“I walk into many drug services around the country and it’s chaos. They’re being asked to do so much with so little resource. I’m not sure how many of them can even feasibly have it on their priority list to discuss hepatitis C with clients.”

Hepatitis C is a very harmful condition but it can be prevented and cured if we have the resources to do so.

This is another story of austerity hitting the services that are most needed by the most vulnerable in society, but—this is the third theme that emerges from the sector responses—it is also a story of false economies. Spending on the recovery and reintegration of people who struggle with drug and alcohol dependency is one of the smartest spend-to-save investments that a Government can make. Strong evidence suggests that properly funded drug treatment services help to drive reductions in drug deaths, crime, and rates of blood-borne viruses. Research that the Government themselves commissioned concluded that drug treatment can “substantially reduce” the social costs associated with drug misuse and dependence, with an estimated cost–benefit ratio of 2.5:1. Depending on the breadth of the definition of “social costs”, that ratio could be calculated far more favourably and take into account factors such as lower crime, fewer health problems, less benefit dependency, lower social services spending and so on. Public Health England estimates that for every £1 invested in drug treatment services, there is a £4 social return.

Drug treatment and harm reduction services are cost-effective and offer good value for money, so this is a classic example of funding reductions in one part of the public services leading to spending increases in another. To quote Ron Hogg, police and crime commissioner for Durham and Darlington, who in my view is one of our most progressive PCCs:

“As PCC, I have concerns regarding the future allocation of public health funding in Durham, via the Public Health Grant, and the knock-on effect for policing. I am fearful that I will face the triple whammy of a reduction in police funding, a further reduction due to changes in the funding formula, and the consequences of a decrease in public health funding. The consequences of these changes are likely to include a significant increase in crime in County Durham and Darlington.”

We know that half of acquisitive crime in the UK is directly related to drug dependency.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I am grateful that my hon. Friend has raised the issue of crime. Is he aware that crime prevention orders and drug and alcohol treatment orders attached to sentences have fallen? Drug treatment orders have fallen from 8,734 in 2014 to 4,889 in 2018, and alcohol treatment orders have also halved. People are not getting drug treatment orders as part of their sentence in the community, which leads to the same threats that my hon. Friend describes.

Jeff Smith: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that important point. Durham constabulary’s Checkpoint scheme, through which low and medium-level offenders with drug dependency are diverted into treatment rather than the criminal justice system, has reduced arrests by 11% and convictions by 9.7%, and has made a positive contribution in relation to participants’ drug use, physical and mental health, finances, accommodation status and relationships. There are benefits right across society when we send people into help and treatment, rather than into custody.

A number of stakeholders have identified that the lack of resources not only puts a strain on current treatments and activities, but stifles innovation in new ideas and treatments. That leads me to another key point, which is on our wider approach to drug treatment and policy. There are measures that we can take to reduce deaths and that would lead to less demand on drug treatment services, but the Government are either not encouraging or not permitting them. The most obvious is what many call drug consumption rooms, although I prefer the term overdose prevention centres, which are aimed at those with severe addictions. People will take their drugs—they have them in their possession, so they will inject them, and there is no way that we can stop them doing that—but rather than being left to inject their drugs in a bedsit or back alley, alone with an increased risk of overdose, they can go to one of the centres, where a nurse is on hand; they can use in a sterile clinical space with medical supervision, and naloxone on hand to reverse any overdose.

There are two great benefits to the centres. First, they save lives; no one dies of an overdose in such facilities. Secondly, they also have services for addicts to engage with. It might be the first time that addicts have come into contact with services, so they could be encouraged
into other treatment options. At least 100 drug consumption rooms operate in at least 66 cities around the world, in 10 countries. In a number of European countries, such as Spain, Germany and the Netherlands, supervised drug consumption has become an integrated part of services offered within drug treatment systems.

Police and crime commissioners and health professionals have been assessing the value of piloting such facilities in various areas, but the Government position is to block the pilots. Furthermore, the Government are unwilling to revisit the legislative framework, and so are consistent that we cannot make provision for the centres. However, according to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction last year:

“There is no evidence to suggest that the availability of safer injecting facilities increases drug use or frequency of injecting”.

Equally:

“These services facilitate rather than delay treatment entry and do not result in higher rates of local drug-related crime.”

Drug consumption rooms, overdose prevention centres or whatever we want to call them simply make sense, and it is very regrettable that the Government will not allow them to become part of our treatment landscape.

On the subject of innovative models of service delivery, I mention the Checkpoint scheme in Durham.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making some excellent points. Does not the thrust of his argument lead to the conclusion that, if one were to regulate and control but decriminalise more broadly, many of the social ills and medical problems might be reduced? Is it not time for a royal commission to look more broadly at the troubling social disease of drugs?

Jeff Smith: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. I absolutely agree that we need regulation and control. Personally, I am not sure about royal commissions, because they tend to kick things into the long grass a bit, but perhaps a parliamentary commission or some other way of looking at the problem, trying to come to a consensus and taking the politics out of it—stop people weaponising drugs as a political issue—is the way forward. We need to look at that, because our system is not working. This is not a debate about wider drug policy but, clearly, that policy is not working, and it is resulting in the kind of problems that we face—addicts need the kind of drug treatment services that this debate is about.

I will try to be quick, because other people want to contribute to this short debate. On innovative models of service delivery, naloxone is a life-saving medication that can be used to reverse opioid overdose. However, coverage across England remains poor and the guidance is confusing. If we cannot convince the Government to increase funding for naloxone treatment by implementing a national naloxone programme, they should at least offer national support and guidance for local authorities and prisons. Finally, on drug safety testing, the Home Office refuses explicitly to sanction drug safety testing, which is a simple measure that could save lives and result in fewer people needing treated for drug harms.

We therefore need a refocus of our spending priorities. Funding constraints are curbing the effectiveness of proven treatment and harm reduction measures at the same time as we spend fortunes on drug law enforcement. In 2014-15, for example, an estimated £1.6 billion was spent on drug law enforcement, compared with only £541 million on drug treatment and harm reduction services over the same period. However, while we know that treatment services are cost-effective and save money, the Home Office’s own evaluation of its last drug strategy could not demonstrate value for money in drug law enforcement or enforcement-related activities.

The Government, unfortunately, are preoccupied with trying to stop people from taking drugs—something no one has managed to do in centuries of human behaviour—instead of focusing on harm reduction and treatment. Problematic drug users are stigmatised by our policies and treated as criminals, leaving them less likely to access the life-saving drug treatment services that they need, for fear of arrest. Meanwhile, the services that are available—as we heard earlier—have had their funding slashed and continue to be squeezed.

I need to conclude with some proposals. First, the one consistent message from all stakeholders who have been in touch and care about the issue is that we need to reverse the cuts to our struggling drug and alcohol treatment system. We need to reinvest in those services. The Camurus report released today states:

“The evidence shows that we are fast approaching a point at which we risk doing irreparable damage to our hard-won recovery system, leaving services unable to meet the scale of need that exists.”

The Government must therefore use the upcoming spending review to increase spending on drug treatment services. They need to provide local authorities with additional funding towards those services, without which the ability of services to meet demand will continue to decline.

Among other proposals I suggest the Government should consider guaranteeing the delivery of substance misuse services by making them a statutory, mandated service to end the ambiguity about their delivery and to underline importance of protecting budgets. The Government should also look at the commissioning regime—the consensus among many stakeholders is that it is not working and is too variable—to see whether it is fit for purpose. A 2017 report by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs asked whether the constant re-procurement of addiction services creates unnecessary instability in the system, resulting in poorer recovery outcomes, which is something I have seen on a small scale in the area of south Manchester I represent. Finally, we need to remove barriers to overdose prevention centres and drug safety testing to encourage faster use of heroin-assisted treatment. Such proposals can stop deaths and reduce the numbers going into treatment.

We are looking at a public health emergency, and we need to act.

The shadow Health Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), has talked movingly about his experience of alcoholism in his family. He has promised that a future Labour Government will reverse the decline in the drug and alcohol treatment sector. I fully support him in that endeavour, but we cannot wait. We need the Government to act to safeguard our drug treatment services and, most importantly, to safeguard those who use them.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can go on until 5.30 pm. I am obliged to call the Front Benchers from no later than seven minutes past five o’clock. The
guideline limits are five minutes for the SNP, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister, and Jeff Smith has two or three minutes at the end to sum up the debate. Five Back Benchers are seeking to contribute, so there will need to be a time limit, which is four minutes each, and then everyone will get in.

4.48 pm

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) on securing the debate. I agree with everything he said. I draw the attention of Members to my declaration of interest as a practising NHS psychiatrist and as someone who has worked in drug addiction, or drug treatment, services.

I do not intend to rehearse the discussion on the lack of, or reduction in, funding for the treatment of addiction services since the commissioning moved to local authorities, because that argument has been well established. The challenge we face is how to encourage more people to engage with addiction services and how to improve the quality of care available to those who are drug and alcohol-dependent. In my view—this is increasingly the consensus—commissioning by local authorities has probably been the single biggest failure of health legislation under our Government, and we need to revisit that if we want to improve the quality of care available to the patients we are looking after.

Between 2009-10 and 2016-17, the number of people with opiate addiction who access services has reduced by about 16%. Heroin deaths are on the rise; the number of people presenting with alcohol-related illness, pathology and morbidity is rising; and alcohol-related deaths are rising. Our current approach to additions is not working, which appears to be that the NHS will patch you up as best it can. We are not doing a good job of preventing people from appearing in A&E or in the acute hospital because the commissioning of addiction service is not right. While I do not believe that local authorities are in the right place to commission services, the lack of funding they receive has been a contributing factor.

There are five key challenges and problems with commissioning by local authorities. The first is the quality of patient care delivered. There is poor integration of services between the NHS and the providers that often are commissioned by the local authority, be they in the private sector or the charitable sector. Historically, NHS services have had a good integrated approach between physical healthcare and addictions care. NHS providers have a joined-up approach to treating people with hepatitis, HIV and other physical health problems, or older addicts who may need support for physical health needs, such as cardiac or respiratory problems they may develop as a result of their addictions, particularly if they smoke heroin. That does not happen when there is fragmented commissioning by private-sector providers and local authorities. That needs to change for the benefit of many patients.

Secondly, all private sector providers operate under their own IT systems that have no integration with the NHS whatsoever, so an NHS doctor does not know necessarily what care those private providers are giving. That is dangerous because there is no continuity of healthcare and it is fragmented, to the extent that one part of a supposed health system cannot see what is happening elsewhere.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order.

4.52 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) for securing this debate.

Figures released today show that in Scotland there are more than three deaths a day due to drug use. But who really cares? Who are those people who are dying? It is the homeless; the isolated; the good-for-nothing; the detritus of society. People who inject themselves with poisonous substances do it to themselves—nobody makes them do it. How often have we heard that justification? Nobody is saying it in this place, but we know some people are thinking it.

Through a lack of compassion, but primarily through a lack of understanding, society has created a sub-culture of marginalised people who are pushed to the fringes of our day-to-day consciousness. It has become far too easy to dismiss them, ignore them and exclude them from our cosy lives. Problematic drug users are not getting high for the kicks; they are self-medicating because the pain of everyday life is so great that without the drugs they could not live. The sickness is not the drug use—the pain started long before the addiction. Of the 10% of drug users who develop an addiction, the vast majority have been physically, psychologically or sexually abused. Mix that with financial and aspirational deprivation and you have a powerful cocktail that it takes powerful drugs to suppress. That is why the support services must be about homelessness, mental health, security, continuity, understanding and compassion—everything that counters the chaos.

When I visited drug consumption rooms in Barcelona, I was particularly struck by one facility: a health centre where people visit their GPs for everyday ailments, which is attached to a hospital that people can be referred to. One part of the health centre is for homeless people to visit and pick up clean clothes, have a shower and shave. Over time, the staff build up a relationship with the clientele and come to understand why they are homeless and what can be done. Another unit attached to the health centre is a drug consumption room; the staff there have exactly the same attitude as the staff in the health centre, the GP surgeries and the homelessness unit. They want to know, “What is your problem, and how can I help?”

That is a million miles away from the stigmatisation that is so common in the UK. The mindset of approaching problematic drug use as a health issue pays great dividends: it is cheaper than pursuing and incarcerating people for drug possession; it frees up the police to fight crime; and, most importantly, it works across the globe. It does not work for everyone; tragically, there will always be drug-related deaths, but as we look at the figures released today let us not forget that, thanks to the naloxone available in DCRs, there has never been a death due to overdose in any DCR anywhere in the world. When will the UK Government come to terms with that?

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): On the reform of drug laws, we probably have a lot in common, but today’s shocking figures show that the
number of drug deaths in Scotland is not only three times the average of the rest of the United Kingdom, even though we are all under the same laws, but the highest in Europe. If the hon. Gentleman wants a health-based solution, will he explain what, after 12 years of SNP stewardship of our health service in Scotland, can be done? What should be done through the devolved and central Governments working together?

Ronnie Cowan: The policy is a Europe-wide one; it is proven that the methods used elsewhere in Europe have helped the situation.

Glasgow stands ready to pioneer a DCR. There is cross-party support from Glasgow Council, backing from the SNP Scottish Government, and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde is fully on board. What in the name of goodness is stopping the UK Government from joining us?

4.56 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) on securing this debate and on speaking so well. Happily, much of what I intended to say I now do not need to, not that I would have time to say it anyway.

I congratulate my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), he began to get into the systemic problems in this area, which is what I want to focus my remarks on. We have a systemic problem in the assessment of the rate of return on the investment in drug treatment services, particularly compared with the rate of return on investment in law enforcement in drug policy.

According to the Government’s own statistics, we are not getting a satisfactory return at all on drug law enforcement. That is why the police’s operational policy has been progressively to withdraw from doing nugatory work, leading to effective decriminalisation in many parts of the country, simply because that is not a sensible use of resources. It certainly is a sensible use of resources to try to repair the lives of drug addicts. The cuts under the necessity of austerity, and the systemic issue that my hon. Friend referred to in respect of local authorities taking responsibility, have meant that we are making a shocking value-for-money judgment in the application of public resources in this area.

It has to be down to the Minister—no one else can do it—to review how we invest public money for the public good. That is at the kernel of this debate. If we do not make changes, enforcement authorities will continue to progressively withdraw, because they simply will not waste the public money they have been given by running ineffective operations. The just-retired chief constable of Durham, Mike Barton, is a huge authority on that, and I urge the Minister to talk to her Home Office colleagues about his experience.

There is a very clear overlap between the application of the law to drug users and recovery. One then gets into the toxic situation of stigma around those users. There is also a public health budget administered by local authorities, which are under pressure to use those resources elsewhere. People who have used drugs that we have made illegal do not get automatic support in our society, yet they are just as much part of our society as anyone else.

If we do not invest resources properly, we will simply find that we carry the burden of the consequences of the damage that has been done to all those people. There is an infinitely better way to do things, and I urge the Minister to try her hand at effecting the system change that is needed to do things infinitely better.

4.59 pm

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) on an excellent speech and on his commitment to tackle unswervingly the problems associated with drug and alcohol abuse.

I am pleased to speak as co-chair of the drugs, alcohol and justice cross-party parliamentary group that last week considered the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs’ recent report, “Custody-Community Transitions”. The report is helpful in providing advice on how to reduce drug-related harms that happen when people move between custody and the community. I hope the Minister will agree to implement the report’s practical recommendations as soon as possible to ensure continuity of care.

Some simple changes could make a huge difference. For example, it suggests prisoners with complex needs should not be released on to the streets on Fridays. Given that last year only 12% of prisoners with drugs problems left prison with naloxone, which can reverse the effects of overdose, the report recommends that naloxone should be issued to all prisoners with drug problems on leaving custody.

We have record rates of drug-related deaths, yet drug treatment budgets have been slashed and services cut, as has already been said. I am sad to say that my region, the north-east, is the worst affected in England. Today we have heard that drug-related deaths in Scotland have gone up by a staggering 27%. We can only tackle these soaring statistics if substance misuse services are made mandatory and drug treatment budgets ring-fenced.

Instead of investing in harm reduction, we waste valuable resources on an unwinnable war on drugs, treating this as a criminal justice rather than a public health issue. We have excellent examples of a different approach being taken in the checkpoint scheme in County Durham and the Thames Valley diversion scheme. They show effective alternative solutions—not easy options, but positive ways of getting people out of trouble and into treatment. Another innovation to help drug users would be the introduction of drug-consumption rooms—effectively overdose prevention centres—which the Government stubbornly refuse to allow, despite conclusive evidence that they are of massive benefit.

In summary, I will quote Paul Townsley, chief executive of the charity Humankind:

“These challenging times provide an important opportunity to cement the evidence base of what our service users and our communities need, but to achieve this we will need stable funding and commissioning... Government has a duty to act now to ensure treatment services are accessible to all who need them. We call on Government to ensure that substance misuse treatment is a prescribed local public health activity.”

I can only concur.
5.2 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) on an excellent introduction to the debate and on the vital points he made.

Last week, one of my constituents, Chelsea Bruce, died of a drugs overdose. She was 16-years-old. She is another figure to add to the 1,187 deaths in Scotland in the last year. It is particularly poignant because this time last year I presented Chelsea with an award at her school, where I talked about the potential of the future and what young people could go off and do in the world. To think that that girl now lies dead for entirely preventable reasons sickens me. I wonder about the damage that has been caused to her family and the trauma that has been caused to her friends, who now live in a mixture of grief and fear of what drugs can do to them.

Chelsea might not have come to harm had she been able to have the pills tested, to have had a testing kit or to have sourced the pills from a supplier who had had them tested. There are now very high-strength MDMA pills in circulation. Sometimes it is not MDMA but other substances that mimic some of the effects of MDMA; that could have been a factor in Chelsea’s death. That is something we need to understand in this House and respond to with great urgency.

I have been following the campaign for drug policy reform closely since my election, and ensuring that a public health approach is at the heart of how we begin to properly tackle this devastating blight on our country is critical. I am personally convinced of the merits of decriminalisation of people who use drugs and minor drug possession for personal use, based on international examples, most notably in Portugal. I am pleased that the introduction of safe drug consumption facilities is Labour party policy and we will be campaigning to ensure that we go even further in our next manifesto.

However, I am alarmed at the lack of impetus to put in place practical policies now, which could save lives in my city where drug-related deaths have reached epidemic levels. They are now 1,000% higher than the European average; that is a public health emergency by any definition. While many are big on rhetoric, our public policy is years behind where it should be in addressing this appalling crisis of death and misery.

The Home Office and the Lord Advocate have been intransigent about the piloting of safe drug consumption in Glasgow. A model that has a worldwide track record of saving lives has been discussed. While the Home Office refuses to change the obsolete Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, the Lord Advocate, Scotland’s chief law officer, claims that a letter of comfort is insufficient to avoid possible prosecutions of NHS staff who might work in such a facility or those who would use it, unless the law is changed by the UK Government.

The chief executive of the Scottish Drugs Forum, David Liddell, believes that much more can be done to facilitate reform within current legislation. Last week, I suggested to the Scottish Affairs Committee that the Lord Advocate is being too risk averse and conservative in approach. I have now written to the Lord Advocate to challenge him on that point. It is certainly no good for Scottish Government Ministers and Glasgow City Council to abrogate their responsibility for this public health crisis by conveniently blaming Westminster, as unco-operative and unhelpful as it might be on this issue, when they have cut victim services in Glasgow by over a quarter in recent years, causing the closure of rehabilitation services and needle exchanges, as well as the end of central Government funding for the national naloxone programme.

While a heroin-assisted treatment pilot will launch in Glasgow later this year, it will be highly targeted and the thresholds for access will be difficult to reach for most of Glasgow’s problematic opiate and cocaine users, who are often polydrug users. That is why I have also asked for the Lord Advocate’s advice on an additional innovative model that could be adopted in Glasgow, a safe prescribing clinic, where instead of illicit drugs of an unknown purity being brought into the facility for use under clinical supervision—as in a drug consumption room—pharmaceutical diamorphine and cocaine can be prescribed freely for use in a supervised clinical environment. As well as bringing all the benefits of DCR, it removes the stranglehold that criminal gangs have over the drugs supply chain and removes the financial dependency that many people with drug problems face to feed their habit, and the crime that goes with it. Combine that with supervised drug facilities like the Loop in Bristol and WEDINOS in Wales, and we could be on to something that reduces harm.

Saving one life is one life that is worth it, and we should take urgent action now.

5.7 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am glad that the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) secured this debate, because it is very timely for Glasgow and for Scotland more widely.

Let me start by saying that every single one of the 1,187 deaths last year is a tragedy—a tragedy for the families who lost a loved one and, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) said, a tragedy because of the potential that was lost as a result of that person passing away. We should bear those people in mind whenever we talk about drugs policy.

Ideally, I want those people, who have an illness, to be able to get medical help as if they had any other illness. If they had cancer, we would not stigmatise the cancer drug that kept them well. That is what methadone does—it supports people and stabilises their lives.

Luke Graham rose—

Alison Thewliss: I will not hear a word from the hon. Gentleman against that.

Luke Graham: It is not stigmatisation; it is data led. We saw information today that more people die from the use of methadone. I am not asking the hon. Lady to cancel anything; I am asking whether she will join me in calling for a review. We need a review of all our drug laws across the board. She knows that I agree with her on many aspects of this policy. I seek a review, not to cancel out or stigmatise.

Alison Thewliss: When the hon. Gentleman talks about methadone, the result is that he stigmatises it. That may not be his intention, but that is the result. He
The Misuse of Drugs Act is reserved. Where we have had powers in Scotland on alcohol, we brought in minimum unit pricing; on smoking, we brought in the end of smoking in public places. This is a medical intervention that we wish to pursue in order to save people’s lives. Glasgow, where it can, has applied for a heroin-assisted treatment programme; when that is up and running, it will be able to treat 60 people, but there are an estimated 400 to 500 people who inject publicly within Glasgow city centre alone. That medical heroin-assisted treatment programme is limited in size, scope and scale, because it is a treatment programme and people must be able to engage with that.

No doubt the programme will make a huge difference to those lives, but it almost goes without saying that if 394 people died in Glasgow last year, and it can only deal with 60 people at a time, it is not enough. It is clear that we need the entry level that drug consumption rooms would give, meaning that people can go in without any kind of barrier or stigma associated with seeking help, and are able to reach those treatment services. It needs to be an easy way for people to get in and get treatment within those services.

The Scottish Government are pursuing this. We are doing what we can. We have a new drugs taskforce, chaired by Professor Catriona Matheson from the University of Stirling, which is looking at all the things we do in the Scottish Government in the round and where improvements need to be made. Both I and the Scottish Government accept that improvements need to be made, but the UK Government also need to play their part.

I will mention organisations such as Turning Point Scotland in my constituency. They drive a van around as a needle exchange, but they know that as soon as they give that needle to somebody, that person is going around to the car park at the back, to inject in a dirty back lane. That is not good enough. Not one UK Government Minister has yet come to visit Glasgow to justify their position; I urge this Minister and any of her colleagues, whoever they may be, whenever the new Prime Minister eventually turns up, to come to Glasgow and tell me why this cannot be done.

5.12 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) for bringing this debate on this very important subject. As we have already said, the debate is timely, as we hear today that 1,187 people died drug-related deaths in Scotland last year, an increase of 27%. I can say from personal experience of delivering services to drug users in a community pharmacy in my constituency that the problem is not confined to Scotland.

The problem is not new, but there is no doubt that cuts to budgets for addiction support services in recent years have made the situation worse. The cuts to public health budgets that have had an impact on this are downright irresponsible. There have been numerous calls over the years for us to take steps to address the problem, but instead, we prefer to speak about getting tougher in tackling the trade in illegal drugs. Meanwhile, police chiefs are on record as saying that there is no way that police will ever stop addicts buying from dealers, but still we continue to chase drug addicts like criminals.

While other countries move increasingly to a public health approach to drug use, the instinct in the UK is to criminalise addicts. It is worth noting that in Portugal, where drug use has been decriminalised, there has been a steep fall in the number of drug-related deaths and even in the number of drug users. It is time for an intelligent approach here in the UK, an approach that stops drug dealers preying on vulnerable addicts and that recognises that drug addicts are not alien beings, but people in our communities in need of help, not a criminal record.

Drug addicts have families and children who need and love them. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) spoke movingly of his constituent Chelsea, reminding us of the humanity in all this. In the first instance, addicts need support to stay alive, to safely manage their addiction, to overcome it and to recover their lives.

So what can the Government do? The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs has clearly said that maintaining funding of drug treatment services is essential to preventing drug-related death and drug-driven crime in communities. It has also said that if resources are
spread too thinly, the effectiveness of drug treatment will suffer, leading to drug-related deaths and drug-driven crime. As a first step, I hope the Minister can tell us that her Government will restore funding to addiction support services, but I also hope she will go much further and consider new ways of tackling the problem to save lives.

Both supervised consumption rooms and heroin-assisted treatments are possible ways to effect some positive changes. Supervised consumption rooms reduce the risk of disease transmission, prevent overdose and also present an opportunity to refer users to appropriate addiction services. Heroin-assisted treatment allows for the provision of pharmacological heroin to dependent individuals who have not responded to other treatments, and involves patients receiving heroin in a clinical setting from a doctor under strict controls.

That has many benefits. It reduces the use of street heroin, which can be of dubious quality and variable strength. It takes away the need for criminal drug dealers, who are preying on vulnerable people and profiting from their addictions. It gets addicts into treatment. It stops desperate addicts resorting to criminal activity to fund their addiction. It improves access to recovery services, HIV treatments and services to address adverse life circumstances. As the police remind us, it also stops drug-taking in open spaces in the community and protects the wider public from contact with used needles.

Both those services reduce pressure on other services in the NHS, police and justice systems, protect the wider public from contaminated needles and ultimately save public money. Cuts to those services are short-sighted in the extreme. Those initiatives are supported by the British Medical Association, and it is a fact that other countries are doing better than us because they have implemented those programmes.

I say to the Minister that we need urgent action. We need mandatory commissioning of drug and alcohol treatment services. We need to amend the Misuse of Drugs Act to enable an innovative, health-focused approach to tackling this problem. We need a Government with the courage and the compassion to act to save lives.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I begin by sending my sympathies and those of the whole House to Chelsea’s family and friends. It is a reminder to us all of the seriousness of the subject we are discussing today. I also thank the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) for securing this important debate.

Many of the hon. Members who have spoken are devoting their parliamentary lives to this issue, because they feel so strongly about it. They have raised questions that are a matter not only for me and my Department but for other ministerial colleagues, particularly those in the Home Office, and I will transmit the many challenges that have been set for me today to those colleagues.

We have made some progress in reducing drug dependency-related harms, but, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, this is an ancient problem. We have made progress but we are not at all complacent, and events such as the death of a girl such as Chelsea remind us that there is much more to do. I have to work with other Government Departments, public health experts and local government to continue supporting people through recovery and to prevent them from ever taking up drugs in the first place.

We published a drugs strategy in July 2017 and it is being rolled out. We know about the serious health harms of drug use, including blood-borne viruses, overdose and death, which have been outlined in great detail by hon. Members. We know that the majority of people who need treatment for drug problems are also experiencing mental health issues. We know that drugs cost £10.7 billion a year in policing, healthcare and crime costs; it is estimated that drug-fuelled theft alone costs us £6 billion a year. There is both an economic case and a moral case for us all to act on this.

It is encouraging that drug use in England and Wales is lower now than it was a decade ago. In 2016-17, 8.5% of adults had used a drug in the past year, compared with 10.1% of adults in 2006-07. More adults are successfully leaving treatment than in 2009-10, and the average waiting time to access treatment is two days.

I will pick up on some of the points that hon. Members have made. On the drug-related death figures for Scotland, health is a devolved matter, but of course—[Interruption.] I am afraid I cannot hear what the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) is saying.

Alison Thewliss: The Misuse of Drugs Act is not devolved.

Seema Kennedy: I will come on to that. However, health is a devolved matter. Any death is a tragedy, but the figures are really worrying. I understand that the Scottish Government have appointed Professor Catriona Matheson to head up a drug deaths taskforce, to look at the main causes of death and to examine how to save lives.

My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) raised the question where responsibility for public health should sit. Clearly, he thinks its sitting with local authorities is not right, but that is a broader question of public health commissioning that I do not know if we can get into here. However, he has a wealth of experience in this, and I will take away some of the points that he raised.

Julie Cooper: Does the Minister agree that, while we can argue about who should be responsible, as long as public health is the responsibility of local authorities, cutting their budgets is irresponsible?

Seema Kennedy: I will come on to funding.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) takes great interest in this issue. He spoke about the legislative framework for drugs, which is a matter for the Home Office. As I said, I will talk to ministerial colleagues about that. The Government are putting together a formal response to the report on custody-community transitions, with input from many Departments, including the Department for Work and Pensions, the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office. I think we have until the end of the summer to issue that response.
Local authorities will want to increase the provision of naloxone to people who are not in treatment, perhaps through outreach workers, hostels or needle and syringe programmes. Public Health England is working alongside the National Police Chiefs’ Council and Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service and recently updated its advice and guidance on naloxone availability in prisons. The problem with drug testing kits is that not all of them are entirely accurate, which might give people false reassurance. More sophisticated testing has been available at some festivals in one pilot, but again this is a matter for the Home Office.

Hon. Members talked about the international evidence that drug consumption rooms can be effective at addressing public nuisance issues and health risks for users and for the wider public, but there is a risk that such facilities would be introduced at the expense of other more relevant, evidence-based drug services for local areas. There is currently no legal framework for the provision of drug consumption rooms, but we support a range of evidence-based approaches to reducing health-related harms. Again, we are committed to widening the availability of naloxone to prevent drug-related deaths. I acknowledge the strength of feeling on drug consumption rooms in the House.

Crispin Blunt: This is a narrow point, but I invite the Minister to talk about overdose prevention facilities, rather than drug consumption rooms. One can understand the difference that might make to their reception in local communities; they are about preventing death.

Seema Kennedy: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention.

Alison Thewliss: Will the Minister give way?

Seema Kennedy: Briefly, and then I must continue, because I want the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington to be able to make his concluding remarks.

Alison Thewliss: The Minister talks about there being no legal framework, but it is the job of the UK Government to provide that. If she wants any assistance, I have a 10-minute rule Bill still waiting to be heard that she could implement.

Seema Kennedy: As I say, that is a matter for the Home Office. I sense the hon. Lady’s frustration, but I am not responsible for that area. I have already said twice that I am happy to take that point away. Tabling business in the Chamber really is not my responsibility. I sense and am cognisant of the frustration in the House.

Under the 2017 drug strategy, we are involved in delivering actions across four themes: reducing demand to prevent drug use and its escalation; restricting supply; building recovery; and a new strand focused on global action, which is important. We need a partnership-based approach alongside the treatment system; other partners, such as the mental health and criminal justice systems, have key roles to play in securing the drug strategy’s aims.

I attend a cross-ministerial drug strategy board with Ministers from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice and representatives of Public Health England. Additionally, the Home Secretary has appointed Professor Dame Carol Black to lead a major review of drugs, looking at a range of issues, including the system of support and enforcement around drug misuse, to inform our thinking about tackling drug harms. Dame Carol will report later this summer.

I acknowledge the concerns about the funding of public health services, and that local authorities need to make difficult choices about how they spend their money to be able to continue providing effective drug treatment services. Local authorities will receive £3.1 billion in this financial year, ring-fenced exclusively for use on public health, including drug addiction. In addition, we are investing more than £16 billion for public health over the five years to the end of 2020. It is a condition of the public health grant that local authorities have regard to the need to improve the take-up and outcomes from drug and alcohol misuse treatment services. Public health funding is a matter for the next spending review, in which it will be looked at in the light of the best available evidence.

Mr Sweeney: Does the Minister accept that it is within the remit of the Department of Health and Social Care to consider the possibility of not only drug consumption rooms but expanding the scope, based on a heroin-assisted treatment facility, to provide safe prescribing clinics, which have far lower thresholds and which would provide greater access to safe drug use?

Seema Kennedy: I will have to respond to that in writing.

It is not possible for the treatment system to bear sole responsibility for responding to these challenges. Where necessary, the Government are prepared to act to ensure that our response enables us to reduce the harms caused by drugs. We are already acting on designating third-generation synthetic cannabinoids, such as Spice, as class B drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Act. In response to the increase in drug-related deaths, PHE has been working to better understand how to best protect people from dying of overdoses.

Although we have made strong progress in tackling the human and financial harms associated with drug misuse, we know that there is more still to do, and that there are emerging challenges that we need to tackle. We will approach these issues with the full range of partners who are essential to delivering the drugs strategy, enabling us to build on such achievements—without being complacent—and drive further progress.

5.27 pm

Jeff Smith: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have made such excellent contributions to the debate. I will mention two in particular. I was very much enjoying the speech of the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) until he was cut off in his prime. He made some important points about commissioning. That is not something I went into in detail, but it is certainly something that the Government need to consider. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) told the story of Chelsea, which brought home the ways that
our drug policy is failing and the way that we need to address issues that end up in tragedies such as Chelsea’s sad death.

I also thank the two Opposition Front Benchers for their powerful speeches, which had a welcome focus on support, rather than the criminalisation of addicts. That is absolutely the way that Government policy needs to go. I thank the Minister for her response. We have a Health and Social Care Minister here, which is exactly right; on a general principle, when talking about drug policy, we should have a Health and Social Care Minister. Responsibility for the policy should be situated in that Department, but as the Minister rightly pointed out, much of the responsibility is currently in the Home Office.

The focus on the legal framework was interesting, as was the frustration about how the legal framework fails us and how the focus on criminalisation fails us and distracts us from focusing money and resources into the drug treatment services that we so badly need. I hope the Minister will go back to colleagues in the Home Office and talk about this. I was expecting the debate to be a lot more about cuts to drug treatment services, rather than the legal framework. However, I think that brings home the frustration that many of us feel: that a progressive drugs policy is being blocked by the fact that responsibility is situated in the Home Office, rather than in Health and Social Care.

The Minister mentioned a couple of points that I question. Without a national framework or programme, we will end up with a postcode lottery for naloxone, which is a real concern. She talked about the legal framework for drug consumption rooms, but that is for the Government to change, as the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) said. Drug testing is very sophisticated these days. A charity based in my constituency operates excellent drug testing in festivals and city centres around the country. We have nothing to fear from the drug testing that those sorts of organisations carry out.

I finish by urging the Minister to do two things. First, the spending review is coming up. I hope she will be going in to bat for her Department, and particularly for investment in drug treatment services.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Music Education in England

9.30 am

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered music education in England.

It is a great pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Sir George, and to open this debate—the first parliamentary debate I have led—on music education. I thank all those who contacted me about the debate, especially the schools in Bury North that told me about their experiences, as well as the all-party parliamentary group for music education, the House of Commons Library and the excellent sector organisations, including the British Phonographic Industry, PRS for Music, and of course UK Music. Those organisations demonstrate impressive leadership and make a powerful case for music education in their published works.

As friends will testify, when getting to know someone I soon share with them my passion for music. Shortly after that, I will probably mention that I played at Glastonbury in 2003, on what is now known as the John Peel stage, on a Saturday at 11 o’clock—11 am. It is good to be here for this important debate in another early morning slot. Two simple ideas will guide my argument. First, music education must not fall victim to the tired old argument of traditional versus progressive education; it applies to both. Secondly, this debate must look to the future in the light of calls for music education in their published assessments.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his excellent and passionate speech. Will he pay tribute to organisations such as the Cheltenham Festival for Performing Arts, which provide exactly those opportunities to people from all walks of life—private and state schools—and allow them to perform, build their confidence and, hopefully, build a lifelong interest in music and performing?

James Frith: My hon. Friend makes a powerful suggestion. I will come to Ofsted’s role later in my speech, as I believe it can be a friend in this mission.

Music output from the UK remains world leading. Artists such as Stormzy are breaking new boundaries and contributing to the success of our £4.5 billion industry. In seven of the last 11 years, the biggest selling album in the world was by a UK act. The heritage of British music is celebrated worldwide, but we must focus on the future. We cannot afford to be complacent at a time of great economic and cultural change. Britain’s role in the world is under new assessment. The rise in automation means that we must emphasise what makes us human, not compete on learned behaviour with the machines we make. Our education system must emphasise what distinguishes us as human, and music education is a huge part of that effort. Creativity, expression and performance are instincts as important as what we feel from the beat of a drum.

Last year, UK Music, the umbrella body for the commercial music industry, released its “Securing Our Talent Pipeline” report, which sets out in great detail the challenges beneath the success stories facing the industry. The report details evidence that 50% of children at independent schools receive sustained music tuition, while the figure for state schools is only 15%. Seventeen per cent. of music creators were educated at independent schools, compared with 7% across the whole population, and 46% of them received financial help from family or friends to develop their career. Growing inequality of opportunity underlines the problem. In that report, the CEO of UK Music, Michael Dugher—formerly of this parish—argues that a career in music must not become the preserve of those who can rely on the bank of mum and dad, and he is right.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his excellent and passionate speech. Will he pay tribute to organisations such as the Cheltenham Festival for Performing Arts, which provide exactly those opportunities to people from all walks of life—private and state schools—and allow them to perform, build their confidence and, hopefully, build a lifelong interest in music and performing?

James Frith: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and I pay tribute to any organisation engaged in that endeavour. My argument is that we need a universal approach as opposed to an incidental one, but I absolutely support the work of that organisation.

Our education system must support a deepening of the well of talent that we rely on. Music education is falling in the charts: there has been a drop of nearly 10% year on year for subjects not in the Ebacc, GCSE music entries have fallen by 24%, and since 2010, there has been a 17.8% reduction of music tuition in years 12 and 13. That is a worrying trend that Tom Richmond—a former adviser to the Department for Education and now director of the think-tank EDSK—says can “no longer be ignored.”

There is huge variation between our state and independent schools. Access to music education, with opportunities to learn, play and perform music, remains too exclusive. That must change; we must give every child the opportunity to learn the best of what has ever been said and done. Of course, that means maths and English, literacy and numeracy, but the enrichment that music brings cannot be put to one side. Children should be given the chance to shine at both or either in formal education, whatever their socioeconomic background. They should be invested in with the cultural capital of music education. In March 2019, the BPI’s extensive teacher survey highlighted that just 12% of the most deprived state schools have an orchestra compared with 85% of independent schools, and that over the past five years, state schools have seen a 21% decrease in music provision compared with a net increase of 7% in independent schools over the same period.

All our schools should turn with the natural and developing needs of every child and be more responsive, patient and dynamic, and show less rigidity and more agility. If schools do not have the time, resources or
[James Frith]

funding to do so, we must address those issues, rather than switching off the approach. Children can be better engaged in their education by expressing their natural creativity and curiosity. In fact, the argument for school tests and exams can be applied to the preparation for a musical performance as well—the idea, the studying, the rehearsal, the performance, and yes, the acclaim. Exam hall meets music hall. If we are to prepare our young people for the emerging landscape and an active, working and loving life, we need to pursue a balanced and expansive curriculum that recognises and hones skills and aptitude.

The school accountability system has pushed music education to the fringes of the way that a school’s success is judged. Music is being squeezed out of the curriculum. The suite of EBacc subjects does not include music, and although the year 9 curriculum changes may attempt to include music and creative subjects more broadly, their carousel approach means that they dilute and reduce time spent learning the speciality that music education represents. That concern is supported by the BPI’s teacher survey, which says that 31% of state-funded schools have seen a reduction in curriculum time for music. In a recent Musicians’ Union survey, more than 90% of music teachers reported that the EBacc has had a negative impact on music education.

The APPG for music education’s excellent report on the future of music education goes further: “Some schools perceive that they have permission to either ignore the curriculum or justify one-off end of year shows or projects as acceptable forms of music provision. Only weekly progressive music lessons can develop pupils effectively in musicianship skills.”

My question for the Minister is: would the Government prefer to scrap the EBacc, or to include music in it? If students are not able to participate in music in compulsory education, they are far less likely to pursue it in further or higher education. According to Ofqual, over five years the number of students taking music at A-level has declined by 30%. However, I commend the Russell Group of universities for its decision to scrap the published list of preferred A-level subjects.

There is of course good practice, which I do not overlook. Some schools in Bury make a difference to their children’s musical education by collaboration. That is innovative, energising and fulfilling, it promotes curriculum richness, and it gives the wider school lots of memorable musical experiences. Bury’s music service is terrific, but the national evidence is that provision is patchy. Studying that evidence, the indices of value all point the wrong way, with a lack of universal, readily accessed music education during formal education time, in school hours, away from the distractions of often complex lives.

Recently, the Government announced that they will refresh the national plan for music education. What plans do they have to consult the industry? When will they be bringing forward recommendations? Does the Minister agree that a refresh of the national plan provides an ideal opportunity to reset the dial on music in education and to take on the challenge outlined in this debate? Will he consider providing creative education a criterion for achieving an “outstanding” rating from Ofsted, as suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan)?

I know that the Minister for Schools recognises the need to get a grip on the issue. He established a music curriculum expert group, and a contract to write a new model music curriculum has been awarded to the Royal Schools of Music exam board. Will he update us on the progress of that work? Will he also assure us that the model music curriculum will work for non-music specialist schools, to ensure that reduced capacity or a lack of specialism in our schools is not a further barrier to progress? Will he explain how monitoring of the impact of any such guidance will be undertaken? According to the BPI, only 44% of music lessons in primary schools are delivered by a music specialist. Support is still needed alongside the model curriculum for teachers who want to specialise in music, whether through a teaching route or a conversion through the postgraduate certificate in education programme. Will the national plan therefore ensure that teacher training and support for music education is improved?

I welcome recent news that Ofsted is to develop its focus on schools providing cultural capital for children. That is a step forward in ensuring that the role of music education is re-evaluated and reintroduced as a norm for all children in our schools. I note favourably that Ofsted will pick that up as part of its new framework. The Cultural Learning Alliance claims that music enhances cognitive abilities by 17%; does the Minister have a view on that proposition, or has he seen any evidence for it? Will the Minister develop the powerful cultural capital argument through his responsibilities at the Department for Education? Indeed, does he agree that one key goal should be for all children, regardless of socioeconomics, to have fair and free access to music education?

My final suggestion is that the Government should renew the effort to put music venues at the heart of high street renewal and economic development. The industry business model has been flipped in the past 15 years by digital platforms, streaming services and self-publishing. Yes, all the industry went through a period of denial of the change.

Kevin Brennan: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government missed a real opportunity when rate relief was offered to pubs, shops and other organisations on the high street, but the guidelines specifically excluded music venues from that list? Despite appeals to the Chancellor by me, UK Music and others, the Government refused to change that ruling.

James Frith: I agree with my hon. Friend. The Government seem to have a bit of a blind spot when it comes to music venues—or perhaps a tin ear is a better phrase.

The industry business model has been flipped in recent years, as I was saying, but will the Government look, for example, at YouTube paying artists next to nothing per stream of their work? Some of the revenue that Google makes from that enormous imbalance could go to support live venues for emerging talent across the country and towards our efforts on music education, whether as a new tax or from a partnership.

Building on the Government’s embrace of the superb agent-of-change campaign, with the protections that brought in, we need more new or improved music facilities for young people outside school hours. UK Music has a network of rehearsal spaces based in
deprived and disadvantaged communities to offer improved access to music. What plans do the UK Government have to develop and enhance that scheme? Can Bury have one, please?

Above the funding argument sits a bigger one. Funding plays its part, of course, but there is a bigger one even than that. It is one of choice and a question of priority. What do we expect from our schools and for all our children? If we recognise the value that independent schools place on music and music education, do we still opt to ignore that for the vast majority of all children, accepting the growing inequality of opportunity? Or do we—as I believe we must—ingrain into all our schools the rights of all children to have access to the same opportunities to learn, play, perform and enjoy music?

The truth is, it is hard to do justice to or to outline in policy what is in fact a deep passion and love. Put simply, one’s faith in the power and possibilities of music, performed, recorded and live, is not just a belief in a light that never goes out; it is the knowledge that music makes life better. Music can still your senses or stir your heart, its message motivates and mobilises, it entertains and, given the chance, it educating us all.

9.46 am

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George, in particular because you are someone who has campaigned hard for the arts in your constituency. I hope that your Shakespeare North theatre is coming along well.

As I look around at the small but high-quality attendance at the debate, I see before me a fellow member and an officer of the all-party group on arts, health and wellbeing, the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane); an excellent Labour spokesman, the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), who is also a fantastic asset of that group; and the shadow Arts Minister for the Labour party, the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin). That is not to mention those sitting on our Benches: my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton), a member of the National Youth Music Theatre and of the National Youth Orchestra; the media star, my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell); and of course my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), who represents such a centre of artistic excellence. I will come to the Minister at the end.

I have been a passionate supporter of music education throughout my time in Parliament. Having checked the records, I am pleased that I can still say, hand on heart, that I did not come to the subject late in the day. Shortly after being appointed as Arts Minister in May 2010, I commissioned Darren Henley, who was then the chief executive of Classic FM, to do a report on music education, which he duly delivered in February 2011. It might astound and shock the Chamber to learn that the report was commissioned jointly with my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), who was then the Secretary of State for Education, showing his commitment to music education.

The biggest thing to come out of the report was the creation of music hubs, which I felt strongly we should have for a number of reasons. Despite the fact that I only look 21, I am old enough to remember when we introduced local management of schools in the 1980s, and the first thing that went out of the window was funding for music education. When schools took control of their own budgets, perhaps understandably they chose to spend on repairs to the roof or other initiatives that the headteacher wanted to follow, and music education suffered. I did not want that to happen again with the introduction of free schools and academies; I wanted to ensure ring-fenced funding for music education. We did secure it: there were some bumps in the road and some anomalies to be ironed out—obviously most of us in the Chamber would want the funding to be doubled, tripled, quadrupled or even more, to make a real difference—but the fact is that the money was saved and ring-fenced.

Music hubs were meant to be innovative organisations; not just money spent by local authorities, but money spent together with local music organisations. It seems ridiculous not to take advantage of the expertise not just of a local orchestra but of innumerable music organisations that might exist in a local area, including perhaps the local music venue, as the hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith) described so well—it was remiss of me not to have congratulated him in my opening remarks on securing this important and welcome debate.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for mentioning music hubs. Before I came to this place, I used to work with a local music hub in Leeds, which opened up vocational routes in music composition, such as work in film, television and video games. Music hubs create new non-traditional opportunities in music. Does he agree that they are important for creating new vocational opportunities for people involved in music?

Mr Vaizey: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman brought up that example; let me take the opportunity to praise the important work he does in this House on video games policy. I am really pleased to hear that example, because the thrust behind music hubs was that they be innovative, different and open up music education in its widest form, not just perhaps in the traditional way.

There were other dogs that did not bark—schemes that have been maintained by the Government and remain effective. One of the most effective was the music and dance scheme, where funding has been maintained to train young musicians to excellent standards and ensure their access to the highest quality specialist music education. Let us not forget that in the wider economy, the Arts Council funding goes to 99 music organisations—not just our major orchestras but important organisations such as Youth Music.

Another aim of the Henley report that I wanted to be implemented was the integration of the In Harmony scheme started by the last Labour Government, which to a certain extent copied the well-known El Sistema scheme in Venezuela. It was whole-class music education. I remember being moved almost to tears visiting a scheme in Everton—not that far from your own patch, Sir George—and seeing incredible children learning music in class. In fact, I was more moved when I met their parents, because the scheme brought the parents and the kids together and brought the parents into school. It gave the kids such pride and belief in what
they could achieve. That leads on to a truism that we all know yet we do not act on: things such as music education have a massive impact on kids’ self-esteem and, therefore, on their academic attainment and life chances. If I could wave a magic wand, every school in the country would be part of the In Harmony scheme.

I am very pleased to be on the board of the charity London Music Masters, which does something similar in five inner city primary schools in London. It is heavy going to raise the money but, again, we see an inspiring effect on pupils. I was delighted when they came and played “Here Comes the Sun” in Westminster Hall, breaking every rule possible, but making a fantastic YouTube video. We should all acknowledge not just that music education is important in and of itself, but that it has a massive impact on academic achievement, self-esteem and, as I am sure we will hear from the hon. Member for Cardiff West, people’s health, life chances and mental wellbeing. I know he chairs numerous meditation all-party parliamentary groups.

An important challenge, for the classical music industry more than anything, is diversity. Music education brings the opportunity to learn instruments to a wide range of pupils who would otherwise not get that chance. The creation of the Chineke! orchestra shows the efforts being made in the classical music world to increase diversity, which is urgent.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): For classical musicians or otherwise, it is important to remember the role that technology plays in producing music is enormous. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there should be more investment in the technology side, and that it should be part of the curriculum?

Mr Vaizey: I do; it is important to go with the grain of society, and it seems absurd not to engage children in music education by using the kind of technology that they will use in their day-to-day lives, and will use when they leave school and university and go into the workforce.

I want to make two brief points that are somewhat linked. While I have no doubt at all that Members on the Opposition Benches, and perhaps even on the Government Benches, might have a go at the Government about music education, I feel strongly that headteachers—I will try to put this delicately—should not be absolved of all responsibility. School leadership plays a massive part in ensuring high-quality music and arts education. In my constituency, I have been to Didcot Girls’ School and St Birinus School, where there are passionate music and arts teachers who have put those subjects at the heart of the school curriculum, thanks to the support of their headteacher. They do not say to me, “We can’t afford it.” They do it because they understand why it is so important.

Kevin Brennan: No one would doubt the right hon. Gentleman’s passionate support for the arts and for music education, but does he not agree that while headteachers should not be absolved of blame, they react to the incentive and accountability measures put in place by this Government? Quite frankly, they have led to the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith) raised, namely the decline in the number of music teachers and the number of children taking music examinations. The Government have some responsibility to make sure they set those expectations centrally.

Mr Vaizey: The hon. Gentleman’s intervention shows why those of us in this House who care so passionately about the arts put party politics aside and unite in how we advocate for the arts. I wanted to get on record the point that headteachers must step up to the plate; they have the opportunity to introduce the arts and music.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): As a former headteacher, when I meet my former colleagues in Colne Valley they tell me that where budgets are concerned, they have crossed a red line. They are making cuts primarily with support staff and the creative arts and music curriculum.

Mr Vaizey: Funding of schools and education is a matter of concern to all Members, particularly those of us who represent rural constituencies where we lobby Ministers for a fairer funding formula. As I say, at the schools I visit where the headteacher is passionate about the arts and music, they do not say it is a budget issue; for me, it is a leadership issue.

To pick up on the point made by the hon. Member for Cardiff West, I agree that Government can and should provide leadership. One of the frustrations of working with the former Secretary of State for Education was that on the one hand, he was a fantastic colleague who supported me in campaigning for better funding and clearer organisation of music and arts education; but on the other hand, he was relentlessly focused on science, technology, engineering and maths, reading, writing and arithmetic, and the EBacc. That created not only an enormous amount of confusion for teachers in an ever-shifting curriculum, but a clear signal to them that they would not be rewarded for putting arts and music at the centre of their schools. A terrible paradox was created where teachers became afraid to do that, because they felt they would be penalised in the league table. That can and must change.

That brings me to my final point. Leadership is absolutely vital—not violent, vital. We need vital leadership, not violent leadership, from Ministers, to emphasise that the arts are important, particularly in a world of technology and automation where British creativity will be centre stage in our success. I remember battling hard with successive Education Secretaries, desperately asking them just to make a speech about the importance of the arts. That leadership is needed more now than ever.

The Minister has a week left in his job—[Laughter.] In his current job—who knows what will happen to him when my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) comes in on his no-deal ticket? From my own experience, let me tell him that if he is sacked, it will not be on the first day, but if he is promoted, it will be on the first day. All I say to the funky Gibb that sits before us is, “Get on your feet! Stand up for music and arts education.” In his heart, I know he believes in it and he can do that funky Gibb dance today.
9.59 am

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I extend my thanks and gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith), who convened this debate. I want to thank a number of organisations that supplied us all, in preparation for the debate, with information on what is a vital issue. They include the all-party parliamentary group on music, the BPI, PRS for Music, UK Music, the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, the Musicians Union and the all-party parliamentary group on arts, health and wellbeing, which is ably co-chaired by Lord Howarth of Newport and the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey).

I have to declare an interest. I have loved music since I was a child. I sang to my children when they were babies—three songs every night. My two girls now have grade 8 in singing. I do not put it all down to me, but I think that little bit of impetus when they were so young had an effect. I sing on my way to work in the morning. Even in these terrible Brexit times I still manage to get a tune or two out as I walk in through the Victoria gardens. I was Pharaoh in the school production of “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat” and even got an encore, but unfortunately at the tender age of 17 I did not know what an encore was, and just carried on. I have been a member of Rhyl folk club for 37 years. It celebrated its 50th anniversary in the Jubilee Room here a few years ago.

I was a teacher for 15 years before becoming an MP, and for six of those years I was deputy head of a Catholic primary school. Music infused the curriculum of the school where I worked, Ysgol Mair. A lovely lady, Mrs Malleliu, would hold singing lessons in the break and dinner times, in her own time. Mrs Jennet would hold recorder and guitar lessons. Mr Russel was a grade 8 piano teacher who played music at every assembly. We had Christmas and Easter musical productions.

In my class I would weave music into as many areas of the curriculum as possible. We would use Don McLean’s “Vincent” when we were painting in the style of Van Gogh. We would use “The Last Leviathan”, a beautiful song sung by Melanie Harrold, when we studied the demise of the whale in environmental science. I used classical music as a background, to quieten the class for reflection and prayer, or just to prepare for studies. We would use disco music in the gym and for dancing lessons. It was a Catholic school so we sang hymns and prayers morning, noon and night. That steeped the whole school in music. I would encourage the children, even out of lessons, in the playground, to work on songs and perform them in the 10 or 15-minute reflection period at the end of the day.

The right hon. Member for Wantage said that music can raise an individual’s self-esteem, and that is true. I spoke to a young man—well, he is now in his forties—whom I taught when he was eight. He would practise to be Freddie Mercury in Queen, and would be out practising at break times. At the end of the day he would burst forward with a rendition of “We Will Rock You.” He said those were the best moments of his life. I attended a school reunion three weeks ago, and former pupils in their 30s and 40s fondly remembered those times gilded by music and song in their old primary school. Music was central to their education, and their education was all the better for it.

We know intuitively that music is good for us. I think that goes back to the womb. From the time when we first hear the metronome of our mother’s heartbeat, we are accompanied by beat, pace and rhythm. What we feel intuitively is backed up by top-quality scientific research. I thank the What Works Centre for Wellbeing for supplying information on dozens of scientific randomised controlled tests on the benefits of music for individuals at all stages of life. There is high-level scientific proof that if a mother plays classical music for 30 minutes a day for two weeks it will reduce stress, anxiety and depression. I believe that if we want to encourage a lifelong love of music for children, it should start in the womb. Other research showed that for pensioners choral singing in groups had a positive effect on morale, depression and loneliness. The What Works Centre said that there were dozens of those experiments, including on teenagers and young adults, but very few looked at the effect of music on school-age children. Perhaps the Minister’s Department could commission some research on that. The What Works Centre summarised the research:

“Listening to music can alleviate anxiety and improve wellbeing in young adults. Regular group singing can enhance morale and reduce loneliness, anxiety and depression in older people compared with usual activities. Participatory singing can maintain a sense of wellbeing and is perceived as both acceptable and beneficial for older participants. Engagement in music activities can help older people connect with their life experiences and with other people, and be more stimulated.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am not sure whether it has been mentioned yet, but community bands are important in working in tandem with music education in schools. The hon. Gentleman may not know—I expect he will enlighten me if he does—that last week there was a tremendous opportunity to see some community bands performing in our own Northern Ireland cultural tradition. There are flute bands, accordion bands, pipe bands and brass bands, and they create character and personality, and friendships that last forever. They bring people together in love of music in every sphere, and that—community bands, education and music together—is important.

Chris Ruane: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I am half Irish, and the Irish are probably one of the most musical nations on earth. I know that the debate is about music education in England, but we should look further afield to Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, and anywhere where music is central to education and society.

It is not just humans who benefit from music and song. There is a field of research called zoomusicology, which studies the impact of music on living creatures. Whales, dolphins and other mammals sing to each other in the courtship process. The production of cows’ milk has been enhanced by 3% by listening to classical music—and it is a better quality of milk as well. The stress levels in dogs in kennels has been shown to reduce when they are exposed to classical music. Perhaps the most beautiful sound in the animal kingdom is birdsong. Older birds teach the younger ones in colonies how to sing, for the purpose of mating and marking out territory.
[Chris Ruane]

Should not something that is good enough for whales, dolphins, cows, dogs and birds be good enough for our young people? It is not just a human foundational capacity but an animal one that goes back to the beginning of time. We should encourage it in words but also in deeds. Teachers, parents and pupils need to know that politicians value music in education, and that that value extends to proper funding and guidelines, and indeed to celebration. We should use this House to celebrate music in education more.

Music is appreciated in certain types of school. In the independent sector it is right up there: we have heard statistics that 50% of pupils in the independent sector get regular music week in, week out, and that the figure is only 15% in the state sector. The independent sector recognises music education by putting its money where its mouth is and funding it. There is already inequality in the education system in England, but the inequality does not end with the school bell at 3 or 3.30. It is perpetuated in the home life of children from different socioeconomic groups. Children from middle-class backgrounds are twice as likely to learn an instrument because they are encouraged to by their parents. A societal, cultural and educational change is needed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North has given a list of excellent recommendations, which I fully support. I urge the Minister to commission research on education in music, as I said before, and I remind him of the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), suggesting that it should be stipulated that no school can gain “outstanding” status without its full complement of music.

10.9 am

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith) on securing this important debate. I, too, have a musical background, but a classical one; I am a choral conductor and an organist. When I mentioned that before in the main Chamber, I was astonished at the speed with which the former hon. Member for Banbury came up to me and booked me as the organist for his funeral. Fortunately, I have not yet had to play for that, as he is still very much alive and thriving, but at least I have one booking in the bag.

I congratulate the all-party parliamentary group for music education on a fantastic report, which sets out a huge number of criteria and statistics. I will not repeat them, but I will draw attention to the report and the points it makes. It mentions that music tuition is compulsory between the ages of five and 14. That is fine, but the problem comes a bit later and in that earlier period, where I feel that the music teaching profession has been so put down that we need to do something to improve it. I will come back to that at the end of my speech.

A number of hon. Members have already mentioned how the sheer love of expressing themselves goes to the heart of what being a child is all about. If they cannot express themselves through music, I do not know how they can express it. I quite agree with those who have said that whatever sort of music we try to achieve, it brings out the inner person within us.

The hon. Member for Bury North touched on the importance of the music industry to the UK, but I will just repeat some of that. The industry is worth close to £4.5 billion a year for the UK—a phenomenal amount. The all-party parliamentary group brought out the point that we punch well above our weight internationally. We have something like 1% of the world’s population, but when we think of the hard-hitting albums that have been sold, we realise that a huge number have come from the UK.

If we look at the impact of music, as a number of hon. Members have already commented, we see the imagination it creates among young people. I would also bring out another thing it creates: team building. Anyone who has ever played in an orchestra will know how much team building counts in producing a good sound. Certainly, in the days when I was a clarinetist and played in a number of orchestras, it was a discipline that I appreciated.

Music therefore has a big impact on mental health, and the sustainability of music education is something we should pay a lot of attention to. As the Minister himself has said, music should not simply be the preserve of the elite; it should be available to us all. The school curriculum is not enough on its own to achieve all that; we need a range of extracurricular activities—school orchestras, school bands or whatever they may be. We need a range of other activities that fit in with what is going on in the school curriculum.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) mentioned Youth Music, a national charity helping young people to change their lives through music. I have a great deal of affection for Youth Music, not least because my son is an ambassador for the charity, helping to push forward its aims. I met him last night, because I knew I was going to participate in this debate, and we discussed a number of these points.

Personally, I am disappointed to see the declining number of areas in which singing is encouraged. When Sing Up was Government funded, it had an enormous reach in schools and provided a great base for primary school children. I would like to see more done to help to push that along, and to keep on developing the skills needed to keep a singing culture alive. We are one of the few cultures in Europe that has largely lost its tradition of folk songs; most people do not sing folk songs to their children, despite what the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) may have sung.

Kevin Brennan: May I invite the hon. Gentleman to join the all-party parliamentary group on folk arts, chaired by myself with my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) as vice-chair? We are looking for more Tory members.

John Howell: For a moment, I thought the hon. Gentleman was going to invite me to sing, which I promise, Sir George, I will not do in this session. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his very kind invitation and I will certainly look closely at that.

We have already discussed how powerful music is in developing the personal and social skills of all those who participate in it. There is one area that I brought up in an intervention that I would like to bring up again. The Music Commission and Youth Music have challenged the curriculum because it does not provide
enough technology. The reason they stress technology is that, whether someone is a classical musician or not, the technology involved in composing or producing the music is the same across the whole industry. My son is a composer and uses a tremendous amount of technology to do that. I urge more emphasis on the technology aspect of music.

I said I would return to one thing in particular that I think we can do. We have had a number of campaigns in the past that have taken social workers, for example, and tried to ensure that they feel loved, valued and part of society. We should do the same for music teachers too. We need a great effort on all our parts to ensure that music teaching is appreciated, that it is seen to be appreciated, and that we can all play our part in taking it forward.

10.17 am

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith) for securing the debate, and I will also say how much I enjoy working with him on the Education Committee.

I will begin by sharing some of my own musical journey and the important role that music has played, and does play, in my life. At the age of around six I had a new teacher. She was the youngest teacher I had ever had, because I went to a very formal, traditional primary school. She was warm, she was funny, she was different, and I loved her. She read us Longfellow’s “The Song of Hiawatha”, but on the second reading she asked us to beat the rhythm of the poem on to our wooden desks with our fists. I could not believe that we were allowed to do that or that we could make such a noise. I remember the excitement and liberation of being allowed to bang my fists on the desk. She then gave out different percussion instruments, and on the third recitation we were asked to use our instruments, keeping to the rhythm. It was chaos, but it was fun, and it was very noisy. It was like an awakening. I was so excited that I could hardly breathe. I longed for every lesson where this new teacher would play music and we could experiment.

She allowed me to play on the piano in the school hall, as my parents could not afford for me to have formal lessons. She gave up her own time to sit with me, and I never forgot her kindness or the joy of touching the keys of that piano for the first time. I did not get the opportunity to continue with the piano sessions, as my parents could not afford it, and the fact that I cannot play an instrument today is one of my few regrets. However, I do know that, throughout the most important times in our lives, music is the thread. At family celebrations, the music chosen is key. At funerals, the songs that we play to say goodbye are so important to us all.

Then for me there was the ‘70s disco dancing—including the funky gibbon—around handbags. These are the musical milestones of everyone’s life. Fast forward and I am a teacher and a parent. I vowed that my own children and the pupils in my school would have every opportunity to enjoy and experience music. My own children knew the joy of local authority-funded music lessons. Both now play an instrument and have a lifelong love of music. The local music centre gave young people the opportunity to perform at the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Royal Albert Hall. They loved playing and they made friends for life, one of whom, Tom Challenger, went on to the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and is now a professional saxophonist.

As head of a large primary school in a deprived area, I was determined that every child would get the opportunity to sing and play instruments. The creative curriculum was valued and invested in. I appointed a specialist music teacher, and every child experienced that quality teaching. For every child, music mattered. One of my proudest moments was having pupils perform on Radio 3 as part of the Huddersfield contemporary music festival. The following year, our school was awarded Artsmark Gold. It was an inclusive school, filled with music and the children’s joy of learning through music.

What do most children experience today? The Fabian Society report entitled “Primary Colours” tells us that 68% of teachers in England say that arts provision in their primary school has decreased since 2010, and 49% believe that the quality of arts provision has worsened since 2010. There is also a significant regional disparity, with primary school teachers in the north 16 percentage points more likely than teachers in the east of England to feel that there is a lack of resources.

I asked Thom Meredith, principal of Musica Kirklees, how he sees music in our local schools today. Thom has been an inspirational and much respected conductor for choral and instrumental music in Kirklees for many years. He said that school funding cuts mean that schools simply do not have the money to pay for resources or teachers. Musica Kirklees used to receive £299,000 from Kirklees Council each year, but by 2016 that was cut to nothing as a result of local government cuts. That resulted in the closure of two music centres, and lessons for gifted young musicians had to be cut. Although it currently appears that nationally there has been an increase in the number of young people engaging with music education, schools are actually lumping more students into larger classes. In fact, the number of young people in smaller, long-term music classes or lessons in which they are properly engaged and learn how to play an instrument or sing has dropped dramatically.

Music can comfort and heal. It can lift our spirits and bring people together. As Shakespeare said, “If music be the food of love, play on”. Let us fund music properly in our schools, so that working-class kids, just as I was, can be given the chance to play on.

10.23 am

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George, and to take part in this debate. We have heard so many eloquent and passionate speeches, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith) on bringing us to this place and allowing us to enjoy talking about such an important topic.

I, too, have to declare an interest. I was lucky enough to have an extensive classical music education at music college—I tried to stay there as long as possible so as not to get a proper job, which I continue to try to do. I was lucky enough also to be a music teacher for many years, and I now chair the all-party parliamentary group on music and am vice-chair of the APPG for music education, and I serve on the boards of various
organisations—the National Youth Orchestra and so on. I therefore have lots of conversations with many inspiring and passionate advocates for music education and hear about a lot of their successes at first hand. However, it is easy to let the activities of great organisations such as that hide the bigger picture—the picture as it is for most people around the country.

As hon. Members will be aware and as we have heard today, Ofqual statistics show that between 2014 and 2019 the number of students taking A-level music has declined by a whopping 30%. I think that is a statistical canary down the mineshaft, warning us of the result if current practice continues. If that decline came from any general disinclination to study music that has suddenly appeared, that would be regrettable but unavoidable. But I think it rather improbable that a wave of musical apathy has swept over Britain’s young people, so we have to ask ourselves why fewer students are choosing to take their musical education further. If there is no mysterious and spontaneous reason, what barriers are preventing those who do wish to pursue it, and how do we eradicate those barriers?

If we look at earlier age groups, we can see critical points at which the pipeline also narrows. The availability of music tuition at key stage 3 is a factor. According to the “Music Education: State of the Nation” report, between 2010 and 2017 there was a fall of 6.4% in curriculum time dedicated to music. Department for Education workforce data shows a drop in music teacher numbers at key stage 3 of more than one quarter.

I do understand, as a former music teacher myself, that more of one subject means less of another. I know how it feels to face the problem of matching students’ aspirations with the realities of available time, and I realise that the EBacc is there not to shrink opportunities, but to allow talent from every area of society to flourish. But to me, a core curriculum that excludes the arts is not a core curriculum—that is an oxymoron—so I would welcome a re-examination, as other hon. Members have said, of the possibility of adding a sixth pillar to the EBacc for creative subjects, including music.

The thoughtful and wide-ranging remarks made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education at the Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership conference in February described very well some of the fundamental issues in making education work across all areas of the country and all sectors of society. He focused on “the five foundations of building character”.

Two of those—creativity and performing—directly correlate with music. His focus on those five foundations was very welcome and is significant in the context of this debate.

Given the consensus on cultural capital in relation to life chances, the gap in music provision between the state system and independent schools, which we have heard discussed, is a trend that must be stopped. The BPI reports a decline in state music provision in the past five years alongside an increase in the independent sector. The gap is widest—surprise, surprise—in schools with a higher percentage of students on free school meals. Relative poverty does not equate to a relative poverty of ambition, but ambition without the opportunity to visualise and then pursue its fulfilment leads to frustration and then disengagement.

The UK’s music industry contributes £4.5 billion to the economy, as we have heard. We saw it generate £2.6 billion in total export revenue in 2017—that figure was up 7%—and it is an instrument of soft power that will only become more important in the years ahead, given the wobbly world picture out there. However, that is just part of the story. The creative industries as a whole contribute more than £100 billion to our economy. We are very good at this stuff, despite the barriers that come before us. Therefore, even if we look at things in a purely utilitarian way, a greater investment of curriculum time and resources can only make sense.

I know that it is much more difficult to quantify the cognitive benefits of understanding the structure of a Bach chorale or the blues scale than it is to see an uptake in STEM subjects or exam entries leading directly to jobs in the engineering industry, but equipping our students with an understanding of our musical, philosophical and artistic heritage does something even more difficult and important: it allows those students to anchor themselves within the centuries-old progression of thought and to understand their place in the society in which they live. The anchor provided by the arts is not just a means of generating economic value; it allows young people to understand what is of value in other people. Denying them an understanding of the value of their artistic heritage hides their eyes, ears and minds from the world around them.

As we look ahead to the new national plan for music education, it is vital that we re-examine both the performance of music provision within secondary schools and the metrics used to measure that performance. As we heard from the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), it is clear to me that no school should be awarded an outstanding judgment by Ofsted if it fails to provide strong arts and cultural education. The next national plan for music must focus on ensuring that these benefits are spread as widely as possible. As well as looking at the curriculum, that should also involve thinking about how to ensure that the flexibility given to academies is not a licence for them to sideline music education or treat it as an optional extra, especially given that 72% of secondary schools are now academies.

The greatest artistic achievements, from the encyclopédistes of the enlightenment through to “Sgt. Pepper”, aspire to universality. As such, they have a democratic impulse at their core. A failure to share their benefits as widely as possible not only lets down our young people, but runs contrary to the spirit of the arts themselves.

10.31 am

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith) for securing the debate. If this is his first Westminster Hall debate, he has a great career ahead of him; his speech was powerful and impassioned and addressed an important and urgent question that will affect many youngsters across the country. We have heard several excellent contributions from people who have lived experience in this world. Their concerns about the crisis of music education in England are profound and compelling. I will pick out a couple of moments of great interest.
The right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) was, as always, a passionate advocate for the creative subjects for all. The work he did creating music hubs and the Henley report is a solid base from which we all work. The highlight of his speech must be funky Gibb, which will stick with us from now on. My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) talked about singing for pleasure and the element of wellbeing. His statistic about cows will also stay with me. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), who I will book for my own funeral—he is obviously going to have several bookings now—mentioned early years. Although music is in the list of Ofsted’s expectations, what is the quality of the music provision for the under-5s? We had a debate yesterday about the first 1,001 days of life, and we know that brain development is supported by access and exposure to music. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker) made a profound contribution, speaking about her own experience. No one could challenge her experience of being on the frontline as the head teacher of a school, creating a brilliant experience for young people and giving them an opportunity to live a full and enriched life.

Finally, the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) talked about the extra pillar to the EBacc. I had a meeting with the Secretary of State to discuss that. His response was, “It will not make a difference.” I hope that when he looks back at this debate he will read the profound and passionate pleas from people who know and have experienced it in their life, and see that this would make a difference.

I welcome the work undertaken by UK Music, Music Industries Association and the Musicians’ Union highlighting the perilous state of music education across the country. As we heard from the hon. Member for Henley, UK Music’s “Measuring Music” report shows that the music industry’s contribution to the economy is £4.5 billion, with £2.6 billion export revenue. Britain has less than 1% of the global population but one in seven albums sold worldwide in 2014 was by a British artist; I can only imagine those numbers have gone up. Music is a critical part of Britain’s soft power and in the current climate, as we career out of the EU, that power could not be more vital.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport’s own report on sector economic estimates showed the value of the creative industries rose by 7.1% in 2017—almost twice as much as the UK economy as a whole—to £101.5 billion. Sadly, the evidence gathered, not just by the unions and other trade bodies but by the all-party parliamentary group for music education, shows that music education is at a point of crisis, with creeping cuts to music education, chaotic music education policies and plummeting morale among teachers and educators.

The Music Industries Association report, “The State of Play—a review of music education in England 2019”, proved beyond doubt that the inequalities in music provision are real, concluding that children from families earning under £28,000 a year are half as likely to learn a musical instrument as those with a family income above £48,000. There are children, certainly in Batley and Spen, for whom coming from a family with an income of £28,000 would make them feel very well off. We should always be mindful of children whose lives are so chaotic that they will never get the chance to experience the joy of playing an instrument or singing in a choir.

Eight years have elapsed since the coalition unveiled its national plan for music education; there was much fanfare around the commitment to give every child the opportunity to learn a musical instrument, with the establishment of Government-funded music hubs. Despite this commitment, as we have heard, the truth is that coherent and impactful music education is entirely dependent on the whims and talents of headteachers, the priorities of the music hub and the youngsters’ postcode. Added to this, the decline in take-up of schools offering music at GCSE and A-level means even those kids who do not necessarily want to play but have a love of music do not get the chance unless their parents can pay for costly out-of-school provision.

Of those surveyed in the “State of Play” report, 60% said the introduction of the EBacc has directly affected music provision in their schools. In a recent National Union of Teachers—survey, 97% of the union’s teachers agreed that SATs preparation did not support children’s access to a broad and balanced curriculum, saying the time taken to prepare children for assessment in maths and English has squeezed out other subjects and activities. The problem does not go away when our children leave primary school. As we have heard, the proportion of 15 and 16-year-olds taking subjects like music and drama has fallen to its lowest levels. There are outliers: Feversham Primary Academy in Bradford recently made headlines with its focus on music leading to improved outcomes for its pupils. It made the national press, which would suggest it is unusual. It should not be.

While this is not a competition between schools, one of the many reasons parents pay the eye-watering fees to send their children to places like Eton is the attractive music provision. At Eton, there is a purpose-built orchestral rehearsal room, a recording studio, a 250-seat concert hall, an organ room, the opportunity to learn music taught by seven full-time professionals, 70 visiting teachers with over 1,000 lessons a week, teaching the full range of orchestral and solo instruments, as well as the sitar and tabla. Pupils can join the symphony orchestra, chamber ensembles, jazz, wind and pipe bands, choirs and choral groups, as well as write and produce their own music in the well-equipped music-tech studios.

I am not saying this to attack other schools in any way, but to reinforce the point that those parents know the value of this enrichment. They know that not every child will go on to be a professional musician, a composer or a singer, but they will have developed as a human being and young person with a love for music and it will stay with them all their life. A recent report from the University of Oxford suggested that 15 million jobs are at risk from automation, but artists such as musicians are at less risk. Parents who send their children to schools with great arts provision are future-proofing their children’s destinies.

Creative subjects are marginalised in the curriculum and the number of post-graduate students training to be music teachers has shrunk. As Members of Parliament we can encourage local opportunities. I have seen how music can transform the lives of youngsters and adults in the Batley and Spen Youth Theatre Company’s production of “Les Misérables” and Creative Scene’s...
production “Batley Does Opera”. They transformed lives, reduced loneliness and mental health issues, boosted confidence and raised aspirations.

We know that creative subjects are a magnet for children who are not naturally academic. They might struggle to read, but come to life on stage; they might be unable to concentrate in class, but play the ukulele for hours. No one loses in music, so we all benefit; there are no winners or losers. Music aids better brain development and maths skills, and it increases human connectivity and concentration levels, but we should look at music for its own sake. It is a gift handed down from generation to generation. Everywhere we go we are surrounded by music. We all attach music to pivotal moments in our lives.

What can we do? Labour is committed to reviewing and reforming the EBacc and ensuring that children get the broad and balanced curriculum they need for the 21st century. Creative subjects will be at the heart of that, with a boost of £160 million for arts education. We will use the cultural capital fund to invest in instruments for music hubs and upgrade music facilities in state schools to match the those found in many private schools. Each child will have the opportunity to learn a musical instrument and we will instigate a creative careers advice campaign. Our creative pupil premium will support schools, ensuring that every child has access to the cultural capital that others in less disadvantaged areas can easily access.

Post Brexit, we will need our arts more than ever, not only for jobs and the economy, but for our spirit and soul. We must support children by giving them every opportunity to love music and engage with it, and to be better human beings from accessing music.

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): I am sure the Minister needs no reminding, but he needs to leave a bit of time for the encore by the mover of the motion.

10.42 am

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith) on securing this debate. He speaks with a passion for music, which I share. He is preaching to the choir—excuse the pun. I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage—which sets our vision for music in schools: for wanting the best for our children, for excellence, for music education hubs, in addition to the funding that goes to schools to deliver the curriculum. Earlier this year, we announced an extra £1.3 million for those hubs. That funding supports pupils, whatever their background, family income, or special needs. No child should be excluded from music because their parents cannot afford to pay for lessons or an instrument, or because they have physical disabilities or other special needs.

Music education hubs help hundreds of thousands of young people learn to play an instrument in whole classes every year. They also ensure that clear progression routes are available and affordable. Many hubs subsidise the cost of lessons for pupils. The programme helps schools to nurture the budding seeds of musical passion that can unlock so much pleasure throughout life, as we heard from the hon. Member for Bury North. In the years to come, many adults with a passion for music will have the work of music hubs to thank for first introducing them to the joys of playing an instrument and playing in ensembles. In the provision of music education, the Government believe in excellence, as well as equity. Talented young musicians need the opportunity to make music with others of a similar standard, and access to selective ensembles and a demanding repertoire. Music education hubs provide high-quality borough or county-wide ensembles and direct the most talented towards specialist provision.

Bury North is served by the Bury music hub, which works as part of the collaborative Greater Manchester music hub. In this academic year, the Bury hub has received over £292,000 of funding from the Government. Last year the hub delivered over 3,500 individual singing and instrumental lessons, and 14,000 small group singing and instrumental lessons. A report by Birmingham City University showed that in 2016-17, hubs worked with 89% of schools on at least one core role and helped over 700,000 pupils to learn to play a musical instrument in whole-class ensemble teaching. That is an increase of 19% on 2013-14, the first year in which like-for-like figures are available, when the number was 596,000.
My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) spoke about singing. The Government recognise the value of singing in schools. Developing a singing strategy to ensure that every pupil sings regularly is a core role of the music education hubs. According to the last published figures, 70% of schools in England were supported by hubs with singing strategies.

I want to ensure that the music lessons young people receive are of the highest quality and that pupils leave school having experienced an excellent music education, so that those who wish to do so can take up opportunities to pursue musical careers. To ensure that, we have started work with music experts to develop a high-quality model music curriculum, which builds on the national curriculum and forms part of our plans to ensure that all pupils can benefit from knowledge-rich lessons. It is being drafted under the direction of an expert panel composed of practitioners, education leaders and music specialists, and will provide schools with a sequenced and structured template curriculum for Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. I hope that the curriculum will make it easier for teachers, including non-specialist teachers, to plan lessons and will help to reduce their workload. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Henley that folk songs are an important part of our musical heritage and I hope they will be included in that curriculum.

The hon. Member for Bury North raised concerns that careers in the arts have become the preserve of the privileged and privately educated. To ensure that that is not the case in years to come, the Government are continuing to fund more than 500 full-time places at four specialist music schools, including the Yehudi Menuhin School and the Purcell School, and a similar number of places at four specialist dance schools, including the Royal Ballet School, through the music and dance scheme. The vast majority of pupils board, and means-tested bursaries are available to ensure that entry to the schools is based on pupils’ talent, not on their parents’ ability to pay fees. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage pointed out, funding for the music and dance scheme has been maintained since we came into power. The scheme also funds places at the junior departments of six music conservatoires.

As well as supporting the music hubs, the Government are committed to a number of programmes, including the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain and the National Youth Orchestra, that aim to enhance the talent pipeline that is so important to this country remains open. Our funding helps to ensure that no one is turned away because their parents cannot pay. We also provide funding for In Harmony, an intensive orchestral experience focused on schools in some of the country’s most deprived communities.

The EBacc, which the hon. Member for Bury North and others raised, was introduced to give young people the same chances to succeed through education. It is key to increasing social mobility, and an important part of that is giving all children the opportunity to study the five core academic areas at GCSE: English, maths, science, humanities and a foreign language. The range of subjects that the EBacc offers provides a sound basis for enriching pupils’ studies, opening up a variety of careers beyond the age of 16 and giving a broad general knowledge that will enable pupils to participate in and contribute to society. Research published in August 2017 by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies found that studying the EBacc combination of GCSEs increases the likelihood that a pupil will stay on in full-time education.

It is not the case, however, that the EBacc has had an impact on the uptake of music GCSEs. Since 2010, the proportion of pupils entered for GCSE music has fluctuated but remained broadly stable at approximately 6% or 7% of the total GCSE cohort. People tend to cite the raw numbers, which have fallen since 2010 along with the total number of secondary school pupils, but the proportions have remained broadly stable.

Tracy Brabin: The question is about the family backgrounds of those 6% or 7%. Are those children taking music because they are supported by wealthy families who can afford the instruments and the lessons?

Nick Gibb: The EBacc was designed to be limited in scope to allow pupils to study additional important subjects such as music. The percentage of time spent teaching the arts subjects in secondary schools remained broadly stable between 2010 and 2018, and our survey of primary schools indicates that they spend the same amount of time teaching music as they spend teaching other important subjects such as history and geography.

It should also be recognised that many pupils decide not to study the arts as academic subjects, but continue to take part in artistic activities in and out of school, such as singing in choirs, playing in orchestras and bands, and performing in school plays. The DCMS Taking Part survey in 2018 showed that 96% of children aged five to 15 had engaged with the arts in the previous 12 months. We are investing more than £70 million this year to support young people and adults to get high-quality careers provision, including careers advice on arts-related careers.

Northampton School for Boys is an example of how the EBacc does not necessarily mean a reduction in the arts. It has more than 20 ensembles and choirs, including the National Youth Orchestra of the UK. The school indicates that they spend the same amount of time teaching music as they spend teaching other important subjects such as history and geography.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) pointed out, the music industry is vital to this country; the hon. Member for Bury North was absolutely right to pay tribute to it. We are a nation with natural musical talent and a love for music that we all have an interest in cultivating. UK Music’s report “Securing Our Talent Pipeline” helpfully highlights the importance of the music industry to the UK economy, and I agree with its conclusion that if we want to produce the stars of the future, we must invest in talent for the future. I hope that it is clear to all hon. Members present that the Government are committed to doing precisely that.
I am enormously grateful to the hon. Member for Bury North for his securing this debate and for his passionate case for the importance of music education. He raised some important concerns, and I hope that I have reassured him that the Government share his commitment to ensuring that music can be enjoyed by every young person. The new model curriculum, the refreshed national plan for music, the ongoing support for our successful music hubs and other music programmes will make sure that the next generation of music superstars have all the support that they need in schools, from their first exposure to the joys of music at a young age to provision for the brightest and most talented young musicians. All children deserve the chance to fulfil their musical potential. Thanks to the national network of music hubs, the music and dance scheme, and the support of organisations such as UK Music, I believe that pupils are being provided with that opportunity.

James Frith: I find myself at risk of repeating earlier arguments—like when I was the singer in a band and we were invited to do an encore but had run out of songs. I thank the Minister for his response, and I thank hon. Members for such a warm, engaging and, at times, spirited and witty debate on such an important issue. It is so good to reach consensus across the parties on a subject that we deeply love and are clearly all passionate about.

In years and years of trying to record an album and find the right sound engineer, the right producer and the right moment to capture the sound we were after, I initially took comfort in the phrase, “It’s all right—we’ll fix it in the mix.” Subsequently, however, I realised that re-recording is always the answer. The EBacc is not something that we can fix in the mix; we have to re-record it. The case has been well made that music and the arts are integral and should be part of the core curriculum, protected by core curriculum time, away from the complex lives that so many children leave school to return to.

If we protect music by including it in the EBacc, we can do away with the myth of fixing in the mix. A Government who commit to an EBacc with music education as a formal part of it—that is the hit we are all after.

Question put and agreed to.

That this House has considered music education in England.

Sitting suspended.
Oliver was arrested because witnesses identified one of the two men who carried out the robbery during which the shopkeeper was killed as wearing a distinctive baseball cap. The other man, Eric Samuels, was relatively short and the witnesses also described the two men as being of similar height. Oliver is a large man who is 6 feet 3 inches tall.

Oliver was questioned for several hours in a police station without the presence of an appropriate adult, which he should have had due to his impaired mental capacity, or a lawyer. Eventually, a lawyer was found, but it was only after that lawyer had left the police station, having left clear instructions to be called back if there was to be any further questioning, that the police—in direct contravention of those instructions—pressed Oliver, in the presence of his ex-foster carer but no legal representative, to confess. Within half an hour of persistent suggestion from the police, Oliver had confessed to a murder that I do not believe a reading of the evidence could possibly suggest he had committed. Many of Oliver’s answers to the police were bizarre and made no sense whatever, so it is hard to understand how they could ever have been relied upon.

Oliver’s lawyer was then called back, and Oliver immediately withdrew his so-called confession. However, in December 1991 he was convicted, almost entirely on the basis of this very dubious confession, and he served 11 years in prison. There was no forensic evidence linking him to the baseball cap nor to the scene of the crime. None of the fingerprints or hairs that had been recovered from the scene or from the cap match those of Oliver. His co-accused, Eric Samuels, who admitted taking part in the robbery, said in interview that Oliver had nothing to do with the murder and was not at the scene. However, this information was never put before the jury as evidence. Samuels’ statement was never signed and Samuels refused to take the witness stand.

Samuels was subsequently tracked down and interviewed by the BBC’s “Rough Justice” programme for its 2002 episode, “If the Cap Fits”. He was filmed during the show’s investigation and again described how the cap was taken from Oliver’s head by the man who was actually his accomplice—the man who was actually the murderer—and how it had been dropped near the shop. Samuels again refused to sign a statement, this time on the advice of his key worker.

A ballistics expert was also brought in by the BBC, who established that the murderer must have been right-handed; other experts have shown that Oliver favours his left hand for most tasks. Oliver’s bizarre confession apparently includes details of how he made a holster for the gun out of string and how he had practised shooting in a forest or a field, but he could not tell the police the location or even whether it was a forest or a field. He was pressed to identify how many bullets he had had and how many were fired, but he clearly had no idea what the correct answer to either of those questions was.

After the “Rough Justice” programme was broadcast, detailed and extensive submissions were made to the CCRC by Oliver’s legal team, including his solicitor, Glyn Maddocks, and his eminent QC, Michael Birnbaum, in the clear hope—indeed, expectation—that the Commission would refer Oliver’s case back to the Court of Appeal.

After two long years, the CCRC concluded that there was nothing new to form the basis of a fresh appeal and that therefore there could be no appeal. That was despite a recent change in the law that would have enabled the Court of Appeal to rely on the statements that Eric Samuels had made, in which he completely exonerated Oliver.

The CCRC also ignored the reports of two very eminent psychologists, who explained that Oliver’s acquiescence to police questioning was due to his limited mental capacity, and his eagerness to please and be accepted. As Kirsty Wark reported at the end of the “Rough Justice” programme, this evidence of Oliver’s mental state, which had never been brought before the original jury, constituted “fresh new evidence which points to a terrible miscarriage of justice”.

I am bringing this case to the attention of the House for two reasons. First, of course, it is because I believe Oliver to be innocent of the crime of murder. Life is not easy for Oliver; life never would have been easy for him, even without a murder conviction hanging over him. Oliver works five mornings a week at a community café as a cleaner; he spends the rest of his time trying to clear his name. Secondly, however, and crucially, the other reason for us to have this debate here today is because the CCRC was established by this House to make it easier to rectify miscarriages of justice, and I do not believe that it has achieved that aim.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend and I are founder members of the new all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice. As he knows, we now have the Westminster commission on miscarriages of justice, led by Lord Garnier and Baroness Stern. Does he believe that we need a fundamental change to the CCRC, both in terms of its structure and its resources?

Sandy Martin: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and he is right. I was very pleased to have gone to the first hearing of the Westminster commission on the role of the CCRC just the other day. I think it is making good progress and I hope to see a radical change in the way that we deal with appeals on the grounds of miscarriage of justice.

In my view, the grounds for an appeal in this case are compelling. I am not a lawyer but I have an inquiring mind, and the first three grounds submitted by Oliver’s lawyers seem to me to constitute essential issues that cry out to be reconsidered properly by a court.

Ground A is that the admissions made by Oliver in his so-called confession were inconsistent, inaccurate when compared with the rest of the evidence and, on a number of points, simply absurd. Ground B is the report of Professor Thomas-Peter, a well-respected and highly experienced psychologist. That report states that Oliver’s “lack of mental capacity for understanding anything other than the simplest of questions indicates to me that he would be vulnerable to self-incrimination.”

He added that Oliver had difficulty understanding double negatives and that, from his reading of the available documents, “it seems that part of Oliver’s defence was based upon his succumbing to intimidation rather than his inability to understand complex questions.”
Mr Sheerman: Does my hon. Friend agree that in some criminal justice systems, access to all the evidence that was presented by either side at the trial makes it much easier to look at the case later and mount an appeal, and does he believe that is something we should have in our country?

Sandy Martin: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and thank him for his intervention. As far as I can tell, any criminal justice system that does not allow all the existing evidence to be available to both sides of the argument prevents the correct decision from being made in court. I believe the commission needs to look again at Oliver’s case, and that if it carefully re-reads the submission from the QC, it will conclude that there is indeed good cause to send this case to appeal.

The recently established APPG on miscarriages of justice has gained a great deal of support in this House. Oliver’s pro bono solicitor, Glyn Maddocks from Gabb and Co, who has represented Oliver for over 20 years and is a recognised expert in miscarriage of justice cases, is a special advisor to the APPG. He has been working closely with the newly established Westminster commission on miscarriages of justice, which is co-chaired by former Solicitor General Lord Garnier QC and Baroness Stern. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government will give their full support to the Westminster commission as it undertakes its important work?

The purpose of the Westminster commission is to look at the difficulty in overturning wrongful convictions in England and Wales. Such a review, particularly of the CCRC and its relationship with the Court of Appeal, is long overdue. I hope to have an opportunity to submit the failings of the CCRC’s review of Oliver Campbell’s case as evidence to the Westminster commission. We need our justice system to be fit for purpose, to identify and punish the guilty and exonerate the innocent, and when there is clear evidence that that has not happened, we need to know why. However, we also have a fellow human being to consider—a man who is still living under licence, with barely enough income to survive and subject to recall to prison at any time. I strongly believe that Oliver has already had to wait too long to have his name cleared. I urge the Minister to write to the CCRC and ask it to review Oliver’s case once more as soon as practicably possible, and reconsider its decision not to refer his case back to the Court of Appeal.

No one doubts that the job of the CCRC is difficult; it is constantly being asked to do more with fewer resources. I suspect that when it was set up in 1997, it was never expected that it would receive 1,500 applications each year. In its 22 years of existence, it has reviewed nearly 24,000 of the 25,000 applications it has received, many of which have been completely ineligible. The commission has referred 658 cases to the Court of Appeal, of which all but 10 have been heard in the courts. Some 437 convictions have been quashed, and 198 appeals have been dismissed. It is beyond me, and beyond anyone else who knows anything about this case, why Oliver’s case was not one of those referred. However, does the Minister agree that the rate of convictions quashed suggests that a large number of the cases that have not been sent to the Court of Appeal might also have led to convictions being overturned?

There is some concern about the subordinate relationship the CCRC has with the Court of Appeal, and about the difficulty it faces when applying the real possibility test, which it currently uses to decide which cases to refer. I have personally seen from Oliver’s case that the CCRC has acted somewhat more as an arbitrary gatekeeper than as a champion for righting the obvious miscarriage of justice he has suffered.

Oliver will be 50 next year, and has been fighting to clear his name for nearly 30 years. Those within the criminal justice system who have had contact with Oliver professionally, including during his time in prison, have had very serious doubts about his conviction. The governor at Wandsworth described him as “of very low intelligence and childlike in some ways. Knowing him as we do it is difficult to see how he has ended up in this situation”.

His probation officer said he had serious concerns about Oliver’s conviction for murder. Even the trial judge’s report to the Home Secretary at the end of Oliver’s trial reflected his view regarding the gross artificiality of the result, and the unsatisfactory nature of the trial process that led to it.

It is right that I pay special tribute to Oliver’s legal team, his solicitor Glyn Maddocks and his QC Michael Birnbaum, both of whom have worked tirelessly and resolutely for over 20 years on an entirely pro bono basis to achieve justice for Oliver. Such dedication is rare, but at a time when legal aid is almost non-existent and miscarriages of justice are increasing—surely linked to cost pressures in the criminal justice system—it is an absolutely precious commodity. I hope that many other younger lawyers will be inspired to work on cases such as Oliver Campbell’s.

Several people have said that Oliver Campbell’s case is the clearest example of a miscarriage of justice that they have seen. I am surprised and dismayed that the CCRC, established by this House with the support of all parties following the recommendation of the royal commission on criminal justice under the Major Government, has failed to enable the correction of what is so clearly a wrongful conviction. I call on the Minister to institute a review of the CCRC’s decision-making powers.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) on securing this debate on...
the decision-making powers of the Criminal Cases Review Commission—which, like him, I will refer to in my remarks as the CCRC, for brevity’s sake.

I also thank the hon. Gentleman for setting out Oliver Campbell’s situation. I know that the hon. Gentleman is a forceful champion for his constituent, and indeed for his constituency; and I pay tribute to him for that, just as I do to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) for his commitment and dedication to the issue. I must be a little bit careful when paying tribute—a reshuffle looms, so I am not sure whether paying such fulsome tribute to Opposition Members will help or hinder my career prospects. However, the work they have done is truly impressive and important. Although I am sure the hon. Gentleman appreciates that it would not be appropriate for me to discuss an individual case on the Floor of the House, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the broader issue. I am of course happy to discuss his constituent’s case with him outside the Chamber, should the hon. Gentleman feel that would be helpful.

As the hon. Member for Ipswich has set out, the independent CCRC plays a vital and valuable role in maintaining confidence in the criminal justice system. In addition to my tributes to Members present in this Chamber, I pay tribute to the commitment of the CCRC commissioners and staff, and to their work in investigating potential miscarriages of justice. I am sure all Members, both in this Chamber and beyond, share my view that miscarriages of justice are a blight on our criminal justice system; have a devastating impact on all those involved; and can cause people to question that justice system, which we must seek to avoid at all costs.

Since the establishment of the CCRC in 1997, my understanding is that 441 referrals from the commission have succeeded in the courts—I raise the hon. Gentleman by four. Those referrals have resulted in overturned convictions or amended sentences.

Mr Sheerman: The Minister has always been very supportive and listened carefully to everything we have been campaigning on, which I appreciate. Some of us went to visit the commission in Birmingham, and we got the impression that it was under-resourced; that it cannot get investigators because it is right out on a limb in Birmingham and should be closer to the centre of legal affairs in our country, here in London; and that very often the commissioners are part time and work from home. Does the Minister think there is a bit of a problem there?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I suspect that some of his colleagues who represent Birmingham seats might slightly take issue with his suggestion that the city is out on a limb. We believe that the approach adopted by commissioners allows for flexibility and the most effective management of case loads, and I will move on to the tailored review shortly. From my discussions with the new chair of the commission, my understanding is that she felt that the resourcing was adequate and appropriate, but that changes are needed to reflect the findings of the tailored review. I will touch on that in a moment, subject to time.

The CCRC is, as the hon. Member for Ipswich alluded to, the world’s first statutory, publicly funded body charged with the task of reviewing alleged miscarriages of justice. The law provides that the commission can refer cases to an appeal court only when it considers that there is a real possibility that the conviction, verdict, finding or sentence would be overturned if the referral were the referral to be made. The hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Huddersfield, have set out concerns about the real possibility test and whether it affects the rate at which the commission refers cases to the appeal courts.

The hon. Member for Ipswich asked whether the rate of convictions quashed suggests that a large number of the cases that have not been sent to the Court of Appeal might also have led to the convictions being overturned. Those concerns have been aired before and were considered by the Justice Committee in its report on the CCRC published in March 2015. The Committee considered whether a declining rate of referrals was due to the real possibility test itself, the CCRC’s application of it or the Court of Appeal’s approach to appeals. It found no conclusive evidence of the CCRC failing to apply the test correctly.

We do not feel that it would be appropriate to alter the test simply to demonstrate the independence of the CCRC. Doing so would by definition risk allowing referrals where there was less than a real possibility of a conviction or sentence being overturned. The Committee accepted that the application of the test is a difficult task and is by no means a precise science, but it considered that the CCRC should be willing to err on the side of making a referral where potential miscarriages of justice are concerned. I am assured that is the approach the CCRC adopts, and there must be a realistic chance of success.

Both hon. Gentlemen referred to the work of the recently established commission. I will make two comments on that. First, I fairly regularly meet the hon. Member for Huddersfield, and if the hon. Member for Ipswich would like to join those discussions of the broader issues, as well as meeting to discuss Oliver’s case, he is welcome. I look forward to following the commission’s work. Without making firm commitments, I hope that the hon. Member for Huddersfield will recognise that I have always been willing to engage constructively since I have been in this role, and I look forward to doing so in future.

Mr Sheerman: Just to put the record straight, the people we met are really good people. I did not want to denigrate them; they are very good people, but they are under-resourced. I got the feeling, talking to them and talking to people in this area, that senior people in the judiciary do not like the system and are not positive towards it. Is that the real key; that some senior judges do not like the process at all?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman is an experienced Member of the House and he is gently tempting me to speculate on areas where I will not tread. I believe the judiciary has full confidence in the process and fully respects the nature of the process. That is reflected in how it engages with the CCRC and the appeals process. He may seek to tempt me, but I fear that on this occasion he has not succeeded.

I note that the CCRC’s analysis has identified other reasons for the recent level of referrals, including the lack of common themes across recent cases and changes
Edward Argar:
The review also recommended that the CCRC and my Department should discuss the possibility of changing the law so that the commission does not have to consider cases dealt with summarily and sentence-only cases. The CCRC currently considers applications relating to summary offences, which often originate in magistrates courts, as well as more serious indictable offences, which are dealt with in Crown courts. The CCRC also considers applications that allege a person has been sentenced incorrectly.

The review recommendation reflects the outcome of the Justice Committee inquiry in 2015, which recommended that the CCRC be given discretion to refuse to investigate cases dealt with summarily, if it deems it not to be in the public interest to investigate. The CCRC is considering and reflecting on that recommendation, but it is of the view that it should retain its function with regard to summary cases, given that it is an area where miscarriages of justice can and do occur. The CCRC has established a working group to consider the recommendations of the tailored review, and I look forward to the outcome of its discussions, especially with regard to what can be done to ensure that commissioners can focus on more complex and serious cases.

I very much support the work of the CCRC. In saying that, I put on the record that I was in no way suggesting that the hon. Member for Huddersfield does not; I know he is deeply involved in this area and has a lot of respect for the staff and their work. Although he is courteously challenging of it, I know that the CCRC welcomes his engagement, which shines a light on its work and raises its profile. The staff enjoy and respect his interest and the focus it brings to their work. I know they would want me to say that to him.

With the appointment of six new commissioners in June, the organisation is well placed to deliver its important work investigating where people are wrongly convicted or where convictions are unsafe. I look forward to carefully considering the results of the work of the Westminster commission that has been set up by the all-party parliamentary group. I hope that I will be in this post this time next week and in a fortnight hence, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will recognise that although we may on occasions disagree, as long as I am in this post I will always be happy to engage with him and with Members from all parts of the House.

The hon. Member for Ipswich is absolutely right to use his position in this House as a champion for his constituents to highlight Oliver’s case, bringing it to my attention as a Minister and also to people more broadly. I look forward, should he wish and should I still be in this role in a couple of weeks’ time, to discussing that with him, where he can unpack some of the more detailed points he would want to make on that. It has been a pleasure to respond to this debate, Sir George. The CCRC continues to play a vital role for individuals and also in upholding the integrity of our justice system, which is precious to us all.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am
Sitting suspended.
2.30 pm

**Eleanor Smith** (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the legal duties of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care for NHS workforce planning and supply.

I am a nurse. My daughter is a nurse. Nursing is in my family and fundamentally informs who I am and what I do. Last November, I triggered a debate about investing in nursing higher education. I am here today to again carry the burning flag for the nursing profession, the wider health and care workforce, and society.

I will start by directly addressing the notion that we should not seek to further clarify the Secretary of State’s legal duties and powers. I have heard that the latest legislation sought to remove political interference in our health system. I have heard people say, “Don’t make health a political football.” Lastly, I have heard that changing the legislation to give the Secretary of State accountability for the workforce would put health and care back under political control—as if our ability to access health and care was ever out of political control.

I am sorry, but those are laughable positions. Whichever side of the fence we sit on, it is a serious point that health is fundamentally political. It can never be political, in terms of what we can access and what happens to people. Our great health service was created within a political agenda, and creating it was a fundamentally political act. Supporting our health and care service to thrive will never not be a political decision. Let us be proud of our history, recognise that health is political, and find a solution to the problems we face.

Now that I have addressed those weak positions, let me state that I, and many others across the political spectrum, take no issue with the idea that there should be explicit clarity in the law about the Secretary of State’s responsibilities. I am not alone in my gratitude for all that our health and care staff do. They work constantly to provide quality care by putting patients at the heart of what they do. In the NHS and the independent sector, nursing accounts for one in 10 of the labour market of the whole of England. We are, and ought to be, a fundamental force to be reckoned with.

Thanks to the scale and urgency of the workforce crisis, many people have been looking into these issues—some of us would say for far too long, and to poor result. We have a long-term plan for the NHS and an interim NHS people plan, so we have seen some movement in the way that agencies work together. However, we have no understanding of what the social care sector needs, and no assurance of workforce funding, which is entirely dependent on the forthcoming spending review and subject to the whim of a new Prime Minister. We do not have a workforce strategy that meets health and care service requirements, or that projects the future needs of the people who live in this country.

The vacancy rate has reached alarming levels, with almost 40,000 nursing vacancies in the NHS in England alone. That is not the full picture. The extent of the vacancies within social care and public health is unclear because it is not mandatory to collect workforce data. It is not possible for services designed with staffing built into their planning to run safely and effectively with so many missing staff.

Fewer people are joining the nursing profession and more are leaving. Since the referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU, more than 10,000 EU nurses and midwives have left the UK workforce. I will not be drawn on Brexit in this debate. However, while we are trying to find our way through the referendum result, frontline staff are propping up the health and care system with no credible assurances that the situation will be resolved. Our professionals are holding on as best they can, but we need to be realistic about what we can reasonably ask of them. They are starting to vote with their feet, and there is not yet the accountability to help us navigate the future that is to come.

This crisis has come about because there is no clarity in the existing legal powers and duties that would ensure that enough staff with the right skills are in the right place at the right time to provide safe and effective care. That is true not just of nursing but of every profession working within our commissioned, taxpayer-funded services, including nurses, medics, psychiatrists, physiotherapists, psychologists, paramedics, pharmacists, social workers, support workers, occupational therapists and dietitians. Literally no one—no one person—is accountable for growing and developing our health and care workforce to meet patients’ needs, now and in future.

The Secretary of State’s current legal duty is to provide a comprehensive service. The Government may say that the Secretary of State has oversight of the workforce through those general duties and powers. With all due respect, the Secretary of State’s responsibilities are too broad to understand what aspects of workforce provision they include. There are also no particular workforce duties within the range of national organisations responsible for service design and delivery. In a health and care system as complex as ours, it is easy for everyone to lose sight of ensuring that we have enough people. Clearly, that is exactly what has happened.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): Surely two reasons for the number of vacancies are low pay in the public sector generally and the lack of bursary provision to recruit new nurses. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a golden opportunity for many mature women, whose children have grown up, to enter that profession? Recently, even ambulance drivers had to pay extra for their certification—I had a debate on that a couple of months ago.

**Eleanor Smith:** My hon. Friend is right, and I will touch on the removal of bursaries later.

A huge amount of effort has been required to try to fix this mess. There has been progress in the NHS, but it is too little and too slow. It does not include social care and deals only with the immediate context. Many of us in this House are here to challenge the position that the existing so-called responsibilities are clear and robust enough for use by the Government and the health and care system, and for the public to have confidence that the Government can be held to account—now and in future, since the pressures on the system will continue to grow and change.
[Eleanor Smith]

Yesterday, many of us met nursing staff, having been brought together by members of the Royal College of Nursing, who are all passionate about patient care and public safety. I am moved by their advocacy for the profession, patients and society. I also feel their desperation in the situation they face, trying to keep people safe in challenging environments. Given that professionals have been raising the alarm for decades, hopefully our demands for an end to the boom-and-bust cycle in the workforce will be met.

Even the High Court recognises how vague the current powers and duties are. The legal dispute between the Secretary of State and junior doctors over their contract resulted in a judicial review in 2016. The Court judgment said that, as stated in the National Health Service Act 2006, the objective of “protecting the public”, with a duty on the Secretary of State to take appropriate steps, leaves “considerable leeway to the Minister as to ways and means” of running the service.

Anyone who looks at the content of the law can see clear holes and gaps. In addition to the Secretary of State having no explicit responsibility, we have other problems with the duties and power of the national guidance. For example, Health Education England is the organisation responsible for developing our workforce, but its hands are tied because it does not have sufficient legal powers or funding to invest properly in the educational provision needed to grow our workforce. HEE can do planning but not supply, which ought to be the responsibility of the Government. The current legal framework is simply not fit for purpose.

Some people might say that Simon Stevens, the chief executive of NHS England, should be accountable for not addressing the workforce needs. The development of the long-term plan provides another clear example of the ambiguity and conflicting expectations playing out in practice. In June 2018, the Prime Minister said:

“Growing demand and increasing complexity have led to a shortfall in staff. So our ten year plan for the NHS must include a comprehensive plan for its workforce to ensure we have the right staff, in the right settings, and with the right skills to deliver world class care.”

That was a clear signal of the Government’s commitment that the long-term plan would address the workforce crisis. On publication, NHS England acknowledged significant workforce issues but said that staffing was additional to service planning and was outside the £20 billion financial package that Simon Stevens was given. Again, NHS England does not have any explicit legal duties that relate to the workforce, so it is not obliged to act.

Just last week, Simon Stevens said there is a need for a “much bigger upturn in the pipeline of new nurses... There has been a big debate about bursaries and their removal, which as we look at the way the student loan system is working, that is clearly back in play as a big question we’ve got to answer as a nation.”

However, the reasons for these supply problems are not within Simon Stevens’s control. They include the reform of higher education for nursing, which has not grown as we were promised. The ability to boost and fund the workforce sits with the Government, and the ambitions set out in the long-term plan will not be met if we do not have trained and qualified staff to achieve those goals. Although the Government have committed to transforming services, they must also commit to building the workforce we need. To do that, the lack of accountability must be addressed.

A nurse who walks into a shift that is short-staffed has no power to safely and effectively staff services. They have no option but to carry on, yet the buck stops with them when patient care is unsafe. Nurses have no power to recruit more staff, and they rely on Parliament to ensure that the incredible position we find ourselves in is addressed: to fix things not just now, but for the future. I know how heartbreaking it is for a nurse to be unable to give the care they want to. I know the guilt we feel when care is left undone, and the stress of being unable to do our job to the best of our ability. Patients pay the highest price when the number of nursing staff falls too low.

Understanding that the health and social care system is a safety-critical industry should be the starting block for any consideration made by the Government. The Royal College of Nursing and other professional and patient organisations have a clear solution. With cross-party support, they are calling for a legal framework for workforce accountability that sets out who in Government and across the health and social care system are accountable and responsible for workforce supply—recruitment, retention and remuneration.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care should have explicit powers in law for the growth and development of the health and social care workforce across England. Such accountability would ensure that there are enough staff to care for the number of patients, and that there is an incredible and fully funded workforce strategy. These requirements are not an either/or position; we need both. Alongside the Secretary of State’s accountability, there are other ways in which the responsibilities need to filter down across all layers of the health system. Never again would the system be able to sidestep workforce planning when setting a 10-year vision for the future of our NHS. The ultimate aim in clarifying accountability for the workforce at Government level is to ensure that all health and social care services are of a high quality, and that they are equipped to provide safe and effective care to guarantee patient safety. The current pressure faced by the healthcare workforce puts that guarantee at risk.

Successive Governments have missed opportunities to fix the health and social care workforce crisis. Boom-and-bust approaches to workforce supply have been an afterthought, with the focus on glossy new services and sparkly new plans, rather than on worrying about the staff who are needed to deliver them. That has led to a situation in which the system currently defaults to discussing how to fix the workforce gap. We need to plan strategically for what workforce will be needed to deliver the future healthcare services that have been designed to meet the needs of the population.

An opportunity to rectify the workforce crisis is coming right towards us. NHS England and NHS Improvement have finished engagement work on the legislative changes that they feel are needed to make a success of the long-term plan. Their engagement work sets out proposed changes to the remit of the Secretary of State, but currently these legislative proposals are missing crucial accountabilities. It is down to right hon. and hon. Members to expand the proposals when the
law is presented to Parliament. The legislation must include accountabilities for the workforce, because it is too clear an opportunity to miss.

A simple legal change would turn the tide for patients, and support is growing across the political spectrum for a legal fix as part of addressing the workforce crisis. I found myself at a roundtable discussion on this very matter, with a Government Member with whom I share no political allegiance. We found ourselves in full agreement that we must explicitly clarify the responsibility for putting our workforce on a sustainable footing.

As a nurse in Parliament, I commit to seeking the change that is being called for. I hope that others call on Parliament to speak loudly and clearly in adding their voices to ours, and that all right hon. and hon. Members will commit to pursuing change. This is a truly cross-party issue, and rightfully so. There is a crisis and everyone points fingers at others, but ultimately no one is responsible. There are moves to make the system better, but they must be set out in law and strengthened further. There is an opportunity to fix this cleanly and easily. We are not adding burdens, but clarifying mandates. The moment is now—we must commit to ending the workforce crisis once and for all.

I was keen to take part in the debate because I recognise that things need to be done. We must take responsibility for the way things are at the moment, and although I understand what the legal responsibility is and the reason for the debate, I want to understand a bit more about the solutions, too. I have never thought that all the solutions can be created, thought up or delivered here in Westminster or in any Government Department. Although real progress in integration and improving services on the ground needs to be enabled through legislation, support and encouragement, people in health and social care in Cornwall have got together and worked extremely hard for many years to deliver a system in which pathways and integration are much better than when I welcomed the Minister off the train.

One problem of many is the workforce, which is undoubtedly a challenge. There is also no doubt that the NHS 10-year plan is a fantastic document, but it depends heavily on workforce. I know that the Minister will agree and will want to ensure that we have people in place. We may not participate in this Chamber, but across Parliament, the bunfight, debate and arguments about the NHS go on, and have been taken up by people in local campaigns and the media. That has created an environment in which people choose not to nurse or do anything else in the NHS because they are misinformed. I know of lots of people who would have gone into or considered going into nursing or social care, but will not do so because the NHS is a political hot potato.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): On the hon. Gentleman’s point about people not joining the NHS to nurse, the lack of bursary is a significant issue. If someone wants to train, the bursary is really important.

Derek Thomas: I am addressing the point the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) has mentioned it. I was one of the MPs who signed a cross-party letter requesting a royal commission for the 70th year of the NHS, because I believe that although we do not have all the solutions, we should set the tone. That would help to open the door of opportunity for those who work in the NHS. I will come to the bursary, which I have already raised with the Minister; I asked him to look in particular at the impact on mature students. Podiatry in Plymouth, for example, will not be taught from September onwards. In the south west, where the incidences of diabetes and other vascular problems are significant, we need podiatrists, so that is a major problem. The reason given is that most people who go into podiatry do it later on in their careers, and one of the challenges arising from the removal of the bursary and introduction of student loans—I voted for that and regret doing so—is that those who take out the loan immediately lose all welfare and can no longer get housing benefit.

For someone with a young family who wants to study, the student loan, or the grant available for mature students, is just not enough. The Minister is aware of my view because I have raised it before, and there is work to do on that. It is not about financial incentives; it is about making it affordable for people to go and do a fantastic job. As the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West rightly said, some people bring so much to the NHS that we will agree and will want to ensure that we have people in place. We may not participate in this Chamber, but across Parliament, the bunfight, debate and arguments about the NHS go on, and have been taken up by people in local campaigns and the media. That has created an environment in which people choose not to nurse or do anything else in the NHS because they are misinformed. I know of lots of people who would have gone into or considered going into nursing or social care, but will not do so because the NHS is a political hot potato.

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and studying through the Open University, and will become qualified nurses after four years. As they are already settled in the area and have family there, they are very likely to work for the NHS for the rest of their careers.

That is really positive, but there are some challenges and I have met the Minister to talk about them. One of the challenges is that for hospitals—in this case Royal Cornwall Hospital—to provide that kind of support, they need extra cash. It is not just about the apprenticeship levy, which they want to use and not repay, but about staffing 100 nurses and 100 healthcare assistants at a time, and providing pastoral support and other elements that come with training up staff on a ward or in a hospital. An added pressure is that for a hospital without the staff that it needs, really excellent healthcare assistants are no substitute for fully qualified nurses with a wealth of experience.

There is a problem in this place. I am a skilled craftsman in the building trade but I have put my tools away, despite the desperate need for skilled craftsmen in Cornwall. In this Chamber and across the House, we have lots of GPs and talented nurses. For some reason, we decided to pitch up here instead of continuing in our valuable jobs. I think that we are part of the problem. I am not suggesting that we should all pack up and go home, although we might get more done if we did, so we should consider it.

Eleanor Smith: I get what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but I worked for 40 years in the health service and it was because I saw its deterioration that I came to Parliament to say, “This is what’s happening.”

Derek Thomas: I said that in humour, which is why I talked about my own skill—or lack of. It is a curious thing, though, to hear people talking about the crisis in staffing when so many of them are in this place.

On a more important note, we are in a tricky situation with the challenges around the apprenticeship levy. In Cornwall, we hope to train 200 nurses using the apprenticeship levy over the next two years—that would address the shortage—but we have to recognise that funding is needed and I know that the Minister is looking at that now.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Derek Thomas: I will when I have finished this point. Whatever the solution, we must recognise the added pressure on existing staff.

Paul Girvan: On that point, it is all very well getting nurses into and through training, but in Northern Ireland the NHS is haemorrhaging nurses who are not leaving the profession, but going into agency work, getting paid two and a half times more than they were and working the hours that they want. Not only is workforce planning impossible when people can just work when they want, but we lose continuity of care in wards.

Derek Thomas: I appreciate that valuable intervention. I had a conversation with the former Secretary of State for Health about how, when the student loan was introduced, there might have been a way in which students had all their loan written off if they gave seven years’ service to the NHS. The advantage of that, to be honest, is that people who had done seven years after qualifying would probably have settled down by then, entered into a home purchase and perhaps had family, so they would have been, first, less likely to clear off to another country and, secondly, kind of tied into the NHS where they were.

In part, that addresses the problem the hon. Gentleman raises. Yesterday, I met a newly qualified nurse from the south-west who found that on Christmas day she was the leading NHS nurse, supported only by agency staff. That must stick in the back of NHS staff’s throat, when they know that extra pay is available to agency staff. Efforts have been made to address that, and there must be ways to do so, but that is what we are getting at today—the workforce challenge.

If we have a workforce challenge, other things will happen, such as agencies springing up and the demand for them. We have to get to a place where working for the NHS as a nurse employed by the local trust is the best and most rewarding place to be, and appreciated by all. We simply do not say often enough how great such people are. We can do so many things locally and nationally to rebuild value, trust and appreciation in those people. The challenge for Health Education England is to look at how we fund local innovative ideas, ensuring there is enough money, as well as flexible support, to find solutions. I discussed that with Simon Stevens, and he seemed alert to the challenge.

As I said, I met nurses from the south-west yesterday, and they were concerned about safety on wards and retention of nurses. We have this bizarre circle spiralling downhill: if nurses do not feel safe, they go to do something that might not be nursing. Unfortunately, in places of low unemployment, lots of other work and employment opportunities are available, often paying more.

Solutions are possible. In Cornwall, I have found that people often do not know what is available. The Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS Trust and other trusts in Cornwall, my local college and I got together to work on an event in the college called “Work for the NHS+”, which included 15 or more different parts of the NHS, as well as some from social care. They came along to tell students and the general public what the employment opportunities were, the pay and training that could be expected, and what kind of career paths were available. In Cornwall, as in many other parts of the country, there are some fantastic members of staff and people in the NHS and social care who can inspire others. This might sound ridiculous in a debate on shortages on a ward, but when we have such individuals, we must find opportunities to get them in front of people who are thinking about which career they should choose.

I do not know much about the other challenging problem raised by the nurses yesterday, but it is right to mention it. They said that although more nurses are training, training placement opportunities are fewer. They suggested that part of nurse training now is off the ward—obviously that has happened before, but they were concerned about whether that virtual training or simulators were the same. I know that the Minister will take seriously all opportunities to get nurses trained in the best possible way, so I will not dwell on a subject that I do not know much about.
I mentioned the issue to do with podiatry, which is a real problem in the south-west. We must find ways to help professionals, whatever they do, whether therapy, physio or all the things that people do to ensure that we stay well and do not end up in hospital. Podiatry is one of those. We must ensure that people get the training, that they can afford to do so, and that they can have a great career in the NHS or with local authorities. We need to talk to universities about exactly why they are not attracting the kind of numbers they need to justify the courses.

I should have declared an interest at the beginning: I chair the vascular and venous disease all-party parliamentary group. One thing I am being told loud and clear—I have done a lot on this—is that because we have taken the nursing bursary away from older students, they find it difficult to go on the courses that I am describing. That will have a real impact on the numbers of nurses available to do those important jobs. If we do not address that issue, in a place such as Cornwall, where diabetes is a significant problem, the pressure on urgent care will be enormous—if it is not already.

Last week, our general district hospital—the only one in Cornwall—closed to the public, because a spate of staff shortages meant we had no cardiology unit and no beetroot unit. I want to tell you the real life of a nurse in Cornwall. Lincoln County Hospital was in a difficult situation. They had to keep in touch with their former colleagues and still hear at first hand how staff shortages affect them—some stories are quite scary. As an MP over the last two years, I have witnessed an awful lot of patronising pats on the back. I exclude today’s debate from that, but we often hear from Members how wonderful our NHS staff are, and yet that does nothing to address staff shortages or to make their working conditions any better. That is what they want; they do not want patronising pats on the back. The 40,000 nursing vacancies are evidence of that stark truth.

As a nurse, when I went on shift, I would be allocated eight cardiac patients. They would have been treated for heart failure, recently had a heart attack or been waiting for an angiogram, or perhaps they were being treated for endocarditis, which is a serious infection of the heart. The staffing was meant to ensure that a single nurse took either the male or the female team, with an extra nurse working between the two sides to support the multitude of tasks that delivering good patient care means. In reality, we often did not get that third nurse, and had to manage without. Some shifts felt like a marathon combined with a sprint—I kid you not, Mrs Moon, it really was that bad. I did love it though.

The medical management of my group of patients would be varied. Many patients were diabetics, meaning that we had to check blood sugars, four times a day for some and twice for others. If four or five out of eight of a nurse’s patients were diabetics, that was quite a task. We could even get something called “sliding scale”, which meant we had to check them every two hours. Sometimes, honestly, we just chased our tail the whole day.

Many patients needed intravenous antibiotics, which were really time-consuming to prepare, even more so if a patient had a line, a Hickman or a PIC— a periodically inserted central catheter—because it had to be done aseptically; it just took ages, and the nurse was running around the whole time. As well as that, staffing was routinely topped up with bank or agency staff. I am not knocking them, because we would not have managed without them, but they were not allowed to do IVs, so when we had agency staff on the other side of ward, to be honest we would end up doing quite a proportion of their work as well. That made it really difficult.

Many patients were prescribed controlled drugs, so first thing in the morning, at 8 o’clock, we might have had two or three CDs to do—but trying to get someone else to check the CD was a nightmare. There were just not enough hands on deck, which meant that people were sat waiting in pain for analgesia when they had gone all night and were due that dose. Sometimes a patient needed a blood transfusion, which was a really tricky process. They had to be monitored the whole time, but, again, that was done for one person and there were eight patients, so the nurse was running around all the time. It felt unsafe and the nurse felt really bad because they wanted to deliver good, safe patient care.

A patient might be close to death and need to be monitored, because the nurse could tell visually whether they were in pain, but there were seven others to look after. The relatives wanted someone to sit and talk to them, of course the nurse wanted to do, but they did not have the time. In addition, there were other tasks such as changing dressings, monitoring pressure areas, and speaking to social workers, physiotherapists and occupational therapists about assessments, as well as discharging patients. The doctor might say to a patient, “You can go home today”, but the nurse had seven others to look after. All the patient wanted was for the nurse to do their paperwork and get their meds from the pharmacy. They sat waiting impatiently and the nurse felt bad because the patient could not go home. When the nurse eventually got them out, another patient was straight into their bed and the admission paperwork had to be done. The tasks were endless, but that was the job. We did it and we loved it, but we have to have enough staff to do it properly.
No nurse can deliver care without the healthcare support workers, so this is not only about nurses. The housekeepers make the tea but because the nurses do not have time to sit and talk to the patients and their families, the nurse goes to the housekeeper at the end of a shift and says, “Has anybody told you anything that I need to know?” It is team work. If there are not enough staff to carry out the different roles, staff simply burn out and cannot deliver the care that patients need.

Towards the end of my nursing career, in the two years before I came to Parliament, I worked in out-patient clinics because I thought it might be a little easier, but it was not. It never is, but I was starting to get burn-out and I did not want that to happen because I loved the job too much.

We used to work 12.5 hour shifts. We would start a day shift at seven in the morning. At about half nine, if we were lucky, we got a cup of tea, but we literally had only five minutes. At around two o’clock we got our lunch. We had half an hour and we were meant to have another break at teatime, but we never, ever got it because we were running around trying to finish all our jobs, chasing our tails and trying to get everything done.

So we would have a break of about half an hour in twelve and a half hours. Then, just when we thought we were going home, it would turn out that the bank staff, the agency staff, had not turned up and we could not simply say, “I am off home.” We had to wait until somebody had been found somewhere else in the hospital and somebody was moved from a different ward. Then the handover took half an hour. Instead of going home at half seven or eight o’clock, it could be nine o’clock and we would be back again at seven the next morning. People simply burn out.

Working in our NHS is incredibly hard work in whatever role. It is not well paid, and in places such as Lincoln a few years ago when we had the pay freeze, it was suddenly decided that a consultation would be held and we were asked, “Do you think you ought pay for staff parking?” Of course, everyone said no, so what happened? We all had to start paying for staff parking: £15 a month for staff nurses who had not had a rise in parking? Of course, everyone said no, so what happened? We all had to start paying for staff parking: £15 a month for staff nurses who had not had a rise in parking? Of course, everyone said no, so what happened? We all had to start paying for staff parking: £15 a month for staff nurses who had not had a rise in parking? Of course, everyone said no, so what happened? We all had to start paying for staff parking: £15 a month for staff nurses who had not had a rise in parking? Of course, everyone said no, so what happened? 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The provision of ambulances and ambulance crews has been hit particularly hard. It is vital that we recruit and deploy more paramedics and ambulance technicians. Rural communities such as mine suffer because of the sheer distances that ambulances have to travel to reach patients. According to the review of NHS access standards, it is the responsibility of ambulance trusts to respond to category 1 calls within seven minutes on average. That is a tall order when there are half the number of ambulances per head in the north-west of England as there are in London, despite the fact that my constituency alone is bigger than the whole of Greater London. It leaves communities living in fear for their safety and takes a serious toll on the physical and mental health of our outstanding ambulance crews. Our local paramedics and ambulance technicians are being pushed beyond their capacity. As a result, I have had an influx of local people contacting me about having to wait hours for an ambulance to arrive to give them the treatment that they so desperately need. That is why local health campaigners have been calling on the Government to deliver two new fully crewed ambulances to south Lakeland to stem the crisis and ensure the safety of the community. It is not right that people in Grasmere, Dent or Hawkshead might be an hour away from the nearest available ambulance.

We met the Minister to raise the issue a few weeks ago. He was incredibly helpful and I thank him for his time and his response. I very much welcome the commitment to procure additional emergency ambulances. I understand that as a result of our campaigns an additional £8 million has been allocated to the North West Ambulance Service. That could be good news for south Cumbria, but only if the ambulance service allocates it in the way that we have asked. Ministers should be held to account for whether the ambulances materialise.

Mental health is another element of workforce planning that I want to raise—particularly provision for children. Four years ago the Government promised a bespoke one-to-one eating disorder service for young people in Cumbria. For young people in south Cumbria that promise remains nothing more than words. The specialists have not been recruited and the service still does not exist. I should love it if the Minister would tell me exactly when we can expect our young people to have access to the service. When will the promises be kept?

I welcome the Government’s commitment to preventive healthcare, set out in the NHS long-term plan. However, again, promises are not being fulfilled. In our area, cuts to the public health budget mean that the NHS in Cumbria currently spends only £75,000 a year on tier 1 mental health preventive care for children. That works out at just 75p per child per year. Proper investment in public health would ensure enough money for a mental health professional for every school and college, if we could recruit them, keeping young people mentally healthy and making sure that problems did not become so severe further down the line. It would also ease the burden on our massively oversubscribed local child and adolescent mental health services, and relieve the pressure on our brilliant but overworked teachers.

In our area, there is a problem with people moving out of NHS provision to work privately, particularly in the delivery of dental services. More than half of adults in Cumbria have not had access to an NHS dentist in the past two years, while one in three children locally does not even have a place with an NHS dentist. Much as with ambulances, the impact of the lack of a workforce of sufficient size is felt particularly acutely in rural areas. Insufficient NHS dentistry provision has resulted in families having to make ludicrously long journeys to reach the nearest surgery with an available NHS place. Often, people are unable to make those long journeys, or to afford to make them.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue about dentistry. There are frightening figures about my constituency showing a lack of take-up of NHS dental treatment among children in particular. That is a real worry. I wonder whether it is reflected in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency and whether he agrees that we need at least to tackle NHS provision for dental treatment for young people. It is important.

Tim Farron: Yes, the hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point. I am certain it is felt across the country. If it is made too difficult to get to the nearest NHS dental surgery—if that is 60 or even 100 miles away, as has been the case on occasion for constituents of mine—people go without treatment, and so do their children.

Last November I managed to secure the agreement of the commissioners to increase the value of the contracts to NHS dentists in Kendal so they could see and treat more patients. “Brilliant,” we thought, “that is really good news.” When NHS England contacted our local NHS dentists they found that not one of them was able to take up their offer. I was told that the practices were already working to capacity within the staffing resources they had available, and were reporting difficulties in recruiting additional staff. Those staff exist, by the way. They are working in the private sector. The treadmill of a contract that is unfair to patients and dentists, and not fit for purpose, keeps them out of the NHS. As the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) says, that hits young people particularly.

The reasons for those difficulties include a contract that pays a set amount for a particular type of treatment, regardless of the number of teeth that a dentist treats. A dentist will get paid, on average, £75 for an entire course of treatment including six fillings, three extractions and a root canal. That is not enough to cover overheads. That is a serious disincentive to people entering NHS dentistry. It hits all areas, but particularly deprived areas, and has a massive impact on the size of the workforce. According to the Department’s website, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is responsible for “oversight of NHS delivery and performance”, but if he is unable or unwilling to intervene to correct such absurd commissioning we have to ask what real power he has to perform the role. That is the kind of systemic problem that adds up to the workforce crisis we have all talked about and which proper accountability would go some way to solving.

The website states that the other part of the Secretary of State’s role is “oversight of social care policy”. Social care policy is key to NHS workforce planning and supply in England. We all recognise that social care provision is in crisis, and that the crisis gets worse the longer we do not address it. As it grows, so does the
pressure on the NHS, which is left dealing with the serious health problems of those who did not receive the routine care they needed. The Government cannot go on delaying simply because of the personal embarrassment of having failed so far. To be fair, they are not the only ones responsible. Neither are they the only ones who can come up with a solution. We need to reach across divides and look for a cross-party solution.

I have written to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government and to the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), the shadow Secretary of State, to invite them to join me so that between us we can constructively use this deadlocked Parliament to reimagine and then redesign a social care system that could provide us with the care we might want for our parents, ourselves or, indeed, in the future, our children. I hope that we can work together to create a new deal for social care and a chance to turn this logjammed Parliament into one of the most productive in history.

The lack in the workforce has a profound impact in each of the areas I have talked about. Common themes and problems emerge: there is a lack of planning, as well as short-sightedness and a failure to invest in preventive care or to understand that providing healthcare is harder in rural areas, as are recruitment and retention. The Government must plan to overcome those specific challenges as part of their overall strategy. The Government, in not taking responsibility for the workforce crisis, are creating huge problems for generations to come. We need accountability, both for the current workforce crisis and to ensure that we invest in long-term solutions beyond the next Prime Minister, the next Government and even the next generation.

3.26 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) for securing the debate. Like everyone who knows the NHS workforce, I want to pay tribute to all the people I served, including in acute services, when I was a Unison official in public sector health. Some of the stories we heard today from colleagues who used to work as nurses or as other healthcare staff took me back to those times. I have talked to many a worker, particularly in mental health, and often they are overstretched. The work is arduous and they cannot go off shift, for the safety of the patients. More importantly, at times the environment is dangerous for staff, and I know many people, particularly in acute mental health, who have been subjected to violence in the workplace purely as a consequence of understaffing and lack of resources, yet they bravely battle on to look after the patients in their care.

There is a word that one would never expect to be associated with NHS services in a commonplace way, yet it is frequently associated with the demise or semi-demise, or shutdown or partial shutdown, of NHS units. That word is “unsafe”. It has been used time and again, especially by acute trusts, to justify the stoppage of particular patient-facing functions, including accident and emergency departments. In 2016 it was reported that in 60 towns, including Hartlepool, A&E units had closed, disappeared or been downgraded. A year later, in 2017, one in six was reported to be at risk, and a further 33 units, in 23 areas in the UK, were affected.

Even today, in the Tory heartlands of Richmond and Northallerton in North Yorkshire, the same is happening at the Friargate Hospital. It is not just A&E provision that is affected but the birthing unit at University Hospital of Hartlepool, and breast screening at nearby James Cook University Hospital in Middlesbrough. They have been mothballed or put into slow decline, with one common denominator: the services were deemed unsafe due to a lack of consultants.

The recruitment and retention of consultants is vital, of course, but so too is the recruitment and retention of nurses and other staff. I mentioned the birthing unit in Hartlepool because last year the maternity centre, at which there were once hundreds of births, reached an all-time low—just three babies were delivered at the unit, with a further five home births in the town. That so alarmed the local authority that maternity provision in the town came under specific scrutiny, with a view to promoting and boosting the use of the birthing unit and improving maternity services in the locality. In fact, the chair of the council’s audit and scrutiny committee—Conservative Councillor Brenda Loynes—is on record as saying that it was “important to encourage more people to use the Hartlepool unit to keep the service in the town.”

Yet the will of the people, and the pride that comes from having the right to be born and registered in their own town, is continually being thwarted. Only this week a constituent told me that his partner, who was four days over her due date, had recently opted to have her baby at the University Hospital of North Tees in Stockton because there was not a consultant on hand at Hartlepool, even though they are part of the same NHS foundation trust. At her midwife appointment, her partner stated that it was a shame that there was not a consultant on hand in Hartlepool, as her preferred choice was to give birth there. The reply was, “Nobody can have their babies at the birthing centre, as they haven’t got the staff to cover it—not just consultants but midwifery staff.” To the people of my town, who thought that they had seen the back of cuts to hospital services, that will be a slap in the face.

There are 40,000 nursing vacancies in the NHS in England alone, according to the Royal College of Nursing and the other unions—GMB, Unite and Unison. We stand on the brink of a crisis in our NHS. As my brother Andrew has experienced several times, surgery and appointments are cancelled, and wards and units are closed, more often than not because of staff shortages.

Let me be clear: that is not the fault of the hard-working NHS staff, who cannot and do not drop everything at the end of their shift, in the face of short staffing and in the interests of patient safety. It is not the fault of the midwives in Hartlepool, who want to provide a service out of the local hospital. It is the fault of the Government, who have failed to get a grip of the issue and ensure that there are enough health and care staff with the right skills, in the right place, at the right time to care for patients. Their strategy for the NHS has to include taking responsibility for ensuring adequate workforce planning and funding. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care must have a clear and explicit responsibly for the growth and development of the healthcare workforce.
across England. Shame on the Government for not doing so and for running the NHS further into the ground.

3.33 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) for securing this important debate, and for her excellent and knowledgeable speech. I also thank all other hon. Members who made excellent speeches. They are all very knowledgeable, and some have had long careers in the health service, which really adds to the quality of the debate.

I pay tribute to the approximately 1.4 million members of the dedicated and hard-working NHS workforce, who are responsible for making our health service one of the best in the world. This debate is absolutely not about criticising them or the NHS, as others have said; it is about criticising the Government, who have continued to undervalue the NHS workforce. NHS staff too often find themselves working under unacceptable levels of pressure following nearly a decade of mismanagement and underfunding. They are consistently asked to do more with less. That pressure has led to abhorrent working conditions. Staff shortages in the NHS have spiked consecutively over the past few years. Recent estimates suggest a shortfall of about 100,000 staff, including 40,000 nurses and 10,000 doctors. If the trend continues, it is estimated that the shortfall will more than double by 2030.

We know that staff shortages put patients at risk. They prevent treatment and lead to a poorer quality of care. A 2017 study concluded that lower staffing levels can lead to necessary care being missed, patients being more likely to die following common surgery, and lower patient satisfaction, yet hospitals frequently have gaps in rotas and lack medical cover, which prompts significant concern about safety. Does the Minister believe that is appropriate care for patients and their families? If those substantial staff shortages continue, we will face even longer waiting lists and a deteriorating quality of care, and money ring-fenced for NHS frontline staff and services will go unspent due to lack of staff.

The effect of staff shortages is already evident. We have already seen care homes shut, an increase in agency hires, and chemotherapy treatments postponed because of a lack of staff at hospitals across the country. The effect that staffing shortages have on patients must not be underestimated, but we must also remember the effect on the staff themselves. NHS staff are consistently asked to take on additional responsibilities, to work harder, to do more intense shifts and to take on an excessive number of patients. Working in an already high-pressure environment without adequate resources or support not only puts patients at risk but damages the mental health of staff, leading to lower morale, poor wellbeing and a poor working life.

Working life is becoming intolerable for some of our NHS staff. It is no wonder that 20,000 nurses have left the NHS since 2010, and that the NHS has seen a 55% increase in voluntary resignations, with staff citing a poor work-life balance as their primary reason for leaving. The number of voluntary resignations due to health problems and stress has increased threefold in the past 10 years. The recent interim NHS people plan states that people are “overstretched” and admits that people no longer want to work in the NHS. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that NHS staff are retained once they are trained and experienced?

The standards of protection and safety that are rightly expected by staff and enshrined in the NHS constitution are being abandoned. On top of the cuts to staff wellbeing services that have consistently been made across England since the introduction of the Health and Social Care Act 2012, the number of understaffed shifts and overworked practitioners is forcing staff to take time off work and has led to increased requests for employed staff to take on extra shifts. That risks their health and can lead to increased locum use to cover staff rota gaps and vacancies. Staff shortages can have a significant impact on patient and professional safety.

It is welcome news that NHS Improvement will monitor trusts’ use of safe staffing guidelines. However, five years after the Francis report, the action taken on safe staffing simply is not good enough. The exodus of dedicated staff over the past 10 years, staff shortages, long waits for treatment, and frequent cancellations of operations demonstrate that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence’s suspension of work on setting evidence-based staffing rules in 2015 was a mistake.

One way of ensuring the system has the number of staff it needs would be for England to follow the approach that is taken in Wales and is planned in Scotland, which is to legislate for safe staffing levels, yet the Government have continuously refused to bring forward legislation on safe staffing levels. Will the Minister reconsider that?

It remains unclear who is responsible for interventions in the workforce supply, as the Government certainly seem to be abdicating responsibility. The Government must consider seriously the legal proposals put forward by NHS England and NHS Improvement to amend the Health and Social Care Act to ensure that the workforce crisis is meaningfully and explicitly addressed. Can the Minister explain what impact workforce accountability requirements would have on the current legal framework?

Surely the fact that Scotland and Wales have explicit accountability for the provision of the workforce across health and social care but England does not will lead to unequal progress and quality of care across the country and, inevitably, to a postcode lottery for patients.

We cannot tackle this problem if the pool of talented medical professionals in Britain continues to shrink. Safe staffing is not just a numerical issue; it is about having enough staff with the right skills, experience and knowledge. The UK trains only 27 nursing graduates per 100,000 of population, compared with the average of 50 across other OECD countries. The Government have continually undermined incentives to join the NHS workforce, which is demonstrated by their treatment of junior doctors, their introduction of salary caps, their cuts to bursaries and funding opportunities for students, and their hostile approach to those who travel from overseas to join the NHS. Does the Minister recognise that restrictive migration policies act only as a further barrier to tackling the NHS workforce crisis?

Does the Minister also recognise that the Health Education England budget has been cut by 17% in real terms since 2013-14? Applications to nursing training have fallen by 30%, particularly since the nursing bursary
was removed. The NHS long-term plan set out some ambitious targets, such as diagnosing 75% of cancers at an early stage by 2028, expanding emergency service care and increasing the availability of mental health services. However, without a long-term, fully funded staffing plan for the NHS, those targets are impossible to reach.

The Government’s warm words and commitments to increase the number of NHS staff working and in training “as soon as possible” are appreciated. However, legislative action must be taken to ensure that patients and staff are not exposed to unsafe staffing levels, which can have dire consequences for patient outcomes and workforce retention. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

3.42 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Moon. I look forward to responding to the debate, which has been interesting, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) on securing it.

I listened carefully to my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas). He will be pleased to know that I will be happy to write to him about podiatry; there are some interesting issues about new plans that are being put in place. He will recognise that there are more applicants for university nurse training places this year than in the previous year.

I was pleased to hear the contributions from the hon. Members for Lincoln (Karen Lee) and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). I have responded to the hon. Gentleman about ambulances. He will know that there are eight posted in the Cumbria and Morecambe Bay areas, but I am looking with him at procurement there and will be looking to see where the North West Ambulance Service places those ambulances. He questioned whether promises are being fulfilled. I guide him to the implementation framework. He also talked about planning and investment. That is why there is a long-term plan and a people plan, and why moneys are going in to back them up. I also listened carefully to the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill).

I say to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), let us start by agreeing and a people plan, and why moneys are going in to back the implementation framework. He also talked about planning and investment. That is why there is a long-term plan and a people plan, and why moneys are going in to back them up. I also listened carefully to the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill).

I say to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), let us start by agreeing

Like many other Members, I attended the RCN member-led event yesterday and heard at first hand about the aims of the campaign from many nurses working in the NHS. I met again a number of the people I met at an event for nurses in training back in November. At the heart of the campaign, as everybody recognises, is the RCN’s intention to ensure that the needs and requirements of the NHS workforce are prioritised. I fully support the RCN’s focus on the importance of the NHS workforce—recruitment and retention—but I am not convinced that legislation is always the answer, and I am not convinced that changing legislation will necessarily bring about the changes and focus the RCN seeks.

However, given that the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West secured the debate in recognition of the Secretary of State’s legislative duties in relation to workforce, it is probably right that I set out exactly what the legal position is. Through the Care Act 2014, the Secretary of State delegated to Health Education England powers to support the delivery of excellent healthcare and health improvement for patients and the public in England by ensuring that the current and future NHS workforce has the right number of staff with the right skills, values and behaviours at the right time and in the right place to meet patients’ needs.

The Care Act 2014 sets out in detail Health Education England’s remit and range of responsibilities, including its duty to ensure an effective system of education and training for the NHS and public health. Beyond the detail of the legislation, HEE provides leadership for the education and training system, and ensures that the workforce have the right skills to be able to deliver excellent healthcare in the right numbers. HEE was established to deliver a better healthcare workforce for England and is already accountable for ensuring that there is a secure workforce supply for the future. It has responsibility for promoting high-quality education and training that is responsive to the changing needs of patients and local communities.

The full range of HEE’s responsibilities, deliverables and accountabilities are described in its annual mandate, which the Secretary of State is required to approve. The most recent edition of that mandate and HEE’s latest annual business plan summarise what it is doing and its achievements. I am pleased to say that, as those who have had the chance to read it will have noted, the mandate for 2019-20 was published last week.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West made a point about legislation for safe staffing, but there is already a commitment to safe staffing and to ensuring that the NHS aims to be the safest healthcare system in the world, as it should be. Part of that must come from transparency in staffing levels, which is why the care hours per day data were introduced in 2016. The Health and Social Care Act 2008 (Regulated Activities) Regulations 2014 require hospitals to have the right staff in the right place at the right time, and appropriate staffing levels are a core element of the Care Quality Commission’s registration regime. As the hon. Lady will know, all providers of regulated activities must be registered with the Care Quality Commission and meet the registration requirements. The safe staffing requirement is therefore already there, and accountability mechanisms are in place.
Mrs Hodgson: The Minister says that accountability is already in place. Staffing levels may be required and desirable, but what happens when they cannot be met because the staff are not there? Where is the accountability?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady will know that the CQC regime puts directives in place if staffing levels are not there. The local providers are then forced to address those issues. The accountability is there.

Beyond this issue, several hon. Members talked about exactly what we are doing now. There was recognition that the Government have put in place the long-term plan and the people plan. Any reading of those will see that our overarching plan for the health service looking forward recognises explicitly that getting the workforce supply right is key. That is therefore an important part of the long-term plan, which sets out the vital strategic framework to ensure that in the next 10 years the NHS will have the staff it needs. Nurses and doctors will have the time they need to care, work in a supportive culture and allow them to provide the expert, compassionate care to which they are committed.

Hon. Members rightly said that that will not be for this Government; it may well be for the Government beyond. However, the long-term plan rightly recognises by its very nature that what we need to put in place today must continue through the next 10 years to ensure that we have the staffing levels we need.

Karen Lee: A number of us mentioned the nursing bursary. The long-term plan talks about extra places for nurses, but if nurses are not being trained—the evidence shows that numbers have dropped by about 25% to 30%—clearly we cannot have them in place. I seek the Minister’s comments on reinstating a nursing bursary so that mature students and other students can afford to train.

Stephen Hammond: I will come to the number of nurses in training and related issues in a moment, to address the hon. Lady’s comments.

Associated with the long-term plan is the people plan, which clearly recognises, to reference what I said about Health Education England, the significant role of that organisation in securing the NHS workforce for the future. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care commissioned Baroness Harding, the chair of NHS Improvement, to work alongside and closely with Sir David Behan, the chair of HEE, to develop the workforce implementation plan. The interim people plan published in June set out the actions needed to change positively the culture and leadership of the NHS, making it the best place to work, which addresses the issues rightly raised about recruitment and retention.

The people plan commits to developing a new operating model for the workforce that ensures that activities happen at the optimal level, whether in individual organisations, local healthcare systems, regionally or nationally, with roles and responsibilities being clear.

On NHS workforce supply, hon. Members talked about demand for nursing and midwifery courses. The latest available evidence shows that we are starting to see a substantial rise. Data published only last week showed a 4.5% increase in applicants compared to 2018, with that being the second increase in as many years. To build on that, to ensure that we increase the pipeline of nurses coming into the profession, the Department has worked with NHS England to ensure that funding is available for up to 5,000 additional clinical placements for nursing degrees in England. That is nursing degrees. That work for England has led work to identify and accelerate the availability of such clinical placements. It is vital that universities ensure that they take up offers and provide placements to ensure that places are filled at the end of this year’s recruitment cycle. That can happen.

Mrs Hodgson: I acknowledge the 4% increase—it is a small increase—but figures show that the numbers are still down 29% from 51,830 in 2016, when the bursary that covered training was removed. Even with that small increase, we are still 15,000 short of the figure when the bursary was axed.

Stephen Hammond: The figures show an increase in applicants this year. The hon. Lady will know that there are 1.4 applications for each place, and she will have heard me say that we are creating additional clinical placements to ensure that more nursing places are available. I recognise that there has been a drop, but I hope that she applauds the 4.5% increase in applicants this year. That is key.

A number of Members rightly talked about additional nursing roles and support. Health Education England is leading a national nursing associates programme with a commitment for 7,500 nursing associate apprentices to enter training this year. That builds on a programme that has already seen thousands start training in 2017 and 2018.

The RCN is leading work focused on the legislative framework for all professional groups. I should set out that work on the people plan also included examining options for growing the medical and allied health workforce, including the possibility of further medical school expansion, increasing part-time study, expanding the number of accelerated degree programmes and greater contestability in allocating the 7,500 medical training places each year to drive improvements in the curriculum.

For allied health professionals, the long-term plan sets out a commitment to completing a programme of actions to develop further the national strategy, focusing on implementation of the plan. There will be a workforce group to support that work and make recommendations, including on professions in short supply, which would address the podiatry point made by my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives. That is essential.

I do not think that anyone should be in any way complacent, and the Government are clearly not complacent. Many hon. Members will have heard me say that, as well as training the workforce for the future, it is important that we support and retain the current workforce. The interim people plan is committed to reviewing how to make increases in a number of factors. One such factor is national and local investment in professional development and workforce development.

There are examples of good practice in this area across the NHS, and I was particularly pleased when I visited Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust to see how a group of band 6 nurses had created their own in-house training programme, boosting management skills and leading to greater collaborative ways of working. That example of best practice makes the case for national investment in such programmes and for national funding for continuing professional development.
Everyone recognises the need to recruit more staff, but it is also fair to put on the record the fact that the number of staff working in the NHS today is at an all-time high—it is the highest it has been in the NHS’s 70-year history. Since 2010 there has been a significant growth in qualified staff. [Interruption] I hear a sigh from Opposition Members, but it is worth making the point that there are now 51,900 more professionally qualified staff, including 17,000 more nurses working on wards. That is a simple fact; it is a piece of data, and we cannot get away from it. I do not suggest that one should be complacent in any way, but we should recognise that there are more nurses and doctors, and the Government are committed to delivering on our promise to ensure that the NHS has the right staff with the right skills in the right place at the right time to deliver the hugely valuable, excellent care that patients deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the legal duties of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care for NHS workforce planning and supply.

Aquaculture

Stephen Kerr: I agree; there is a tremendous future ahead for aquaculture. My constituency has always been at the centre of aquaculture. The historic fishery at Howietoun was created by Sir James Maitland in 1873. Many of the methods used today in fish farming were developed there. It was part of the Institute of Aquaculture at the University of Stirling until recently, when it was taken over by Michelle Pearson, who is a model social entrepreneur. She has hugely impressive plans for the environmental and ecological enhancement of the site.

The Institute of Aquaculture at the University of Stirling has a growing global reputation as a centre of excellence, and the university has a long history in this field. Even as long ago as when I was a student there in the 1980s, Stirling had a formidable reputation in aquaculture and that continues to grow. It is truly global in its scope. The university is a pioneer of aquaculture as a solution to the challenges of feeding a growing global population. Its contribution should be celebrated.
It has done significant work on aquatic animal health, focusing on aquatic infectious diseases, studying how diseases spread and how to fight them with vaccines and other systems.

Let us not shy away from that issue. Significant environmental issues need to be addressed, including the destruction of natural ecosystems, the acidification of water environments and riparian ecosystems, the general pollution of water that could be used for human consumption, invasive non-native species and the spread of disease to wild populations. Those are real accusations that have been levelled at the sector, but they are surmountable.

Given the current value of this industry to the Scottish and UK economies, and the vast potential promise and future prosperity connected to the industry, we are rightly investing and must continue to invest in this sector. We must push on with the necessary research and development and give the champions at the University of Stirling the space and the resources they need to develop solutions to those challenges. That is why, as part of the Stirling city region deal, the UK Government are rightly and properly investing in the Institute of Aquaculture on the campus of the University of Stirling. The UK Government have already committed to invest £17 million through the deal, to support research by building brand new, state-of-the-art facilities in Stirling.

The University of Stirling campus is also home to the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre, led by the excellent chief executive Heather Jones. It works to ensure that commercial opportunities from aquaculture research are fully realised. Its first five years of activity are expected to create additional sales of £284 million. It brings industry and academia together, from research and development to retail. It houses the ecosystem of a whole industry, bringing the whole industry together in one place, acting as an engine, delivering real benefits in the sector, developing markets and partnerships, growing the number of jobs, growing sales, promoting best in class practices, driving up standards and securing the industry for the future.

I strongly urge the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to co-invest in the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre, to bring those benefits to the whole of the UK. The Institute of Aquaculture and the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre are invaluable assets to Scotland and the United Kingdom. They have the potential to become a much bigger global player—a world centre of excellence, putting the UK at the forefront of this important and valuable agenda. I welcome the creation by BEIS of a new seafood innovation fund, announced in last November’s Budget; it is a welcome recognition that new technologies and innovations can drive economic growth and productivity across the sector.

As I said, capture fisheries and aquaculture add disproportionate value to the Scottish economy, notably the latter: Scottish salmon is worth more than all wild fish landed into UK ports put together, and it represents 93% of UK aquaculture. Given those facts, I call on the Minister to commit to ensuring a proportionate distribution of innovation funding to aquaculture, giving it at least 50% of the total, and at least 50% going to Scotland.

Jim Shannon: I am aware, and I think the hon. Gentleman is aware, that farmed salmon infect some wild salmon—I have read proven cases in the papers in the last 10 days. Does he fear that the rise of farmed salmon could be detrimental to wild salmon?

Stephen Kerr: That is exactly why I request that the Government proportionately invest in Scottish aquaculture, particularly in research at the Institute of Aquaculture at the University of Stirling. There are solutions to the problem that the hon. Gentleman raises, but they require innovative, scientific research breakthroughs, which come about through the funding of world class research, such as that at the University of Stirling. We need to encourage business investment in research and development. The innovation centre that I referred to earlier is important because it brings together the entire sector.

The UK industrial strategy sets out the bold ambition to increase UK investment in research and development to 2.4% of GDP. That is a good objective. The Government have firmly put research and innovation at the heart of their industrial strategy, setting a grand vision for the UK to become the most innovative country in the world. We need to see better co-ordination of innovation in the sector; that is the focus of this debate.

As we have seen already, the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre in Stirling has created a £36 million programme of research and development, with £22.8 million from commercial partners and £1.3 million from university finance. Many companies are investing in this valuable sector, but we need it to work better together.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My hon. Friend is speaking with his usual combination of insight and eloquence. He draws attention to a critical matter that I know will be close to the Minister’s heart, and that is the marriage between research and development, skills and macroeconomic strategy. If we are really serious about productivity, we have to invest in the competence of the people who work in aquaculture, agriculture and horticulture, and the necessary innovations that he has described.

Stephen Kerr: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend; there is a connection between investment, the resulting gain that we make in national productivity and the benefit that will then accrue to the whole UK economy. Innovate UK, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, the Scottish Government and Marine Scotland all need to work together to create a shared strategy of supporting investment in research and development in this area.

At the very least, we need that shared strategy to be agreed in a spirit of co-operation. The industrial strategy calls for innovation across the board to boost our national productivity, as my right hon. Friend suggested, but it also calls for a new technological revolution in agriculture and food production. UK aquaculture is an innovative sector; there is a big opportunity to utilise big data, sensors, imaging or robotics. It is at the forefront of the productivity challenge, but it needs more investment and interest from the UK Government.

I ask the Minister whether DEFRA will consider investing UK funds to help to support the growth of a vital UK industry such as farmed Atlantic salmon?
This is far too important a sector to be devolved and forgotten about. We need an explicit acknowledgment that UK aquaculture is a high-tech, high growth, low carbon food source and direct future funding through the industrial strategy challenge fund to support further innovation in the sector. That would also give us an opportunity to address some of the other issues I have spoken about in terms of environmental sustainability, which can and will be solved through the power of science and innovation.

There is no doubt in my mind about the importance of this sector and I hope there is no doubt—I am sure there is not—in the mind of the Minister.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman speaks a lot about the importance of productivity and R&D and about investment. He will be aware that in the event of a no-deal Brexit Scotland’s salmon industry may need four times as many export health certificates as now, which has the potential to cost the industry £15 million. Can he tell us how he thinks that should be addressed?

Stephen Kerr: That is a very good intervention; the hon. Lady is absolutely right. Government and business need to be fully prepared for any eventual outcome in relation to Brexit.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): We are right on top of that. We understand what would need to be done in the event of a no-deal Brexit in terms of the export health certificates. We are well on top of that and understand exactly what other work would need to be done.

Stephen Kerr: One of the encouraging things about interacting with Ministers from DEFRA is the state of readiness in that Department, which is led by an excellent Secretary of State and ministerial team, in relation to the potentiality of any Brexit outcome.

Deidre Brock: I am delighted to hear that from the Minister and to receive those reassurances. I do not know how much influence the Minister has in terms of local authorities. I know about one department that examines export health certificates in a local authority in Scotland that has been cut considerably. I do not see how it is possible for the Minister to give us complete assurances about export health certificates.

Stephen Kerr: It is illuminating and apposite that the hon. Lady draws the attention of the Chamber to the cuts that the SNP Scottish Government have inflicted on Scottish local authorities. In fact, the UK Government gave a parcel of money that was intended to be passed to local authorities to help them be ready for any eventual outcome in relation to Brexit. The Scottish Government thought better than to pass that money on to Scotland’s local authorities and decided they had other spending priorities.

That is not surprising given the fact that this is a Scottish Government that borrows to the hilt on the nation’s credit card on the one hand, then has dramatic underspends from year to year on the other. They are frankly incompetent when it comes to managing Scotland’s economy and Scotland’s public finances. I am afraid that they are incompetent in just about every field we look at in Scotland; the sooner we can shine a bright light on the performance of the Scottish Government in this matter, and every other matter, the better, because then we can talk about real substance in terms of political issues that impact on the quality of the lives of constituents.

To conclude, I have specific asks for the Minister. Given the fact that Scottish farmed salmon alone is worth over £1 billion to the UK economy, we have got to give aquaculture its proper place. I look forward to the Minister’s reply on the issues I have raised. I would like to hear how the Government will ensure Scotland and the aquaculture sector benefit from the seafood innovation fund; that is key. The UK Government is working with the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre in Stirling, but what more can be done to support that valuable work and promote a UK-wide approach, harnessing our global reputation in this sector? What more can be done to ensure closer working across and between Governments to develop a shared vision and strategy for innovation in the aquaculture sector? Putting aquaculture at the heart of our food security policy and acknowledging what a tremendous innovative and high-tech sector it is, how much more would be possible with the right level of investment and partnering?

In short, the whole point of my speech is to ask the Minister to support the idea of creating a UK-wide sector deal for aquaculture. Can we have one?

4.18 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for securing this debate on such an important subject. I am excited to have so many Conservative colleagues from north of the border shining a bright light on the failures of the SNP Government there.

Aquaculture is a critical part of the UK’s food industry. As we have heard, the value of the UK’s aquaculture produce is over £1 billion and the industry employs over 3,000 people. Before I respond in full to the debate, I note that policy on the aquaculture sector is, and will remain, devolved to the four UK fisheries administrations. I use the word sector with a proviso: just as with fishing, I take the view that when we talk about the sector, we actually mean sectors. Aquaculture is rich and diverse, comprising a range of activities. In the UK as a whole, this ranges from farmed salmon—Scotland’s largest non-liquid export—through rainbow and brown trout to the cultivation of marine shellfish such as oysters and mussels, and more exotic species such as king prawns, with which I know there are exciting developments in my hon. Friend’s constituency, Stirling is clearly already at the cutting edge of technology in this area.

I am acutely aware of the key contribution that aquaculture specifically makes to the Scottish economy; it had a sales value of £765 million in 2016 and employs more than 2,000 people. Of course, it is not just those people directly employed in aquaculture who depend on it. The wider impacts across the supply chain are estimated to be around £620 million in gross value.
added and 12,000 jobs. The value of aquaculture produce also extends beyond Scotland. According to Seafood figures, its value in the rest of the UK is likely to be around £100 million in revenue and 1,700 jobs.

Aquaculture is a sector with a bright future. Global production, as we have heard, has been growing by nearly 7% per year and I think it is making an increasingly important contribution to global food security. Overall UK production has risen more rapidly. The biggest percentage growth is in Northern Ireland, as I am sure the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will be pleased to know, but the largest growth by volume is in Scotland. We recognise that the Scotland is currently leading the way in UK aquaculture, and I hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling says about sharing out the budget proportionally. He makes a good case. England has set out its the aquaculture growth opportunities in “Seafood 2040”. I encourage the Seafood 2040 Aquaculture Leadership Group to engage with Scottish counterparts to seek opportunities for learning and working together.

Sir John Hayes: On food security in particular, my right hon. Friend will know that the best guarantee of food security is to shorten the distance between production and consumption. A significant contributor to that is public sector procurement. Will he give a commitment in this Chamber, as a result of this excellent debate secured by our hon. Friend the Member for Stirling, to look again at how we can maximise consumption of British produce in aquaculture, agriculture and horticulture through changes to public sector procurement?

Mr Goodwill: Certainly, leaving the European Union gives us more flexibility on procurement, but I would like British suppliers and British public services—prisons, schools and so on—to buy British food not because they have to, even though it is more expensive, but because it is the best quality and the most cost-effective source. The way to get more British food on to British plates is to ensure that it is the best and that it is delivered at a cost-effective price.

Henry Dimbleby is leading the first major review of the UK food system in nearly 75 years. He will investigate the entire food chain, carrying out an integrated analysis of our food system, resulting in a new national food strategy to be published in 2020. Only a couple of weeks ago, Henry attended an aquaculture workshop for the public sector, academia and officials hosted by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I strongly encourage more engagement from the sector and devolved Administrations in this important undertaking.

It is only right to acknowledge the environmental and sustainability challenges that the aquaculture sector faces. They have been brought to the fore by two recent parliamentary inquiries in Scotland, which culminated in a debate in the Scottish Parliament that demonstrated broad cross-Chamber support for the sector, but emphasised that progress must be made on known issues such as sea lice.

At the end of March 2019, 111 aquaculture projects had been approved for funding under the European maritime and fisheries fund, with a value of approximately £14.5 million.

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): There are huge economic opportunities in aquaculture—indeed, Scottish salmon is one of our biggest food exports—but, as my right hon. Friend says, there are some environmental consequences. One of those is the plight of the wrasse, a species of fish found in Cornish waters. Is he aware that Scottish vessels go to Cornwall, kidnap live wrasse from Cornish waters and take them to the North sea to eat sea lice on their farms, which has a big impact on wrasse? Will he ask his officials to look at the impact on and the plight of the Cornish wrasse?

Mr Goodwill: I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend did, as my predecessor, in getting to grips with these issues. He is a hard act to follow. I was aware of the wrasse being kidnapped and taken to harvest the lice, and of the impact that has on the ecology in the south-west of England.

Deidre Brock: I am a little surprised to hear the Minister talking about the industry leadership group here, because there is one set up in Scotland, the Aquaculture Industry Leadership Group, which seeks to double the economic contribution of the sector and double the number of jobs to 18,000 by 2030, as opposed to 2040, which I think is the ambition of the group down here in England.

Mr Goodwill: I give the Scottish Government credit for its achievement where credit is due. I hope the groups will work across the four Administrations to ensure that we do not duplicate effort, but work together. At this point, I must pay tribute to the huge investment in the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre through the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal, which is a clear demonstration of the Government’s commitment to aquaculture.

Stephen Kerr: Does the exchange we have just witnessed not underpin the importance of having a UK-wide approach? Is not the answer a UK sector deal for aquaculture?

Mr Goodwill: We need to be careful that we do not intrude on the devolution agreements, but where we can work together, we should. The best way to work together would be to have Ruth Davidson in Holyrood; I think she would be much easier to work with than some people currently inhabiting that place.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend makes the point about working together, which is very important, and mentions the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal, where the UK Government are also investing in the International Environment Centre. The centre will work with the University of Stirling on these kinds of UK-wide impacts and will not only help Scotland and the whole of the United Kingdom, but lead the world.

Mr Goodwill: It is clear that the UK is at the cutting edge globally of progress in this area, and I am pleased to recognise that.

I reassure those in the industry that EMFF funding will continue to be available until 2021. In December, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced an additional £37.2 million for fisheries and aquaculture
over the next two years. He also made a commitment that the Government will put in place domestic long-term arrangements to support the industry from 2021, through the creation of four new schemes comparable to the EMFF to deliver funding for each part of the UK. In addition to the EMFF funding, the UK Government’s seafood innovation fund is a three-year, £10 million research and development fund, which I can confirm applies to the whole of the UK. The fund will focus on investing in innovative research and development, helping to improve both the environmental sustainability and the productivity of the fishing and aquaculture industries, and will be launched imminently.

The Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre at Stirling University, which connects industry with academia, facilitates knowledge exchanges and funds projects, plays a key role in addressing the sustainability challenges through innovative solutions. Further investment of £17 million through the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal to develop the new National Aquaculture Technology and Innovation Hub is welcomed.

Important points have been raised in today’s debate, which I hope I have covered. I am optimistic about the future of aquaculture. I want to see a sustainable, profitable fishing and aquaculture industry, to have the greatest possible tariff-free and barrier-free trade with our European neighbours, and to negotiate our own trade arrangements around the world. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State met representatives of the Scottish aquaculture and salmon industry just last week to discuss this issue. We look forward to continuing our engagement with the sector to achieve our common goal: that exports of top quality UK aquaculture products should be able to continue in all scenarios.

Delivering a negotiated deal with the EU remains the Government’s top priority, but like any responsible Government we are planning for all scenarios, which must include leaving without a deal. We acknowledge industry concerns about the impacts of a no-deal EU exit, particularly on the continued ability to rapidly transport a premium product to the EU. We and the devolved Administrations have published guidance on the revised export requirements and will ramp up engagement with businesses to ensure that they are clear on those requirements.

Hon. Members have raised many important topics today, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to close this debate. I have heard voiced today the passion for further developing this dynamic and innovative industry. We have heard about the valuable contribution that aquaculture is making to the UK economy, boosted by Government investment in research and innovation in Stirlingshire. We have heard about the innovative recirculation aquaculture system farm that has recently opened in the region. I will be interested to see what role that technology plays in the expansion of the UK aquaculture industry, and look forward to having an opportunity in future to visit the facility to see the research that is going on and how we can not only reduce food miles in domestic production, but have low-carbon protein delivered to our plates. We have acknowledged the sustainability and export challenges that the industry faces and how the Government are working to support it through those challenges. Overall, it is an exciting time for UK aquaculture and I look forward to seeing the industry continuing to grow and thrive.

Question put and agreed to.
Small and Village School Funding

4.30 pm

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): Just before we start the next debate, there are a lot of colleagues here, and it would be very helpful if, through a note, those who have not already written expressing a wish to speak could let me or the Clerk know, so that I can make sure that no colleagues are disappointed.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered funding for small schools and village schools.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. This debate is about two things that overlap but are not the same: small schools and village schools. My focus will be firmly on primary schools. About a fifth of schools are in villages, and on average they have just over 100 pupils, compared with an average of about 400 for schools in large cities. These village schools are good schools; only about 8% are not “good” or “outstanding”, compared with 11% nationally and about 15% in towns and small cities. They are also much-loved institutions, at the heart of their community, and they are where the community gathers for special occasions. Just the other day I was at the Church Langton Primary School fête watching the children do some intense Japanese drumming. I could equally have been at the Foxton family fun day or any number of other wonderful occasions in my constituency.

Village schools are also where people meet each other and the community organises. For example, the campaign for a road crossing in Lubenham in my constituency is being spearheaded by the children of Lubenham Primary School, and I am being bombarded by their very neatly handwritten letters. It is no wonder that people feel that a village loses its heart if it loses its school.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Like his constituency, Cornwall has many village schools. They make sure that our villages survive, because by having the school there, a younger generation of people come into the village, renewing its life. Without those schools, there is a real risk that those villages could become dormitory towns for second homes or for people who have retired.

Neil O’Brien: My hon. Friend is completely correct. However, rural schools, partly because they are small schools, have been much more likely to close in recent years. I thank the Department for Education for the historical data it provided to me on this, and Pippa Allen-Kinross at Schools Week for helping me to analyse it. Since 2010, 61% of schools that have closed and not re-opened in another form have been rural schools,

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing the debate. What he outlines in his constituency and other parts of the United Kingdom mainland is replicated in Northern Ireland. I know that the Minister does not have responsibility for this, but for the record, is the hon. Gentleman aware that since September 2010, 98 of the 230 schools that closed in Northern Ireland—42%—were rural, according to Schools Week analysis? Does he recognise the difficulties that creates for rural dwellers and socially isolated children?

Neil O’Brien: The hon. Gentleman is completely correct. This challenge affects all of the United Kingdom. For rural schools that closed, the average walk to the next nearest school is 52 minutes, which in practice means driving or getting a bus. There is a cost to the taxpayer for this transport, and a cost to parents and children for driving a long way, so there are all kinds of reasons why we should want to preserve our village schools.

I will turn to small schools more generally, including those in urban areas. I am grateful to the House of Commons Library for digitising older data for me that revealed a dramatic transformation in the scale of our schools over recent decades, and a decline in the number of small schools. The number of pupils at state primary schools in England is roughly the same as in 1980, but the schools that they attend are completely different. In 1980 there were 11,464 small primary schools with fewer than 200 pupils, but in 2018 there were just 5,406. The number of such schools has halved over the decades.

In contrast, in 1980 there were 949 large primary schools with more than 400 pupils, but in 2018 there were more than 4,000, so the number of large schools has quadrupled. The number of really big primaries with more than 600 pupils increased from 49 to 780, while there are now more than 100 what I call “super jumbo” primary schools with more than 800 pupils, which often have playtimes in shifts and hundreds of staff. This is a huge change in the nature of our primary schools, and it is visible in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland too. In fact, since 2002 Wales has seen the most dramatic decline in the number of small schools, followed by the north-west and Yorkshire.

This huge change in our primary schools has come about without any real discussion or political choice. It seems to me a move away from the natural small scale for small children, and there is no obvious policy rationale for it. Small schools are not bad schools. Schools with 200 pupils or fewer are just as likely to be “good” or “outstanding” as other schools. In fact, schools with fewer than 100 pupils, which account for about one in eight schools, are more likely than average to be “good” or “outstanding”, so this is not about academic standards.

I think two different things are driving it. The first is planning, which is outside the DFE’s remit. We do not build new small schools, and we do not make developers pay enough for the infrastructure needed for new housing. Instead, our bitty, piecemeal development allows developers to get out of paying for new schools, and we cram more pupils into existing schools, building classrooms on playing fields. Secondly, wider catchment areas mean more car journeys to those schools, and because builders often put schools in residential areas, there are a lot of cars driving into streets that were never intended for them, leading to a lot of congestion. People tell me that makes their village no longer feel so much like a village.

However, the DFE could do some things about the declining number of small schools. We should increase the lump sum element of the national funding formula. Do not get me wrong; the national funding formula is extremely good and has meant that the funding rate per
pupil in my constituency has gone up twice as fast as the national average. It helps underfunded areas such as mine to catch up with the national average, although there is still a long way to go. It would be very helpful to increase the lump sum—the part of the national funding formula intended to help small schools.

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): Is another problem with the national funding formula that the system of gains, caps and floors—in place for transitional reasons, which we all understand—compounds historical unfairness? While 3% of a very small budget is still quite limited, 1% of a very large budget is still quite a lot for those schools to enjoy.

Neil O’Brien: I think my hon. Friend is correct, and I think we both want to see a faster transition to a fairer overall settlement. However, I want to focus on the point about the lump sum.

Leicestershire County Council was historically a strong supporter of small schools and had a lump sum of £150,000 per primary school. In the national funding formula, that is only £110,000. When consulting on the national funding formula, the DFE acknowledged that that number was lower than the average for most local authorities. As local authorities converge on the national funding formula, as they should, the pressure on small schools may intensify. The proportion of the core schools budget going through the lump sum declined in the last year, and the gap between income and expenditure is much smaller for small schools, indicating a financial pressure. In fact, larger schools have about twice as much headroom per pupil. Small schools are definitely feeling the pinch.

I hope and expect that, under the next Prime Minister, we will see a big increase in school funding. A good way of delivering that would be to increase the lump sum within the national funding formula. About a fifth of primary schools get more than 20% of their income from the lump sum, and for them an increase could make the difference between staying afloat and closing.

There has been some discussion about increasing sparsity funding as an alternative, but I am a bit sceptical. Fewer than 6% of primaries get sparsity funding, and only 1% get the full amount; a number of small schools in my constituency that are under pressure would not be eligible. That is one reason why only a third of local authorities have included a sparsity element in their local formulas. Increasing the lump sum, if I could beg the Minister to do that, would be simpler and better. For a little more than £800 million, we could take the lump sum back up to £150,000 and get my village schools back to where they were.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. I support his last point. One of my local authorities, North Lincolnshire Council, made a policy decision not to close any small schools, so the schools in my constituency with 45 or 50 children will remain open. However, the key issue that my local authority has asked me to raise with the Minister is the core funding costs. Adman costs, in particular, for a small school of 46 or 50 children are not dissimilar to those for a school of 100 to 150 children, because the same admin function is still needed. I therefore think that the point my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) is making is really important, and I want to offer him my full support and say that it is exactly the same point that my local authority is concerned about.

Neil O’Brien: I thank my hon. Friend. He is right and has brilliantly teed up something that I intended to say: the future for small schools and rural schools can be very bright. There are two reasons for that. One is that more and more people want to live in villages, and technology allows people to do that and work from home, rather than having to live in a major city. The other reason is the growth of multi-academy trusts—no an ugly phrase for families of schools. The growth of those families of schools is enabling small schools in effect to combine the advantages of being a small school—the human scale and the connection to the community—with the advantages of being part of something bigger, which are being able to share resources, people and back-office functions and to learn from one another. Therefore, if we get behind them, village schools can have a really bright future.

I was in one such school just the other day in South Kilworth in my constituency. In many ways, it was a very traditional scene. I was watching the new school hall being built, thanks to school condition improvement funding, and the children were practising their maypole dancing. The fields were ripening around us and the sun was shining. It was a beautiful scene. We could have been time travelling, but that school is a modern school. It is part of a family of schools, which are helping one another to improve. It is a really good school and exactly the sort of thing that we want to keep in our communities. There are these very exciting opportunities opening up for small schools, but we need the Minister’s help to relieve the financial pressure on them if we are to fully achieve the potential of small and village schools.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): Order. The winding-up speeches will start at 5.15 pm, so there is about five or six minutes per person.

4.41 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) on securing this important debate. My constituency has two secondary schools with fewer than 200 pupils, 10 primary schools with fewer than 50 and, by my reckoning, three primary schools with fewer than 30 pupils. They are all really good schools. They are small because the area that they serve is sparsely populated and we live huge distances away from one another. However, small schools are enormously vulnerable.

If a school with a decent-sized population to serve has a bad Ofsted report or a difficult period of leadership, or if there is a dip in the birth rate, that does not kill it, but if a small village school that is absolutely vital experiences any one of those things, that could be the end of it, and the damage to the community is immense. Just two summers ago, we lost Heversham Primary School, which had once had 60 kids. It had a period of difficulty, went down to 11 or 12 kids and was closed. The ongoing damage to that village and its community is huge. Small schools are vulnerable, yet utterly vital.
In my time in Parliament, and in my time as a parent, a local school governor and what have you, and as somebody who worked in education, in teacher education, for many years, I have never known schools’ budgets to be as tight as they are today, particularly for small schools, because they do not have the wherewithal to get through difficult periods. I think that what happens is that because headteachers keep quiet, the Government take advantage. Headteachers keep quiet for two reasons. First, teachers do not like to get overly political by talking about the level or lack of funding that their school has to cope with.

Also, headteachers do not want to risk any competitive advantage that they have. If I, as a headteacher, say that I have had to sack three teaching assistants this year, pupils or parents looking at my school will think, “Well, I’ll go somewhere else instead.” I think that all of us, but particularly the Government, take advantage of headteachers’ perfectly understandable reticence about talking about the state of play at the schools they serve so admirably.

I therefore want to pick out what was said by the 16 schools in the Kendal area that wrote a collective letter to all of us. They said that Westmorland and Lonsdale had seen school funding cuts of £2.4 million, which was equal to a cut of £190 per pupil per year, and that that had led them collectively to reduce the numbers of teaching and non-teaching staff and support for the most vulnerable pupils; to make reductions in small group work for children who need additional support, reductions in teaching resources and equipment, reductions in subject choices in secondary schools and reductions in the range of activities at primary schools; and to cut back on repairs to school buildings and so on.

One head of a small school told me that his school income had gone down by £204,000 since 2014. Staffing costs had risen by £32,000 in the same period. He had got rid of teaching assistants and reduced administrative support time and had had to increase charges for school meals, the breakfast club, music tuition and so on. There were reductions in catering hours and in midday maintenance and janitor work for the school, because it cannot afford anybody to do that full time.

Underpinning all the problems is the ongoing issue of special educational needs funding, which hits schools of all sizes, but particularly the smaller schools, because proportionally it is a bigger blow. The Government make schools provide and pay for the first 11 hours of special educational needs support. That means that they hit and they hurt and they punish those schools that do the right thing and they reward those schools that do not take children with special educational needs. That is wrong and it needs to be changed.

The quality of experience of a young person at a small school is so obviously so wonderful and so treasured and something that parents will travel out of area to take advantage of. The quality of teaching and leadership and the diversity of skills that are needed to teach in and run small schools are much greater, but the failure to fund schools properly across the board hits smaller schools the worst, even though smaller schools, especially in Westmorland and Lonsdale, are the best.
I understand that many rural small schools are now taking on a greater quantity of children with special educational needs and complex behavioural issues who have often been excluded from other schools. They do that to bolster numbers, because each child brings with them a pocket of funding. Although that funding allows schools to keep their doors open, it does not cover the subsequent additional support that these schools need from teaching assistants.

I recognise that funding for special educational needs has risen from £5 billion in 2013 to £6.3 billion this year. However, schools still face challenges in addressing the rising levels of special educational need, not least in West Sussex, where 13.5% of all pupils require SEN support, which is well above the national average of 11.6%.

Having looked at the school budgets, to me the challenge is clear. Most schools spend more than 80% of their budget on teachers and staff. That is a real challenge, because little is left for essentials, pencils, books and digital equipment. My local schools are using other funding streams to survive. Loxwood Primary School has a weekly cake raffle to raise money for iPads and a wish-list website where local businesses, friends of the school and parents donate items. I checked that website the other day and I saw everything from a paper guillotine to paint brushes and books. The school has just crowdfunded 15 laptops thanks to the generosity of a local charity, the parent teacher association and the parish council. That work is inspiring, but it should not be necessary. Schools such as Loxwood are the beating heart of their communities. The teachers should spend their time educating the next generation, not fundraising.

My constituency is packed with fantastic schools and dedicated teachers and parents who go above and beyond for their schools and students. They maintain exceptional standards despite facing pressure. In advance of the upcoming spending review, I encourage the Department for Education to continue to engage closely with the schools and local authorities, to develop a deeper understanding of the pressure these schools face, and to consider the level of income required to maintain such excellent standards.

These schools are the beating heart of communities up and down the country. They offer the best education to young children and they are the centre of all kinds of community activities. They ensure that our precious village life is maintained.

4.51 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) on securing this important debate on small and rural schools. I thank the Minister for everything he has done and will continue to do. He has listened to many MPs on this side of the Chamber lobbying for more to be done for our schools, but we also recognise that almost 2 million more pupils are in “good” or “outstanding” schools under this Government and during his many years as Schools Minister. I want to put on record my appreciation of him.

I have frequently spoken of my schools’ need for more funding. I have a 200-square-mile constituency—which you have visited, Sir David—75% of which is an area of outstanding natural beauty, so we have many small village schools. I am concerned not only about funding for all of those schools, but particularly about Broad Oak Primary School, which is under threat of closure. That is a new experience for me in my four years as MP for Bexhill and Battle. The villagers, pupils, parents, governors and staff are hugely concerned about what will happen. It is a classic case of there not being enough pupils. As was mentioned, the reduction in the block grant makes it harder for smaller schools to continue. Broad Oak Primary School has a capacity of 140, but approximately 80 pupils. That is a problem for my area: we have many schools but not enough pupils.

However, those small schools play a vital role in the community. Broad Oak is a good example. Because it is a small and nurturing school, more pupils with special educational needs can find the right environment for their needs there, but that adds to the cost. While schools receive £6,000 per student with SEN, they often spend an extra £6,000 from their own budget, to provide the proper required education. That compounds the challenge for Broad Oak.

I would appreciate some guidance from the Minister. What can I do to mount a case? I understand that there are not enough pupils and a school is no longer viable, difficult decisions must be made to support the other schools. At the same time, however, small is good and small needs nurturing.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): It is vitally important to note the contribution that small schools make to rural communities. They can be the heart of a village, holding it together. If the school closes, the village effectively dies. People do not want to move there, because there is no school. They are vital to keeping communities alive. We might save money in the short term, but in the long term it will cost more.

Huw Merriman: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. A village school is the heart of that community. As villages have lost other services, the school is often the only bedrock in a village; without it, we lose the heart and soul of the community. That is why I am concerned about the village of Broad Oak.

Part of the rationale in the consultation by East Sussex County Council is that a number of pupils travel from outside to attend the school. I am a Conservative; I believe in choice. We have championed the ability of pupils and parents to choose the school that is best for them, so that should not be used as an argument for closing the school.

If we require pupils to travel further—pupils from some villages will have to travel to other schools—we have to increase the school’s budget for transport. One cost often knocks out another. Further, if pupils rely on the bus service, they miss out on the rich, after-school learning and sporting activities, and the social part of school. Private schools are able to deliver that, but in rural areas we are hampered by the bus service: students have to leave at a certain time otherwise they will not get home. That is a big concern.

I look to the Minister for assistance, to help me make the case that small schools are good schools, so that the villagers in Broad Oak will continue to be able to educate their children in their local school, with pride in their community.
4.56 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak, Sir David, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) on securing the debate.

I have 56 schools in my constituency, and 40 of them certainly have fewer than 100 pupils—unfortunately, some as low as 30, or perhaps just over. That is a real challenge. The problem, as has been said by my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) and others, is that taking that school away means that the community suddenly ceases to function, and that is exactly what has happened in my constituency.

About 18 months ago, the St Martin-in-Meneage Primary School was closed. That was not as a result of what we might call natural wastage—pupils were not leaving the school in year 6, but were taken out by parents because of problems in the school. Everyone concerned was slow to react and it therefore became unsustainable. We lost a perfectly good school and an excellent facility for the local community. As soon as that happened, families moved out and people considering moving in changed their minds.

Other schools in the area are now full, and we have an empty school building that still has to be maintained for that purpose. However, it is much more difficult to reopen a school than to save it. I did all I could, as did the commissioners, but unfortunately we could not win the argument.

I agree with many things that have been said, and I do not want to repeat all of them, but we will make some quick points. The first is on capital funding for small schools. I go to a school every Friday whenever possible. The main issue that I see, and which I hear about from staff and children, is the quality of the estate, and that needs concentrated work.

The Minister’s commitment to the subject has already been mentioned, and he has been fantastic. He has been to my constituency considerably more times than any other Minister—to be fair, I except my immediate constituency neighbours, as they live right next door. Early on he visited St Erth Community Primary School, which is in need of a hall, as he might remember. The school has grown, and done everything it can to try to make its existing building work, but it does not have a place in which the school can meet. That reduces the opportunity for assemblies and all the other things we had in our school halls when we were small. Other schools in my constituency are in the same situation, and we cannot find a solution that will allow them to build a school hall. I am keen to hear from the Minister about any capital that might be available for making schools fit for purpose with a clean, dry and warm environment, good toilets and facilities such as a school hall.

It has already been mentioned that although a small school, with 30 pupils or slightly more, may not be able to afford the teaching assistants that it requires, it will tend to attract more children with special educational needs because of its size, the real commitment of its teachers, and their wonderful work. That puts enormous pressure on the schools; I do not like to say it, but they are victims of their own success. They do a great job—I visit them, and they are great fun to be at—but the funding to properly support each child to get the very best start in life is just not there. As Conservatives, we want our children to have all the opportunities available. I know that the Minister understands that, but we need to win the argument with the Treasury and the Chancellor, whoever that may be in a week or two.

Also mentioned earlier were the armed forces covenant and the impact on schools of having armed forces children. If a child’s parent is in the armed forces, a veteran, in the regular forces or a reservist, the school benefits from a premium. However, it does not benefit if—as is often the case in Helston in my constituency—the child’s parent is in the merchant navy, because they are not described as being in the armed forces community. As I argued yesterday in our debate on defence spending, the experience of modern-day merchant navy personnel means mums and dads can miss the whole summer holidays because they are away at sea, and they are exposed to threats from pirates and rogue nations. The premium is there to help schools to support children in distressing situations. I would argue that one way of supporting schools and funding them for the work that they do so well would be extending the armed forces covenant to include the merchant navy. I would be very interested to see what the Minister can do to make that case to the Ministry of Defence, and possibly the Treasury.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) made a very important point about funding. We expect new money for education, certainly by next April, and we will be grievously disappointed if it is not there. It is really important for money to go where it is most needed. My hon. Friend made the important point that if the growth in funding follows the national funding formula, some schools will benefit far more than others. A very small school that has been underfunded, as happens in Cornwall, can expect far less growth. I would like the Minister to consider that point, as I am sure he has already, because there is a case to be made that funding needs to be targeted at the schools that most need it.

In Cornwall, we have quite a perverse situation. Cornwall Council defends its actions, probably rightly, but to ensure that children with special educational needs are supported, it has had to take funding away from our schools—not only the high needs block funding, but some of the baseline funding. That has left every single school—the 56 schools in my constituency and all the others around the county—with less funding per pupil for a sustained period. That means that when the national funding formula comes into place, our schools will continually and consistently be underfunded until we get the fair and happy funding that we all desperately look forward to.

I need not say any more; I think I have made my point. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to speak.

5.3 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) on securing this critical debate, and I join all hon. Members in their praise for small schools, village schools and rural schools. My constituency has a great many: about 70% of Witney’s schools are village schools or rural schools, and 90% of them are rated “good” or
"outstanding". That is a tribute to the outstanding work to all the teachers who have worked so hard to make the quality of education so high. I declare an interest: my wife is a governor at one of those schools—Bladon Church of England Primary School, the village primary school where I live.

As hon. Members have said, we cannot overestimate the importance of a village school. It is the centre of the community—the beating heart, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) said. It might have been where our parents, our grandparents or we ourselves went to school, and it may be where our children go. It is a crucial way to build links with the local community. What makes such schools so special? As has been said many times, their nurturing and caring nature and the amount of attention that individual schools can give results from their relatively small size. However, that is also one of their great challenges.

I have been to the majority of schools in my constituency and spoken to teachers, parents and governors. I have visited assemblies, seen the projects that pupils take part in and attended the school fetes that often happen during the summer. I have had conversations and really tried to understand the issues in detail. As I am sure the Minister and many hon. Friends will understand, school funding is a complicated issue that repays detailed study—I have certainly tried to study it. Having had all those conversations with teachers, because I very much value that close relationship, I think I can make some suggestions.

West Oxfordshire is an f40 area—a rural area that historically has been underfunded. I do not think that it is terribly helpful to make any cheap political points about cuts; the Minister will tell us that there have not been cuts, because core per-pupil school funding has been protected for the duration of the spending review. However, I make it absolutely clear that my primary schools—my small schools, rural schools and village schools—face significant cost pressures.

There are a number of reasons for those pressures, which I hope the Minister can help with. Some of them may be a result of funding very well-deserved teacher pay rises. Pension costs were another major concern, although I understand that they are now covered. Several hon. Members have mentioned special educational needs provision, which is critical and of increasing concern for our small schools. There has also been a reduction in the spending powers of local authorities; many things that were once covered are no longer free, and schools are expected to pick up the cost. It may not be direct, but the net effect is the same: our excellent schools are trying to do much more, to less effect. In some cases, that may be due to pupil numbers, which are critical because all these schools are functioning on the tightest of budgets. From speaking to the teachers, I am clear that they are making every penny count, certainly in my constituency in west Oxfordshire, but the funding is on a per-pupil basis. That can be a problem, because if the catchment area is relatively small—if it is a village, a rural area or perhaps even a small town—a fluctuation in pupil numbers can cause real concern.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), who mentioned military forces. A quarter of the entire Royal Air Force is in west Oxfordshire, based in Carterton and the whole area around RAF Brize Norton. It is certainly a concern, not just for village schools but for Carterton primary schools, that those personnel are posted, so the schools do not necessarily know from one year to another how many pupils they are likely to have at a particular stage. That causes significant budgeting challenges. Even for the best-run school in the world, not knowing how many pupils it will have makes things harder. In some areas in my villages, there may be a low birth rate, an ageing population, or families moving in and out because they are in the armed forces or for other reasons. That has had a major effect in several villages in my area.

The effect of multi-academy trusts has been very helpful in many cases. The Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust is shared by my constituency and the Prime Minister’s, as she was kind enough to recognise at Prime Minister’s questions last week. The trust has 12 schools in my constituency—small schools such as Bampton Primary, Leafield Primary and Wootton-by-Woodstock Primary. They are doing a fantastic job of providing outstanding education, but all such organisations, whether they are small schools on their own, local authority-run or part of a multi-academy trust, face uncertainty about pupil numbers.

If we are looking for ways to support small schools, one idea that has not yet been suggested is a dedicated funding stream for small schools—let us call it a small schools grant or a small schools loan—whereby schools can bid for funding if they have low pupil numbers or other temporary budget pressures. If a school usually has stable numbers but it has a year in which there is a dip, that will cause it great problems, but if it could apply for assistance from the Government or the local authority by way of a dedicated funding stream, that would be of great assistance, because it would give that school the certainty it needs for that year, which may help it to deal with factors such as a low local birth rate. Of course, it will also deal with money in the long run, because the local authority will not have to worry about things such as schools closing and having to relocate children or support them in that time. The cost to the local community of school closures is, as other hon. Members have said, absolutely devastating and must be avoided at all costs.

I am very grateful to the Minister for coming to Westminster Hall to respond to this debate. We are all passionate about our local schools and my suggestion about a dedicated fund is just one that might assist them. I also echo the call made by my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives when he said that we must ensure that any funding is in place. Of course I make the plea for more school spending in the spending review, although I appreciate and understand that that is a plea that I should direct at the Treasury and not at the Minister, but we must ensure that it goes to the right place. Our small schools—rural and village schools—provide outstanding education and we must provide the funding they need; I look forward to seeing that funding in due course.

5.11 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): As ever, Sir David, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.
I congratulate the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) on securing this important debate; it is very important that we talk about the funding of small and rural schools. I also congratulate him on the really powerful speech he made in the main Chamber last year about one of his favourite teachers, who had passed away. For many of us, speeches in the main Chamber do not often stand out, but that was a really memorable one. For him personally, education and standing up for his constituents is very important, and it was great to be in the main Chamber for that speech.

The Minister for School Standards and I have had this debate before. In fact, I said to him today that we should go for a drink some time, because at the moment I see more of him than I do of my wife. That is because we spend so much time either in the main Chamber or here in Westminster Hall discussing school funding cuts and budget pressures. If we are not discussing West Sussex, Cornwall, Stoke-on-Trent, Chichester, or Westmorland and Lonsdale, then it is Liverpool, Merseyside or Manchester—week after week after week.

I want to put this debate in context for Members from rural constituencies who are passionate about their schools, so I say to the hon. Member for Harborough that Leicestershire has had to take £51.9 million out of its budget since 2015. That is probably the root cause of most of the reasons why primary schools in rural or urban areas are facing problems at the moment. Many of the concerns about this issue have been really well articulated today, so well done to all Members who are standing up for schools in their constituencies. However, all the challenges for schools are amplified for small schools, as we have heard this afternoon.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) on his speech, in which he said that small schools struggle because they do not have the economies of scale that some multi-academy trusts or local education authority schools can achieve in urban areas. I think he said that small schools lacked the “wherewithal”.

The hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), whose constituency is in West Sussex, shares a local authority with the Minister. I have to say with some passion that that authority has had to take £51.9 million out of its budget since 2015. The Minister will come back and say what the Government have done, including £37 million has been lost. It is always an honour to play football with him, and recently, we played at Stamford Bridge—I think it was in a game to “Show Racism the Red Card”. It was the only football game that I have ever played in where my boots were cleaner coming off the pitch than they were when I went on. He is an excellent footballer and I congratulate him on standing up for his schools.

The hon. Member for St Ives spoke about Cornwall, where £51 million has been taken out of the schools budget since 2015. He made a hugely valid point about special educational needs practice, which is often overlooked in these debates, even though it is an issue in urban areas, too. Where there is a school with really good SEN practice, parents want to get into that school, but the school has to put the money up front and is disadvantaged because of it.

Sorry—it was the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts), in his excellent speech, who talked about rural schools being the “beating heart” of the community. He is right, but I have to say to him that Oxfordshire schools have lost £37 million. He did not want to hear about the cuts, but I am afraid that he has to hear about them from me, because no amount of national funding formula, no amount of sparsity funding and no amount of special funding for rural schools—even though such funding may be a good idea that the Department might wish to look at; I will let the Minister respond to that suggestion—will get a way from the fact of the cuts that have happened across the whole of Oxfordshire, in addition to what he said about the pension rises and pay rises, which we still do not have certainty about, and the SEN provision.

The Minister knows that I sound like a broken record on schools funding, but it appears that no matter how many times it is raised or whoever raises it—including his colleagues on the Government Benches—this Government are not listening to the grave concerns of hon. Members, leaders and teachers about the impact of school funding cuts.

It is really interesting. I do not want to proselytise on a party political point, but the leadership candidates of the Conservative party—sorry, what is the Health Secretary’s seat?

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): West Suffolk.
Mike Kane: I thank the Minister. The right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) pledged £15 billion of new schools money in that leadership debate. All the candidates know, from courting Conservative Members over the last few weeks, what the No. 1 concern is for Conservative Members, and they have responded to those concerns in the leadership debates.

Across the country, our schools are experiencing £2.7 billion of cuts. There are concerns from teachers, including thousands of headteachers, many of whom protested right here in Parliament, and there are cuts to special educational needs and disability provision, which is an even more acute challenge for small schools, as they cannot amass economies of scale when they are buying additional support and resources.

Statistics from the Department itself show that the number of children and young people in England with SEN, or with education, health and care plans, rose by 34,200, an increase of 11% from 2018. However, research by the National Education Union has found that special needs school provision in England is down by £1.2 billion because of the shortfall in funding increases from the Government since 2015. No doubt the Minister will come back in his speech with what has happened since 2017.

The Government’s own data shows that as of January 2018, 4,050 children and young people with EHC plans or statements were awaiting provision; in other words, they were still waiting for a place in education. Over 500,000 children are now in a super-sized class, and there is an unquestionable recruitment and retention crisis in our schools, with the Government having missed their own targets five years in a row. For the second year running, more teachers are leaving the profession than joining it. That has a huge impact on rural areas, especially if we take into account the price that teachers have to pay to afford a house in those areas, not having the same opportunities to find efficiencies as schools elsewhere.

Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) on having secured this debate, and on his excellent opening speech. The Government recognise the importance of rural schools and the need to maintain access to good local schools in rural areas, which, as hon. Members have said, are so often at the heart of their communities.

Mike Kane: I am terribly sorry, Sir David; I was just hitting my stride.

Career progression is more difficult in rural areas and for rural teachers, as cities often offer an agglomeration of impacts so that teachers can develop professionally.

Under Labour’s national education service, we will invest properly in our schools. Investment will be delivered under Labour’s fully funded and universal vision for a national education service that will cover all our schools, including those in rural areas. For example, as my hon. Friend mentioned, funding for schools in his local area of Leicestershire has increased by 5.5% per pupil compared to 2017-18. That is equivalent to an extra £31 million when rising pupil numbers are taken into account. As he stated, we do direct funding to provide additional support for small and remote schools, especially those in geographically challenging areas that do not have the same opportunities to find efficiencies as schools elsewhere.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to reply to this debate under your beady eye, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) on having secured this debate, and on his excellent opening speech. The Government recognise the importance of rural schools and the need to maintain access to good local schools in rural areas, which, as hon. Members have said, are so often at the heart of their communities.

I also echo my hon. Friend’s recognition of the strong educational standards in many rural schools. Although we know those schools face special challenges, we also know that they rise to those challenges and perform well. In terms of attainment, both primary and secondary, rural schools have on average outperformed urban schools over the past three years, and 89% of rural primary schools have been rated either “good” or “outstanding”.

We want to ensure that school funding levels support an education system that offers opportunity to every child in this country. To continue to support all schools, including those in rural areas, the Government have prioritised education funding while having to take difficult decisions in other areas of public spending, as we seek to reduce the unsustainable annual budget deficit from 10% of GDP in 2010—some £150 billion a year—to under 2% now. As a result, core funding for schools and high needs has risen to £43.5 billion this year, and high needs funding has risen to £6.3 billion. However, we recognise the financial pressures that schools face, as described so well by my hon. Friends the Members for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) and for Witney (Robert Courts).

My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) reminded me of our visit to St Ethr Community Primary School, which I enjoyed. I remember being lobbied by its school council, which was almost as compelling as my hon. Friend in making the case for capital for the school hall. Although I cannot pre-empt decisions that will be made as part of the forthcoming spending review process, we are of course looking to secure the best deal possible for our schools, both revenue funding and capital funding. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough recognises the decisive and historic move towards fair funding that this Government have made by introducing the national funding formula. The NFF is now directing money where it is most needed, based on schools’ and pupils’ needs and characteristics rather than accidents of geography or history.

Schools are already benefiting from the gains delivered by the national funding formula. It has allocated an increase for every pupil in every school, with significant per-pupil increases for the more underfunded schools, including those in rural areas. For example, as my hon. Friend mentioned, funding for schools in his local area of Leicestershire has increased by 5.5% per pupil compared to 2017-18. That is equivalent to an extra £31 million when rising pupil numbers are taken into account. As he stated, we do direct funding to provide additional support for small and remote schools, especially those in geographically challenging areas that do not have the same opportunities to find efficiencies as schools elsewhere.

The national funding formula provides a lump sum for every school as a contribution to the costs that do not vary with pupil numbers. That gives small schools certainty that they will attract a fixed amount each year, in addition to pupil-led funding. Although there is general agreement that schools face fixed costs, the evidence available suggests that there is no agreement on the scale of those costs, or that they are the same for all schools. In the previous system, local authorities awarded their schools very different lump sums, ranging from £48,480 to £175,000, and there was no obvious reason why local authorities chose those different amounts. It is important to maximise the funding available for the
factors that are directly related to pupils’ characteristics, so following our extensive consultations with schools, we set the lump sum at £110,000 for each school within the national funding formula. However, the beauty of a national funding formula is that we can tweak it from year to year.

The formula also includes a sparsity factor, which allocates an additional £25 million specifically to small and remote schools. When the lump sum is coupled with that sparsity factor, it provides significant support for the small and remote schools that play such an essential role in rural communities. A small rural primary school eligible for sparsity funding can attract up to a total of £135,000 through the lump sum and the sparsity factor. Of course, we continue to look for ways in which the national funding formula can be improved; in particular, we are considering how to improve the methodology for calculating sparsity eligibility in future, and we will consider the suggestion my hon. Friend the Member for Witney made of a dedicated rural school funding stream.

Local authorities have a duty to provide sufficient school places for all pupils in their area, including reviewing provision where populations have grown or declined. Consequently, local authorities have the power to close maintained schools; that is a local decision, and neither Ministers nor the Department play a role in the process. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) will be pleased to know that given their importance, we have a presumption against the closure of rural schools. Although that cannot mean that no rural school will ever close, the case for closure must be strong and in the best interests of educational provision for pupils in the area. When a local authority proposes the closure of a rural school, it must follow a well-established statutory process that takes full account of that presumption against closure. That includes a representation period, during which all those affected by the proposals can submit their views and suggestions.

To enable my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough to respond to the debate, I will conclude. Our rural communities are part of the historic fabric of this country, and the schools that serve them are fulfilling a vital and valued service both locally and nationally. I believe that by working closely together, we can make sure we deliver on our ambition to give every child a world-class education, wherever they live.

5.28 pm  

Neil O’Brien: I thank all Members who have taken part in today’s debate. I know that many Members are not in the building this afternoon, so I am particularly grateful for the eloquent and thoughtful speeches we have heard. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) in strongly praising our brilliant Schools Minister, who is a relentless and hard-working champion for higher educational standards. If the next Prime Minister has any sense, he will be promoted; if he has very good sense, the Minister will be kept in place, because he is doing a good job.

I thank the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) for his praise for my previous speech in the Chamber. I thought his own speech would have been stronger if he had acknowledged that there has been a real-terms increase in spending per pupil since 2010—an amazing achievement given that we inherited the biggest budget deficit since the second world war. Perhaps if he finds himself in a position of power in future, he can avoid dropping one of those again.

I thank all the Members who have taken part. We heard important points about capital and buildings from my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), and important ideas about smoothing out budgets from my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts). My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle spoke about the importance of not relying on a bus, because children miss out on after-school activities. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) about some of the things small schools are doing to cope in an authority where there has been an even bigger drop in the lump sum.

Small schools and village schools are an important part of the fabric that makes up this country. I do not want to wax too lyrical, but I genuinely think that if we continue to lose those schools at the rate we have seen in recent decades, in my lifetime, we will be losing an important part of this country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered funding for small schools and village schools.

5.30 pm  

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Thursday 18 July 2019

[Mr Nigel Evans in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Human Rights in Saudi Arabia

1.30 pm
Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

2.12 pm
On resuming—

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered human rights in Saudi Arabia and the detention of opponents of the regime.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for giving us time in Parliament to debate our relations with one of the most important operators in one of the most important regions in the world. Saudi Arabia is a dominant force in the Gulf—an area of significant importance to this country—a significant trading partner, and a significant partner in security and intelligence matters.

I am not naive about how we should approach these matters; I am aware of how politics in the Gulf works. I chair the all-party British-Qatar group, and last year I was a guest of the Kuwaiti Government in that country. Those matters are fully disclosed in my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. It is right that we recognise, applaud and encourage progress on standards of governance and human rights. I approach human rights in that region in a spirit of humility. I am aware that many of the things for which we criticise Gulf regimes were part of our society and law just a few decades ago, or are even part of it today. On workers’ rights and standards, for example, let us not forget that for all the legislative and regulatory standards that we have in this country, not long ago several dozen cockle pickers perished in Morecambe bay as a result of the fact that they had been engaged illicitly.

Even with all those caveats, when I look at Saudi Arabia today I see a bad human rights situation, and I regret to say that it is getting worse. This is an area where the United Kingdom Government, as a partner of the Saudi Arabian Government in commercial and security and intelligence matters, can do more. They should be looking at some of their current actions.

I will focus on people being held as political detainees following the mass arrests on 4 November 2017, others who remain in detention subject to capital punishment, and our assistance to and engagement with Saudi Arabia. It is well known that on 4 November 2017, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman arrested several hundred of his political opponents, as he probably saw them. It was a mass arrest, and those arrested and detained were rounded up and taken to the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. I have to say that of all the accommodation that could be afforded to those who get on the wrong side of the regimes under which they live, the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh is probably not the worst. None the less, it remains a serious matter, not least because it highlights one of my main concerns: the lack of proper regard for the basic norms of international and domestic law.

As a consequence of that arrest programme, there was a process of forced transfer of assets totalling approximately $100 billion, we believe. Many of those held have been tortured, and there have been fatalities. We understand that approximately 200 detainees remain in custody as a consequence of the Crown Prince’s move.

Those who remain in detention without clear legal status include Prince Turki bin Abdullah, the former governor of Riyadh and son of the late King Abdullah. He is obviously seen as a key political rival of the current Crown Prince. He remains in detention without charge. His associate, Faisal al-Jarba, is also in detention without charge. The Washington Post reported in June that Jordanian authorities detained him in Oman, where he had fled to seek safety; they eventually drove him to the Saudi border and handed him over to the Saudi authorities.

Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz bin Salman and his father, Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman bin Mohammad—both businessmen—have remained in detention since January 2018 without charge or trial. Their arrest was believed to be in retaliation for their representation and advocacy on behalf of detained family members. Beyond that there is no clear basis for their continuing detention. The Government have not frozen any of their assets or asked for financial settlements.

My requests of the Government and the Foreign Office are fourfold. We should ask, first, for proof of life of those who were detained. On 12 March 2018, the New York Times report said that Ritz-Carlton detainees required hospitalisation for physical abuse. Major General Ali al-Qahtani, an aide to Prince Turki, later died in custody. Reports suggest that his “neck was twisted unnaturally as though it had been broken” and his body had burn marks that appeared to be the result of electric shocks. To this day, Saudi Arabia has not offered any official explanation of how al-Qahtani died, although it is interesting to note that on 7 November the President of the United States tweeted:

“I have great confidence in King Salman and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, they know exactly what they are doing....”.

Sometimes, when he takes to Twitter, the President manages to say so much more than I suspect he intended.

Secondly, we should ask for clarification from the Saudi authorities about the specific charges on which those who remain in detention are being held. That is a basic norm of international law: a person should know the basis on which they are being held and the charges should be for recognisable crimes. As an absolute minimum, they should be given the specific grounds for their arrest and be able to contest their detention fairly and promptly before an independent and impartial judge, with appropriate legal representation, and there should be periodic reviews of their case. Those who are detained in the Ritz-Carlton and elsewhere in Saudi Arabia receive none of that most basic legal entitlement.

Thirdly, we should ask that people who are not charged with a crime be released. Again, that is a basic principle of international human rights law. In its general
comment on article 7 of the international covenant on civil and political rights, the United Nations Human Rights Committee stated that

“provisions should be made for detainees to be held in places officially recognized as places of detention”—presumably not normally including five-star hotels—“and for their names and places of detention, as well as for the names of persons responsible for their detention, to be kept in registers readily available and accessible to those concerned, including relatives and friends.”

Fourthly and finally, we should ask the Saudi Arabian Government for the release of frozen assets that are currently held illegally. If the assets have been frozen without any proper legal basis, surely we should be saying that they should be returned, unless formal charges can be brought. These are not extravagant requests, and they are the very least that we should be taking to the Saudi Government if the relationship we have is meaningful and not one-sided.

As the House is aware, on 23 April this year there was a programme of 37 executions, including, we understand, one by crucifixion, following two mass trials: the Qatif 24 case and the Iran spy case. This matter was ventilated fully as a result of Mr Speaker granting an urgent question, so I will not rehearse the detail at this time, but there is one aspect I want to remind the House about: three of the detainees who were executed were children at the time of their detention and charge. Capital punishment for children is absolutely forbidden under international law.

That remains relevant today, because, according to Reprieve, there are currently at least three detainees in Saudi Arabia who are subject to conviction awaiting execution. Ali al-Nimr, Abdullah al-Zaher and Dawoud al-Marhoon were all arrested in 2012 following anti-regime demonstrations held in the Qatif region of Saudi Arabia’s eastern province. All were under 18 at the time of the alleged offences. In international law that makes them children and makes their execution illegal. All were tortured extensively while they were detained and forced to sign false confessions to serious crimes, punishable by death, on which the trial courts later relied to convict them.

The three men were not informed of their charges or presented with an arrest warrant. All were held in solitary confinement for long periods, during which time they were given no access to legal representation. Their families did not know where they were and they could not contact them. All were tried at the specialised criminal court, which has been widely criticised for failing to meet the basic standards of a fair trial and for its use as a tool of political repression. Despite widespread international condemnation, the Saudi authorities have never investigated the serious allegations of torture. Having exhausted all domestic legal remedies, the three now await execution, unless they can receive pardons from King Salman.

The United Kingdom has a long-standing and distinguished policy of opposing the use of the death penalty in all circumstances. Surely, if that policy remains meaningful, it demands that representations of the strongest and most public sort be made to the Saudi Arabian Government on behalf of these three young men. That is a common theme in all the representations I have received from organisations that provided briefings for today’s debate. Yes, the Government will say the right things in this country, but they say them privately and they do not say them loudly and publicly enough when it comes to their dealings with the Saudi Government. In relation to the Khoshoggi killing, we have seen that the Saudi Arabian Government will take heed and will respond to international pressure and criticism. Surely we should not be leaving it until the executions have happened to criticise them. We should be doing that while there is still a prospect of bringing these three young men relief and mercy.

That raises the question why all this should matter to us in the United Kingdom. We know there are many regimes across the world that are similarly despotic and, in some cases—although probably not many—even worse in their human rights abuse and their use of capital punishment than Saudi Arabia. I do not want this debate to be an exercise in hand-wringer on the international stage and saying, “Isn’t this dreadful.” It has to be an open and honest examination of how we see these issues and what we, as a commercial and security intelligence partner of Saudi Arabia, are prepared to do to help to effect meaningful change.

The Government are often criticised for not being active enough. I have heard other concerns and received from Reprieve a compelling briefing, which argues that the problem is not just that we are not saying enough, but that sometimes what we do aids and abets the conduct I have described. Reprieve has brought it to my attention that the UK College of Policing has provided forensics training to the Saudi Ministry of the Interior since 2009; I have commented publicly in the House about this before. In 2016, Reprieve obtained documents from a proposal by the College of Policing to extend its training of Saudi police to areas including cyber-security, mobile phone analysis and IT digital forensics, including data decryption and the retrieval of deleted files. These documents show that the college accepted that there was a risk that “the skills being trained are used to identify individuals who later go on to be tortured or subjected to other human rights abuses.” They decided that these risks could be “mitigated” by the college, in conjunction with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, preparing a press statement emphasising that the forensics training is part of a wider programme to assist the Saudi authorities move to democratic policing methods. That was a thin defence in 2016. Having seen the events in 2017 and the mass execution of 37 people earlier this year, I am afraid that that defence simply does not stand anymore. Will the Minister tell us what attitude the Government now take to the relationship between the UK College of Policing and Saudi Arabia?

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we are going to assist the Saudis on technology in this way, at the very least our Government should in response press for the immediate release of all political prisoners and, pending that happening, seek proof of life of those who have been detained?

Mr Carmichael: I did not realise that my right hon. Friend was behind me, so I do not know whether he was in the Chamber when I made exactly that point about those who are detained in the Ritz-Carlton in Riyadh.
Getting proof of life is crucial. That is something that we should not have to demand; it is something that should be provided routinely. If Saudi Arabia wishes to move among the developed nations of the world as an equal partner, that is something it should wish to take on board for itself.

An investigation by The Daily Telegraph this year revealed that hundreds of Saudi police officers were trained in Britain in 2018, despite the risk that the skills acquired here could be used by the regime to commit human rights abuses. With no transparency about the training taking place, it remains entirely unclear what safeguards have been placed on this assistance to ensure that it does not contribute to severe human rights abuses.

Furthermore, real questions hang over continued UK funding in Saudi Arabia through cross-departmental funds such as the integrated activity fund. The IAF is a cross-departmental fund earmarked exclusively for co-operation with Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, on security and justice assistance. Under the auspices of the Foreign Office, the IAF is overseen by the Gulf national security secretariat implementation group, which consists of representatives from Departments responsible for delivering the Gulf strategy, including the FCO, the Home Office, the Department for International Development, the Department for International Trade, the Ministry of Defence, the Treasury and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

We know, because the Foreign Office has confirmed it, that the IAF’s allocation is £80 million over the current spending review period. What we have not heard from the Government is any detail on how the programme uses its funds. I would like at least an explanation for that basic lack of transparency. For a fund that covers only six countries, unlike the 90 countries covered by the conflict, stability and security fund, for example, the Government refuse to provide any details of the breakdown of spending across the country or within the region, claiming that no breakdown is possible, since:

“Many of the projects and programme activity are delivered regionally”.

In any circumstance, that would be a pretty thin defence, but in the context of everything that we know and see to be going on in Saudi Arabia, if that is where the British taxpayers’ money is being spent, at the very least we should be given a proper explanation of the spending and not some obfuscation according to accounting practices.

The Government continue to refuse to provide any information to parliamentarians about the use of IAF funds in Saudi Arabia. That, of course, raises real questions about why the Government refuse to provide that information in this age. If there is to be a bid for the IAF to continue beyond 2020, which we understand is already under consideration, surely it is critical that Members of this House get answers on just what the funds are being used for and what safeguards exist to ensure that they will not lead to further and more egregious abuses of human rights.

I have three final questions for the Minister. First, will the Government confirm that the Foreign Office will make urgent representations to its Saudi counterparts to ensure that the three individuals currently on death row in Saudi Arabia will have their sentences commuted and receive a full pardon? Given the inadequacies of the process that has brought them to this point, if the Government are serious about a policy of opposing the death penalty in all circumstances, that is the very least we should do.

Secondly, will the Government commit to publishing information on all programmes currently engaging with Saudi Arabia, including the programme documentation and assessment frameworks, and assessments under the overseas security and justice assistance guidance? Thirdly, will the Government commit to providing full breakdowns of all projects funded under the integrated activity fund, including the countries and institutions receiving funds under that programme, and details of each project’s human rights assessment under the overseas security and justice assistance guidance?

It is all very well to stand here, in the comfort of the House of Commons, and criticise Saudi Arabia for its human rights, but I am pretty sure that, if we were to go out and ask anybody we stopped on the street here what they thought of the treatment of detainees and citizens in Saudi Arabia, they would be pretty appalled. I think they would actually be angry if they knew that money paid by taxpayers in this country was being used in such a way that it could contribute to and abet those human rights abuses, and that no explanation for that would be forthcoming. That is why I think it is important that the House debates this subject today. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the time, and I hope that we will have time to hear the fullest possible answers from the Minister.

2.37 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, and a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). I congratulate him on securing this debate.

I will concentrate on the first part of the right hon. Gentleman’s motion, human rights in Saudi Arabia. I will do so by tackling one issue in particular, that of modern slavery. We have set a significant agenda for dealing with modern slavery in this country, but I have also had experience of dealing with it overseas. In my role as a trade envoy to Nigeria, I have been there specifically to try to sort out the problems of modern slavery, and I have had successful meetings there that have gone a long way toward sorting them out. I have also mentioned before my experience there with Unilever, which has eradicated modern slavery from its entire supply chain. There is a lot that we can do, if I may use that example to talk about what we want to do on modern slavery in Saudi.

Our definition of modern slavery is a situation in which people are exploited for criminal gain. That sounds very simple, but it hides the enormous impact that it has on the human rights of the individuals who are exploited. I have a background in human rights from my membership of the Council of Europe, which I share with you, Mr Evans, and it is interesting to see the matter in that context.

Hon. Members may be aware of pictures sent around on Saudi social media of two Moroccan women who were sold as housemaids for lump sums of cash. They were described as being able to cook local meals and as loving children and so on, but they were sold for cash,
Saudi human rights organisations point out that this is modern slavery, explaining that the women were severely restricted in what they were able to do and were also sexually abused. We should all bear that firmly in mind.

In Saudi Arabia, women working as housemaids, as in this situation, or simply as domestic helpers are not only from Morocco, as those two women were, but from other developing countries such as Ethiopia, India and the Philippines. Numerous cases have come to light in recent years of domestic helpers, particularly female, being treated in this way and finding themselves with great problems. A system of law in Saudi Arabia called the kafala system provides some legal structure to this, but it is a tissue of a legal structure that does not provide any substance of protection for the women there. The owners—they are classed as owners—remain responsible for the visas and residence status of the women for the duration of their stay. That system has come under huge amounts of criticism from human rights organisations, which object to the restrictive and abusive relationships that the women are put through.

Such advertisements for women have brought further attention to other cases of mistreatment of women, including other Moroccan women, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In one example, a Moroccan woman who married a Saudi man was raped by her husband and then imprisoned in their house after trying to report the crime. Her being released from that captivity required her to appeal directly to Morocco’s King. Those are good examples of how prevalent modern slavery is in Saudi Arabia. It is not only Moroccan women but American women as well. I am aware of American women who married Saudi nationals, live in Saudi Arabia and are subject to a situation in which other people completely rule over what they do.

Those people have all the rights that we associate with ownership. The women were forcibly abducted or kidnapped, in clear violation of the laws of other countries, and of court orders of other countries in some cases. They have been removed from those countries, far beyond the enforcement powers of the courts within those countries. They have been hidden away in family compounds for years, deprived of even a basic standard of living, including being deprived of a choice of religion, spouse or, for younger women, a choice of their age of marriage. They are denied freedom of movement and they are subjected to torture.

The stories are pitiful, and we should have tremendous sympathy for those women, but sympathy is not enough. I have explained what I have been doing in other countries. The Government can take a firm stance in raising those issues with the Governments of other countries and bringing to attention the plight of those women. It should not only be the King of Morocco who is required to do this; we should be doing it as well.

Many foreign workers in Saudi Arabia report abuse, but they are not allowed to change employer or, indeed, to leave the country without the written consent of their employer. During the year, numerous migrant workers report being laid off, sometimes after months of non-payment of salaries, and some remain stranded in Saudi Arabia without the money to move. An American study of this phenomenon revealed a lot of details, but the Saudi reaction was illustrative of the modern-day approach to dealing with a problem. They did not try to tackle the problem head-on. All they did was try to rubbish the report, which we typically see today; whether in response to antisemitism or whatever, the people who respond to reports simply choose to rubbish them and do not tend to engage. That illustrates all too well the problems that we have here.

Sadly, a number of women in this situation have been forced to work as prostitutes, even though prostitution is not officially allowed in Saudi Arabia. We should stand forcefully against any system that forces women into prostitution. We should not sit by and allow our relationship with Saudi Arabia to continue without taking up those issues and making a great point of those problems in the course of that relationship.

2.47 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I sincerely congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on his comprehensive account of some of the characteristics and misdeeds currently being carried out by the Saudi regime. I will emphasise one or two of his points, but I will endeavour not to repeat them.

It is probably now a truism to say that the Saudi regime operates, to a large extent, outside civilised norms, the rule of law and due process, and does not, in many cases, recognise the right to a fair trial. It is not unique in those respects—indeed, it is not unique in the Gulf region; its closest allies in the Gulf Co-operation Council, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, are equally guilty in many respects—but that does not excuse what it is doing. A lot of the current cases date from immediately after the Arab spring and the crackdowns that occurred in those countries, including some of the cases of juveniles who were arrested and who are still incarcerated and face the death penalty.

However, it is also undoubtedly true that the situation has become worse since the accession of King Salman and the increase in power of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. We now look with great irony at the way they were fêted as reformers and as those who would undo a lot of the anachronisms and anomalies of Saudi society. There is little sign of that in the area of women’s rights. The response to women’s rights defenders who protested not only the driving ban, important though that is, but against the whole guardianship system has been the arrest, detention and torture of prominent individuals.

Of course, the issue that gained the regime in Saudi Arabia notoriety around the world was the horrific murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Again, there is no contrition there and no real willingness to co-operate with the UN special rapporteur or the international community in investigating that. Indeed it has simply been swept under the carpet.

The treatment of the Shi’a minority population has been atrocious over many years, with many people put on trial on trumped-up and vague charges. Most significant was Sheikh al-Nimr, himself the uncle of one of the young men currently on death row but also the most prominent Shi’a cleric in Saudi, who was executed after years of persecution in the mass execution in January 2016.
I think it was one of the largest of the recent mass executions—47 people were beheaded or killed by firing squad.

Again, it is outside the scope of this debate, but of course beyond all this are the atrocities being committed, and the breaches of international humanitarian law, in Yemen. It is a shame, but I think it is emblematic of the way the British Government are responding to many of these atrocities that it took victory by the Campaign Against Arms Trade in the Court of Appeal for the Government to look at suspending in any way the sales of arms that are fuelling that war. Even so, it is without any embarrassment that the Government are taking their case to the Supreme Court, no doubt with the intention of resuming sales thereafter.

That is the background to this debate, and I want to focus on a couple of those points. The first, which is particularly shocking, it is not just that many people who in other countries would just be seen as exercising their democratic rights end up in prison in Saudi Arabia, but the fact that it also happens to juveniles. Sadly, a number of young people have been executed, including in the mass execution earlier this year of 37 people, in which three young men who were juveniles at the time of their arrest were executed.

The three who have become a cause célèbre and are still at risk on death row are Ali Mohammed al-Nimr, Abdullah al-Zaher and Dawood al-Marhoon. Their cases have been raised many times in this House over a period of years. Indeed, in preparing for this debate, I looked back at an urgent question that I was granted back in October 2015. I shall say more about it in a moment, because it relates to a good decision that the previous Government made, but I referred in that exchange to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, the then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, said that he was closing that operation down and withdrawing from the contract. He is to be congratulated on that, but it was one beacon of hope and has not really been followed up in succeeding years. Indeed, there continue to be concerns about the College of Policing and other arrangements whereby respectable UK institutions offer training—it was reported only last year that hundreds of Saudi police officers were being trained—or supervise in some way give credibility to institutions in which practices such as torture are carried out.

No doubt the Government will say, “We respect human rights and we hope that by engaging with these countries we can promote human rights,” but that is not what is happening at all. There is no sign that the engagement is in any way mitigating or addressing the way in which the Saudi authorities operate, so in effect we are colluding.

There is no clearer sign of that than the funds that have been referred to, which are largely opaque; this is within Government. Numerous attempts have been made to identify exactly where the money goes, particularly in relation to the Gulf countries. The integrated activity fund and other larger funds, which are operated through the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Development, run to more than £1 billion in total, but there is no clarity whatever about how that money is spent. Frankly, that is a disgrace.

I welcome you to the Chair for this debate, Sir Henry. This morning’s statement on detainee issues had really to be dragged out of the Government over the period of a year. It is a matter of great regret that the Government announced that they would not pursue that, despite previous promises on rendition and the Gibson inquiry and the Intelligence and Security Committee inquiries and their inconclusive nature.

There is an unhelpful trend in this Government not to deal with issues that they find embarrassing to themselves or to their close international partners. When I heard the announcement today, I thought, “Well, this is exactly what we heard about Leveson 2: ‘Nothing to see here. We’ve all moved on. No need for an inquiry.’” That is becoming an unhealthy habit of the Government. They should bear it in mind that, even if they are not prepared to confront these matters in this House or in public, they will still come to light and, as with the war in Yemen, there will be legal challenges. I have no doubt that there will be in relation to rendition. We are fortunate in this country to have a tradition of good independent journalism, of good independent non-governmental organisations, some of which briefed us for this debate, and of lawyers who will do that job if the Government are not prepared to do it themselves.

The Minister has set himself up as somebody who does take these issues seriously and wishes to see this country take its human rights responsibilities abroad as seriously as its defence and security and trade responsibilities, so it would be useful if we could see some change of tone and of policy specifically in relation to Saudi. Do we need anything further than what happened to Jamal Khashoggi just last year to raise the alarm about the way that that country is conducting itself in the region and in the world?
I shall end my comments shortly as other hon. Members wish to speak. I end simply by asking again in relation to the detainees on death row in Saudi, and specifically in relation to those who were juveniles when their alleged offences took place, that the Government redouble their efforts and use what influence they have—they say that they have a lot of influence—with Saudi, and that they do so in the strongest possible terms and the most urgent terms, because it could well be the case that at no notice we find that there has been another series of mass executions in that country.

2.59 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I draw the House’s attention to my declaration in the register, not least because I chair a detention review panel examining the cases of Saudi activists for women’s rights. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate. Saudi Arabia is an important ally, so it is important that, where she falls short of the standards we expect from countries we strategically stand alongside, we hold her to account.

It is also important to put the question of how we advance and support human rights in Saudi Arabia into the wider strategic context. By most measurable economic and social indicators, the world is improving for the majority of its citizens. Global poverty and child mortality are down. Vaccinations, basic education and democracy are going up. Those are trends over the past couple of centuries. We live in a liberal-democratic-inspired, rules-based international world order, underpinned by NATO, the United States security umbrella and the United Nations, based on those structures established at the end of the second world war.

Overall, we expect those structures to advance human rights, but we now have to recognise that those structures are under immense strain. First, there was the missed opportunity of the fall of the Soviet Union, which has been replaced over the past 30 years by an increasingly like-for-like security structure in Putin’s Russia. Additionally, in the middle east we witnessed the failure of the Arab spring to advance the political and human rights of those on the wrong end of governance in the pre-2011 middle east, except perhaps in Tunisia and Morocco.

Strategically, the main challenge we face is the rise of China. If we fail to secure China’s place in the rules-based international order, it will be to our peril, and it will not only have implications for the nation states who immediately abut Chinese regional power in east Asia, but have a direct effect on basic questions of advancing human rights in countries such as Saudi Arabia. If our policy serves to drive our allies into the open arms of China and Russia to provide for their hard security, we will do nothing to advance and support human rights, collective political rights and government accountability in countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, which have also been mentioned. It could seriously damage accountable progress.

This is a perilous time for human rights. This debate rightly highlights that Saudi Arabia is a human rights priority country for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and has been for several years. Disengaging from its political development and security will only help more authoritarian countries, which place less value on the rule of law, to become the dominant paradigm in the world.

I profoundly disagree with the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). I believe the cancellation of the Just Solutions International contracts, which engaged in the Saudi justice system, particularly in the management of offenders, is profoundly to be regretted. I believe in the merits of interdependence. I believe that the police and justice training that we support should be delivered as far as possible. If we can do that, and sell to countries our experience—particularly the experience of the Ministry of Justice’s retired senior prison governors and probation officers—at economic advantage to the United Kingdom, so that they can improve their systems and import some of the human rights accountability, which we take for granted, it is likely to be of significant benefit overall, both financially for the United Kingdom and, more importantly, for the values we want to promote in those societies.

Mr Carmichael: I said in my speech that I am pragmatic about these things and where progress is seen, it should be applauded and rewarded. The difficulty is that where there is no accountability, it is difficult for us to know how effectively our money is being spent. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the refusal to account for the money that is being spent, as I referred to in my speech, is not good enough for the taxpayers of this country?

Crispin Blunt: I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. It does not only apply in this area. When I chaired the Foreign Affairs Committee, I served on the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, which made a report about the inadequacy of accountability in the conflict, stability and security fund, for example, and the right hon. Gentleman mentioned the integrated activity fund. We ought to have accountability for public money; it is a basic requirement of our responsibility as we levy taxes on our constituents.

Having made the case for co-operation with Saudi Arabia, I recognise the flipside. As vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Saudi Arabia, I feel particularly pained by the current situation. In my 22 years as a Member of this House, I have defended the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s important relationship with the United Kingdom. A few years ago, I had hoped that the Kingdom was taking a bold new step forward when Mohammed bin Salman—first as Deputy Crown Prince and then as Crown Prince—effectively assumed the majority of the Executive power in Saudi Arabia.

The moves of the Crown Prince towards economic reform, with Vision 2030, were accompanied by wider apparent social reform: the removal of arrest powers from the religious police, the formal preparation of legislation to ease male guardianship laws and granting women the right to drive. There is genuine potential for modernisation under that programme. However, if the price turns out to be the closure of any emerging political space, any overall societal gain will be heavily reduced, if not negated altogether.

We must be beyond disappointed by the series of events over the past two years that have led to where we are today. There is a wretched contradiction between
the recent societal liberalisation in Saudi Arabia and the detention of the people who campaigned for those changes. Saudi Arabia has been commended for allowing women the right to drive, for the opening of cinemas and other entertainment places and, as I said, for ending the religious police’s power of arrest. They were all immensely important to the freedom one has to conduct one’s life in Saudi Arabia, but if in parallel the activists who for years had advocated those changes are arrested, such incredible detention and this disastrous series of events must be challenged, not least by the friends of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia who recognise the importance of that nation as a regional ally. Pushing for successful reform should not lead to prison. The Crown Prince would be well advised to recognise the truth of the aphorism used by President Ronald Reagan that successful reform should not lead to prison. The Crown Prince would be well advised to recognise the truth of the aphorism used by President Ronald Reagan that

Andy Slaughter: I am following the hon. Gentleman’s argument and I would hate to take credit for the Just Solutions contract being cancelled. I was simply an advocate of it. The hon. Gentleman’s parliamentary colleague, the then Lord Chancellor, must take the credit for it, and no doubt he has had those discussions. In advancing his argument, what evidence can the hon. Gentleman point to in recent years of the regime’s move towards a human rights success—not ones that have been forced or dragged out of it, but ones that he would say our close relationship has helped to achieve? What evidence is there?

Crispin Blunt: The most obvious one that springs to mind is the influence of American and British officers in the targeting cells for the operation in Yemen. The Saudi-led coalition in Yemen was unanimously approved by the United Nations in order to deal with the illegal usurpation of authority, and we all supported the necessary military involvement to restore order in Yemen. It is an awful place to try to advance by military means the political objectives that the world supported the Saudi coalition to put together. That campaign has been of immense difficulty. Rightly, the coalition was properly condemned for the way it appeared to be conducting the operation yet we should note that there has been a significant improvement. That operation has continued because of the quality of advice coming from the United Kingdom and also the United States in making sure that the military operations were conducted within the remit of international law with regard to human rights. I point to that as an area where there has been effective influence.

Domestically over the past two years within Saudi Arabia, I concede to the hon. Gentleman that what we see and what is reported about the execution of the 37 and the rest, and the detention of the women detainees that I and two of our colleagues inquired into, has been profoundly disappointing. I assume that the Saudi Arabian Government would reflect on the issues I have already mentioned—women being given the right to drive and the ending of the powers of arrest of the religious police—as an overall improvement but if, as I will come on to, Saudi Arabia simply closes down the political space and everyone is far too terrified to offer a critique, it will not help a consultative monarchy to advance good governance in Saudi Arabia. The picture is mixed, but let us not deceive ourselves into thinking that we have no influence whatever.

We have enormous leverage over Saudi Arabia as far as defence is concerned, until and unless we cancel our defence contracts with it. Such leverage would disappear.
and Saudi Arabia would be faced with the enormous expense of re-equipping itself from another supplier. It would be catastrophic if that supplier was in either Russia or China and provided it with the defence capability that it needed. We would certainly then say goodbye to any influence that we had over Saudi Arabia at enormous economic cost to ourselves. In that sense, we are engaged in a contest for influence, and its human rights is a very important part of trying to advance that agenda. I say to the hon. Gentleman that this is difficult, as I am sure the Minister will recognise. If we give up on interdependence, we will pay a very heavy price, as will the people of Saudi Arabia. We need to stand as much as we possibly can alongside them, and this debate and oversight of what is happening in Saudi Arabia should be part of that.

There is a degree to which it should be true that public shaming and the isolation of offending regimes can occasionally be a spur to progress, but it is better to offer a solution, to engage, and to assist by using our centuries-long hard-won experience of accountability for the rule of law. Rather than tell the Saudis sanctimoniously what their values ought to be, we should have these debates to challenge our friends and encourage them to see the merits of an open civil society, for the benefit of their nation’s policy making if nothing else. Given such a process and our influence, we should be able to agree that they could do nothing better than to release the female detainees straightforward away.

Previously, change came slowly to Saudi Arabia. It was a conservative country with a cautious monarchy. That caution appeared to be swept away with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, but expecting it to suddenly transform into a fully-fledged accountable democracy overnight was never going to happen. Britain remains in a position to help the Crown Prince move away from the path of a leader lethally intolerant of dissent. As our ally, there is a necessity for Saudi Arabia to uphold the highest standards of a consultative monarchy by better engaging with its citizens. There remains an opportunity for Saudi Arabia to set a course for a better future for its society and its economy, learning from the human rights disasters of 2018. Those are the terms used by Saudi Arabia’s own Foreign Minister about what happened to Jamal Khashoggi—it was described as a disaster.

The alternative to a consultative monarchy is an absolute monarchy, and down that route lies disaster and probably eventually revolution. Before that disaster and revolution lies terror and repression. In the west we need to ask ourselves whether we want a penitent reformer in charge of Saudi Arabia or a rolling back to a hard-line clerical domination that reflects the values of centuries earlier or some other revolutionary horror. To reapply the words of Talleyrand, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi was not only a crime; it was a mistake. We must help Saudi Arabia to deliver accountability for the crime, and for its future, we must do our best to ensure that it does not compound the mistake.

3.19 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who secured the debate, for his eloquent and comprehensive assessment of the human rights picture. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) for linking some of the issues that we have debated, such as our military relationship and the events playing out in Yemen, with the recent judgment on the case brought by the Campaign Against Arms Trade.

Hon. Members may be aware that, today—or perhaps overnight, if my sense of Washington time is correct—the House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly, by 238 to 190, to block the supply of the precision-guided munitions that are being used against civilians in the Yemeni civil war. There are lessons there for our sales regime. I hope that we will continue to develop links between Parliament and Congress, as the Committees on Arms Export Controls began to do last week in Washington, so we can have a business-like relationship with the people with whom we do business on the arms and defence question.

The hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) was rather optimistic in his assessment of the human rights picture in Saudi. He believes that it is correct for the UK and the US to be involved in targeting expertise and training in the use of military equipment in Yemen, but targeting can sometimes go wrong, as we have potentially seen in some test cases regarding the blowing up of buses, weddings and other civilian occasions. We do not quite have the evidence yet, but there are enough questions to make it necessary to comprehensively link the human rights picture with what is happening in the war in Yemen, particularly in relation to the recent cholera outbreak and the deaths of many children.

I commend the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) for his incisive treatment of the issue of the abuse that women, particularly those who work as servants in homes, have suffered over several years. That he spoke in so much detail about them is telling. I hope that the Minister will address the questions his hon. Friend raised about what the Government are doing to hold the Saudi Government to account for women who are particularly vulnerable because they are servants in Saudi homes. Obviously, the high-profile cases involving women’s rights are those related to driving, but the hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out that there are more serious issues than just having the right to drive, although that is symbolic of women’s liberty.

I reiterate the concern about the treatment of young people in detention, particularly the lack of legal representation, the use of false confessions and their execution, which is simply unacceptable. I am also concerned about journalists. We have already heard about the tragic and revolving killing of Jamal Khashoggi, whose body, if media reports are to be believed, was chopped up into small pieces and melted down using some type of acid, so it was in a form that could be disposed of. I do not think it gets any worse than that, and yet the Saudis are our allies and friends.

We have to join the UN and Dr Callamard, who is looking into the matter as the UN’s rapporteur, in applying more pressure. We have to show more backbone in the way we interact with our military allies. In particular, I want the Minister to address what is going on in relation to the investigation. Will the UK join the UN in asking questions about its next steps? We cannot allow the matter to drop and just stand next to Mohammed
bin Salman at G20 meetings and take photos and so on. We have to say something, have some backbone and be much stronger.

Like Jamal Khashoggi, journalists in general and people who tend to speak out and protest about the Saudi regime come under tremendous pressure, including execution. I look forward to hearing from the Minister what steps he will take as a new Minister, with a fresh approach, to inject more backbone and strength into our approach in this important regard.

3.25 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If ever there were a prime candidate to be the subject of that excellent BBC Radio 4 series, “Moral Maze”, it would be Britain’s relationship with Saudi Arabia. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing the debate and on the measured and temperate way in which he presented the case.

All the Back-Bench Members who have spoken have shown wisdom and moderation in their remarks. I was particularly struck by the contribution of my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), who knows more about the Arab world than just about anybody I have come across in 22 years in this House. Even he, though, with all his knowledge of the subject, made no bones about the extent to which one must be conflicted about a relationship as complex as this.

I mentioned that I have been in this House for 22 years, which takes us back to 1997, when the Blair Government came in on a tide of optimism and idealism, and Robin Cook, who became Foreign Secretary, stated his admirable objective of importing an “ethical dimension” into foreign policy. The problem with trying to find an ethical dimension, however, is that the choices we face, far from being between good and evil, are often about which is the lesser of two evils. I am afraid that that is the situation in which we find ourselves regarding our decades-long involvement with the countries of the middle east.

It is sometimes tempting to feel a sense of superiority about the way in which our society conducts itself, compared with the brutal and authoritarian regimes in other parts of the world in general, and in the middle east in particular. It is good to remind ourselves, therefore, that a few hundred years ago people in this country, who regarded themselves as Christians, thought nothing of inflicting terrible barbarities on one another, similar to what happened to poor Mr Khashoggi in that embassy, in the name of a belief as to which was the true branch of Christianity and which was what we would call, in another context, an infidel variation on that theme.

If we think of that in the context of our history and say, “What could have been done several hundred years ago to rapidly bring those societies to an appreciation of human rights and democratic politics?” we realise how difficult that process is. That is why revolutions often have such bloody consequences and make bad situations even worse. That is also why I would like to think that most hon. Members believe in the revolutionary, rather than the revolutionary, process. If we are going to make improvements, we have to take society with us from the point at which we find it.

Let me give an example of the dilemmas that arise in relation to Saudi Arabia. On 20 June, I asked the Secretary of State for International Trade:

“Do the Government accept that, as the years have rolled by since the 9/11 atrocities, it has become harder and harder to justify the closeness of our relationship with Saudi Arabia, but in defence of what the Government are trying to do, would it not be sensible for my right hon. Friend to have conversations with the Foreign Secretary, perhaps with a view to publishing a digest of some of the representations that we make to the Saudis in trying to keep them from straying further away from acceptable standards of international behaviour?”

We could add to that the dimensions of human rights abuse. The Secretary of State’s reply, rather predictably, was as follows:

“The Foreign Secretary and I have answered numerous questions on this issue in the House of Commons, and we have certainly cited some of those incidents and been questioned on specific incidents in the House. On my right hon. Friend’s key point, I do not think the proximity or otherwise to 9/11 is the key determinant here; rather, it is whether Saudi Arabia acts as an important source of intelligence for this country in our shared combat against a global terrorism. It is a valuable partner in that particular battle and has helped to keep numerous UK citizens safe.”—[Official Report, 20 June 2019; Vol. 662, c. 379.]

This is where we begin to run up against a dilemma, because we all know that much of the problem of international Islamist totalitarian terrorism derives from sources in Saudi Arabia. When 9/11 happened, it was widely pointed out that there was some sort of pact between the authorities in Saudi Arabia and the totalitarian Islamist revolutionaries that basically they could do what they liked abroad, as long as they kept their activities limited at home. That is what we might call a form of the devil’s bargain.

Because I am not within the ring of secrecy, I am not in a position to know whether the Saudi intelligence services are really constantly feeding us vital information to thwart terrorist plots, or whether, as well as promoting and funding madrassahs all around the world that leach out this terrible form of totalitarian ideology, they are actually just giving us what I believe is known in the trade as chickenfeed, to keep us satisfied that it is better to remain, rather than cease to be, their friends.

Crispin Blunt: I think that the position in Saudi Arabia has radically changed since 9/11. Its Government have had to take on board some of the consequences of their policy up to that point, and of the large scale of their investment to support madrassahs in most of the rest of the world. As I understand it, it is now illegal in Saudi Arabia to make a cash donation within a mosque, and everything now has to be accountable in terms of where the money is going. That is the scale of change that is happening in Saudi Arabia, and it is why our Government are right to see it as a practical and important ally in this ideological battle in which we find ourselves on the same side.

Dr Lewis: That welcome intervention, if accurate—I have no reason to believe that it is not—is a powerful argument in favour of continued engagement with the regime, even though from time to time it does things that we would regard, with justification, as barbaric. That has often been the nature of international relations, and those are often the difficult choices that have to be made. To give the most extreme example, Sir Winston Churchill had a lifelong hatred of bolshevism and communism; he said at the time of the 1917 revolution that he wanted bolshevism to be strangled at birth. When he found himself in alliance with Stalin after the
Nazi invasion of Russia in 1941, he was twitted by a political opponent who pointed out his lifelong hatred of communism. His famous reply was:

“If Hitler invaded Hell, I would make at least a favourable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons.”

The history of diplomacy is that we often have to have relationships with unsavoury regimes in order to avoid something that would be even worse. However, having to have a relationship with a regime that does terrible things does not mean that we should go silent on criticising it. That is why I particularly welcome this debate. In some senses, it was a relief to discover that it would be more about human rights than about the arms trade. Believe me, if we had to have the same debate about the arms trade, which has been touched on slightly, we would face an infinitely more difficult dilemma. We would have to decide, as my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Reigate said in passing, whether it was better to wash our hands of supplying military hardware to Saudi Arabia if the consequence would be to anchor that country in the orbit of Russia or China, as the Iranian regime already is.

I conclude by commending the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland for securing the debate, and by endorsing his notion that pressure on the Saudi regime on the human rights front is one area in which we can safely express our differences without risking a rupture that we cannot afford on overall strategic grounds. I wish him well in his campaign and congratulate all those who stand up for human rights in Saudi Arabia. I hope that they, in turn, will recognise that vast geopolitical forces are and will continue to be at work in the area, and that there are no morally perfect solutions to dealing with an environment like this, in which frankly all the actors are tainted.

I have mentioned Sir Winston Churchill, but perhaps we should go back to the 19th-century concept of the balance of power, which expressed the interests of Britain by ensuring that no one power could become overwhelmingly dominant on the continent and that we did not get drawn in too closely with any power. My fear, which I have expressed before, is that in the conflicts in the middle east we are sometimes in danger of getting too closely involved with one side rather than the other. That side, I am afraid, is Saudi Arabia.

3.38 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing the debate and on all his expertise and work on this important area. His speech dealt with three issues, broadly speaking.

First, the right hon. Gentleman spoke about the detainees who are opponents of the regime, and the very concerning lack of regard for international human rights norms and the rule of law in their treatment. I associate the Scottish National Party with what he said and with all four of his asks to the Minister: I will be interested to hear the Minister’s reply to them.

Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman dealt with the issue of capital punishment, reminding us that the capital punishment of children is absolutely forbidden under international law. The examples that he gave were chilling, and it is chilling to think that other children await a similar fate. The United Kingdom is a union of countries that are supposed to be opposed to capital punishment in all circumstances. The representations that the right hon. Gentleman demanded in respect of the three young men who are awaiting execution are right and proper, and he stressed that the UK Government must state their opposition to capital punishment—particularly in respect of children—loudly and publicly.

Thirdly, the right hon. Gentleman dealt with why these matters should matter to us in the United Kingdom—because we are a close commercial, security and intelligence partner of Saudi Arabia. I listened with great interest to what the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) and the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) had to say in relation to the moral difficulties here, and I took on board what they said. It is easy to wring our hands and perhaps it is not easy to find a solution, but there are certain things that are absolutely beyond the pale, and the execution of children is beyond the pale. In addition, for any of us who believe in human rights and the rule of law, detention without trial is also beyond the pale.

That leads me to some points made by a number of speakers this afternoon. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) talked about the way in which women and girls who have been trafficked or kept as modern slaves are suffering in Saudi Arabia, and described the sort of domestic servitude in which they are held. He also touched on the issues of women’s and girls’ rights, which were alluded to by the hon. Members for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West). Also, the hon. Member for Reigate is to be commended for the interest that he has taken in the plight of female detainees in Saudi Arabia, and I will devote the few comments that I will make to the issue of the human rights of women and girls in Saudi Arabia, particularly looking at the women who have been rounded up and detained in relation to their feminist activism about the right of women to drive.

We all know that women in Saudi Arabia face formal and informal barriers when they attempt to make decisions or take action without the presence or consent of a male relative, and some speakers today alluded to Saudi Arabia’s discriminatory male guardianship system, which remains intact despite pledges by the Saudi Arabian Government to abolish it.

It is interesting to observe that in June Saudi Arabia passed a law on sexual harassment with a sentence for offenders of up to two years’ imprisonment, which can be increased in certain circumstances. However, that law also provides that anyone who falsely reports a crime of harassment or falsely claims to have been a victim shall be sentenced to the same punishment as for the offence that they alleged took place. That could be used to punish victims. I am all in favour of the concept of innocent till proven guilty, but I do not believe that the law should be used to punish victims, and there is a real risk that the way in which this law against sexual harassment has been introduced in Saudi Arabia will deter victims from coming forward.

In February, the Saudi authorities came before the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women to defend their record on women’s
rights, and the committee called on Saudi Arabia to accelerate efforts to abolish the male guardianship system, adopt an anti-discrimination law and adopt a written, unified family code, based on the principles of equality and non-discrimination.

However, as I said earlier, perhaps the most concerning example of the abuse of the human rights of women comes with the treatment of those feminists who have campaigned to lift the long-standing ban on women driving. As the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green said, the right to drive is an important one; it is fundamental to women’s autonomy for them to have the option to be able to travel freely, in the way that men can take for granted.

It is very concerning that there has been a wave of arrests of prominent women’s rights activists. They have been charged with serious crimes, such as suspicous contact with foreign parties, and Government-aligned media outlets then carried out an alarming campaign against them, even publishing their photographs with the word “Traitor” branded across their faces.

In March, a number of those women—including Loujain al-Hathloul, who I will say a little about in a moment—appeared before a court and were charged with communicating with external hostile powers, providing financial support to external parties, and luring and exploiting minors to work against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Basically, the women were women’s rights bloggers who had been advocating for gender equality, including the right of women to drive. Despite the fact that that right has now been granted in Saudi Arabia, those women have been imprisoned; some of them are still in prison.

When those women appeared before the court in March, they were not informed of the charges before the hearing, they were not permitted to speak during the proceedings, and no lawyers or foreign journalists were permitted to attend the hearing, which of course is unacceptable.

Some of those women have now been released, but others are still in custody. Loujain al-Hathloul has been imprisoned for more than a year and when her parents visited her last December, she showed them black scars on her thighs that had been caused by electric shocks. Also, towards the end of May, a Guardian journalist interviewed Loujain al-Hathloul’s brother, who explained what kind of person his sister is. All her life, she has advocated for women’s rights, but she was pushed over while driving in the United Arab Emirates last year and deported back to Saudi Arabia. Basically, what began then was a really brutal campaign to silence her. She claims that she was detained for three days, then freed, before being seized again from her family home in Riyadh, blindfolded, thrown into the boot of a car and taken to a detention centre, where she was tortured and threatened with rape and death.

As a feminist—I am sure that all the men in Westminster Hall also count themselves as feminists as well—I have to say that that treatment was absolutely unacceptable. I make no apology for focusing on the particular issue of women’s and girls’ rights, but it reflects on the overall approach of a regime when other human rights have been neglected. Equally today, the way that it treats journalists, the rights to freedom of speech and freedom of expression, and religious minorities.

So, while I take on board all that Conservative Members have said today to urge some caution in the way that we deal with these matters, I wholeheartedly support the points made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland. I wholeheartedly associate myself and my party with the asks that he has made of the Government, and I very much look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say in due course.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Thank you. Lady for that very succinct wind-up.

3.47 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): As always, Sir Henry, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate and on his excellent introduction to it. He rightly pointed out that Saudi Arabia is a very important nation in the region and in the Gulf area. However, as he also said, the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia is getting worse.

Of course, the right hon. Gentleman also told us about the many people who have been held since 4 November 2017 and tortured; some fatalities have also been recorded. He asked the Minister for a number of things to be made clear, one of which is whether the Minister would ask for proof of life of those detained, and clarification of specific charges, and like every other Member in Westminster Hall today I wait to hear the Minister’s response to that.

The right hon. Gentleman also reminded us of the urgent question that was tabled in the main Chamber of the House of Commons recently regarding the 37 executions that took place on 23 April. Many right hon. and hon. Members have told us some of the details of those executions, which are horrific, but the most important issue is that three of those who were executed—brutally executed—were still children at the time of their alleged offences. The right hon. Gentleman also said that the UK Government need to be more public in their condemnation of the Saudi Government, which was a feeling echoed by many this afternoon.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), who always makes an excellent contribution to debates in this place. He concentrated—rightly—on human rights in Saudi Arabia, specifically on modern slavery and the abuse of women. His contribution to the debate was very important and relevant.

Then, my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) talked about Mohammed bin Salman being seen originally as a reformer, but of course we now know, having seen his regime develop, that that is not the case. There has been no contrition whatever over the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. My hon. Friend mentioned arms sales to Saudi Arabia; he also mentioned that in other countries, many of those held on death row would have been seen as simply exercising their democratic rights. When will Saudi Arabia be able to do the same, and not regard those democratic rights and criticisms as crimes against the state? He also said that the United Kingdom was colluding with abuses in Saudi Arabia, and I am sure that the Minister will reply to that point.
The right hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt)—sorry, the hon. and gallant Member; he is not right honourable—

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Not yet.

Fabian Hamilton: Not yet; I am sure he will be very soon. He told us again that Saudi Arabia was an important ally, which is absolutely true. However, like many of our allies, we must hold them to account for abuses that are taking place in those countries, and I believe we should never be apologetic about that. Saudi Arabia is, of course, a human rights priority for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the hon. and gallant Gentleman said that disengagement from Saudi Arabia would send a very bad message to other human rights abusers: that if we did not like what was going on there, we had no more to do with them. Maybe he has a point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) talked about the vote in the House of Representatives in Washington to block the supply of munitions for the war in Yemen, which is an important point. She also said that there were question marks over the accuracy of the targeting of some of the weapons—some of which may well have been supplied by the United Kingdom—used against schools, hospitals and innocent civilians in Yemen. That is an issue that we have discussed on many occasions.

The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) mentioned Robin Cook’s ethical dimension to his foreign policy, something that we are all trying to build on. Certainly, we on the Opposition Benches hope to build on that in preparation for being in government after the next general election is held, whenever that may be. However, the right hon. Gentleman rightly said—as every right hon. and hon. Member has said this afternoon—that we should never be silent in criticising regimes, even when the relationship is vital to our national strategic interests. One cannot disagree with him. He said that there is no morally perfect solution, and I certainly support that view.

As I have said and according to the former Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), Saudi Arabia is a Foreign and Commonwealth Office human rights priority country. FCO officials have consistently stated that they regularly discuss human rights with the Saudi Government. We have also heard that Saudi Arabia is to host the next G20 summit next year. Agnès Callamard, the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, has urged the G20 countries to reconsider holding that G20 meeting in Saudi Arabia in the light of the death of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

As has been referenced in some of this afternoon’s contributions, the Saudi authorities set up the specialised criminal court system in 2008, ostensibly to prosecute terrorism-related cases. In 2014, the Saudi Government issued a new penal law for crimes of terrorism and finance, which broadened the authority of the SCC to prosecute anyone who “disturbs public order, shakes the security of society or subjects its national unity to danger, or obstructs the primary system of rule or harms the reputation of the state”. That broad language has been used to arrest and prosecute many human rights defenders and try them in the SCC. The SCC is highly restrictive and refuses to allow even diplomats to observe its trials, in clear violation of the Vienna convention. The Foreign Office has already criticised Saudi Arabia for not allowing diplomats to observe the trials of women’s rights defenders in March 2019. I wonder whether the Minister can update us on what conversations he or his colleagues have had with the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding access to the SCC by our, and other countries’, diplomats.

Saudi Arabia continues to detain people without charge for indefinite periods, and—this is the important thing—without access to counsel or fair trials. Many arbitrary arrests are made to deter others from speaking up, such as women’s rights defenders, as the spokesperson for the Scottish National party, the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said. As we have also heard, many prisoners are denied the medical attention that they often desperately need.

Saudi Arabia is one of the most prolific users of the death penalty in the world, often doing so in mass executions of over 30 people, as happened in April this year. According to Reprieve, since the ascension of King Salman to the throne in January 2015, the state has signed off more than 700 death sentences as of May 2019. In the first six months of this year, Saudi Arabia executed 122 people, making it the bloodiest year since 2015. During the same period in 2017, 41 people were executed; in 2016, that figure was 88, and in 2015, it was 103. Reprieve also noted that in 2018, at least 12 human rights activists were sentenced to death.

We have heard a bit about women’s rights this afternoon. In mid-2018, Saudi authorities arrested prominent women’s rights activists, many of whom are still in detention today, although I am glad to hear that some have now been released. The Saudi Government are allegedly planning to relax the strict guardianship laws to allow women to travel without requiring the permission of their male guardian. However, as we know, the Saudi Ministry of Interior has created a smartphone app called Absher that notifies a male guardian if a woman under his guardianship passes through an airport. He can then automatically withdraw her right to travel. No other country in the world has such restrictions on women. As we have heard, after lifting the ban on women being able to drive in the kingdom, the authorities jailed the women activists who had been campaigning for that right for years. Loujain al-Hathloul, Eman al-Nafjan and Aziza al-Yousef were jailed under the country’s cyber-crime laws, which can carry sentences of up to five years in jail.

Since the protests related to the Arab spring broke out across the region in 2011, more than 50 children have been arrested in Saudi Arabia. Some remain in custody, lacking any kind of due process. At least six individuals arrested as minors were executed in the first half of 2019. On 24 April, six minors were beheaded in a mass execution; none had been informed of their impending execution, and all were refused the right to see family members before they were executed.

Saudi Arabia has been a signatory of the convention on the rights of the child since 1996. Under that convention, a minor is described as anyone under the age of 18; under international law, it is illegal to sentence a person

"disturbs public order, shakes the security of society or subjects its national unity to danger, or obstructs the primary system of rule or harms the reputation of the state".

[Fabian Hamilton]
under 18 to death. Murtaja Qureiris, aged 18, has been sentenced to death by the Saudi authorities. He was arrested in September 2014, aged just 13 years old. Thanks to international pressure, he was given a stay of execution last month, but we do not know how long that will last for. We have heard about Ali al-Nimr, Abdullah al-Zaher and Dawood al-Marhoon, three other juveniles who were arrested in 2012 and sentenced to death. They were tortured, and confessions were forced out of them.

The UK continues to give assistance to Saudi Arabia despite a deepening crackdown on dissent. Saudi Arabia is a key ally in a strategically important region; it is an important partner in trade, investment, education, counter-terrorism, defence and energy security. The Minister for the Armed Forces, the right hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), has written:

“We are committed to maintaining and developing the relationship.”

Recently, the former British Foreign Secretary David Miliband told The Washington Post:

“All those countries that have a relationship with Saudi Arabia need to use those relationships in a way that curbs the failed war strategy in Yemen.”

In February 2019, the Lords International Relations Committee stated in a report that the United Kingdom was “on the wrong side of the law” by allowing arms exports to Saudi Arabia for the war in Yemen. That was before the Supreme Court judgment. That report stated that “relying on assurances by Saudi Arabia and Saudi-led review processes is not an adequate way of implementing the obligations for a risk-based assessment set out in the Arms Trade Treaty.”

Labour has consistently criticised the UK Government for allowing arms sales to Saudi Arabia, especially for their use in the civil war in Yemen. The shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), has said that “Ministers have wilfully disregarded the evidence that Saudi Arabia was violating international humanitarian law in Yemen, while continuing to supply them with weapons.”

Labour has continually called for a full parliamentary or public inquiry to find out how that has happened.

A UN report earlier this year said Saudi Arabia executed an “extrajudicial killing” by a 14-man team linked to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. At least 30 journalists are detained in Saudi Arabia. Saudi blogger Raif Badawi was sent to prison in 2012 for insulting Islam and has received 50 of the 1,000 lashes he was sentenced to. Saudi Arabia is ranked 172nd of 180 countries in 2019’s world press freedom index.

4 pm

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

It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) and a number of extremely fine speeches. Although it is a Thursday afternoon, it is a pity more hon. and right hon. Members are not here, but I am sure that does not reflect the interest the House of Commons has in these matters.

I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing this debate. I welcome the opportunity to discuss and debate the UK Government’s approach to Saudi Arabia which, as we have discovered in the course of this afternoon, is complex and nuanced. In the points I make in response to colleagues, I will attempt to explain why that is. In doing so, I want to be completely frank about our significant concerns. Ultimately, we believe that progress will be hastened through constructive engagement with the kingdom, so I will highlight work we are doing to support human rights in Saudi Arabia.

People often suggest—Members have done so today—that there is a contradiction between UK interests in Saudi Arabia and our democratic values. They suggest we choose to put our interests above human rights. Those are simplistic arguments based around a false premise, and they miss the point. It is precisely our shared interests and our extensive ties with Saudi Arabia that give us an effective platform to raise our concerns and to encourage human rights progress. If there is no dialogue with those we seek to influence, the debate is purely among ourselves and we become a delusional debating society. As such, I find common cause with my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), and commend him for two things: first, his work for women’s human rights defenders, about which he was very modest; and secondly his very fine speech.

I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) for his typically fine speech. He balanced our desire to ensure that we encourage progress in Saudi Arabia with being unashamed of our norms, values and realpolitik. He raised the spectre of what might happen in the event we did not engage in the way I believe we are. It is a choice that Members make. We either bring down the shutters and give ourselves a warm feeling and do virtue signalling, which makes us feel good, or we engage, understanding the sense of frustration, unhappiness and awkwardness it gives us, while giving ourselves at least the prospect of having a dialogue with Saudi Arabia. I choose the latter, though I am tempted by the former, since I rather like the absolutist, black and white way of approaching some of these matters. It would be fairly straightforward. We could all stand here and in the Chamber and make fine speeches about the evils and wickedness of regimes with which we do not see eye to eye, but it is not clear to me how that will move things on for our intended beneficiaries, which in this instance are the people of Saudi Arabia, the people in the wider region and, ultimately, ourselves.

Catherine West: Will the Minister accept that the situation is getting worse as per the evidence given by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) in his speech? Will he also accept that the situation in relation to our business relationships and the war in Yemen puts this in a different light from other countries where there are human rights concerns?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Lady cited something from the United States that happened fairly recently, but I do not accept her position. I understand her concerns. She did not cite the recent Court of Appeal case, but we could discuss that in relation to some of the businesses that I think are in her mind. The fact of the matter is, as the 2017 judgment made clear, that the people exercising these judgments are full of anxiety and anguish—those words are used in that judgment. On my part, as well as that of my predecessors and my officials and advisers, I have to say how much I resent the implication that those
[Dr Murrison] decisions are made lightly. We are human beings, and sometimes we will get decisions wrong, but the consolidated criteria on which we and our allies depend are rigorous and robust, and even the appellate court was good enough to acknowledge that.

I remain convinced that the standards we apply in this country are among the best in the world and are a beacon for others to follow. That does not detract in any way from the fact that, in a complex situation where our intelligence is—from time to time, if not most of the time—inevitably partial, we can get things wrong. That is inevitable, but we have to weigh things up.

Returning to the points I made earlier, it is my view that our engagement with Saudi Arabia is, in general, positive. It is more likely to engage Saudi Arabia and procure what we would see as good behaviour on its part than the alternative, which is disengagement. I will come on to some further points on defence and security, but ultimately as politicians we have to decide which we choose. I am pleased that the United Kingdom has historically been and remains in the company of those who choose engagement and influence rather than distance.

I am concerned, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East and my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Reigate clearly are, that if we changed tack and policy direction, we would isolate the regime in Riyadh. The consequences are very difficult to predict. It is an extraordinarily dangerous region. A change in direction could pose a real and present threat to this country and the people the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and I represent. I will come on to some further points on defence and security.

Mr Carmichael: The debate is now essentially not about whether we intervene, but about how we intervene and with what force. The asks I made of the Minister in relation to those who were detained in November 2017 were four very basic, modest asks: the right for someone to be told what they are charged with; their right to be released if they are not charged; their right to have their assets given back if there is no legal basis for taking them; and, most fundamentally, the request for proof of life. Surely those requests are at one end of the spectrum, and the Government should have no difficulty in making them forcibly and publicly.

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman because he brings me on to my next remarks. I will try hard not to be diverted by some of the broader issues in addressing what I think are the guts of his thesis, which relate to those who have been detained, imprisoned and misused.

Of course, the big headline figure in all this is Jamal Khashoggi, whose brutal murder and dismemberment truly sickened the world. There cannot be any of us who are not revolted by that story. It is a stain on the reputation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and I look forward to details of what happened being made public and explicit very soon. It would be appalling if Saudi Arabia decided to obfuscate or obscure that terrible episode. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia must make it very clear what remedial action will be taken in respect of those who are responsible and to prevent such events from happening in future.

The lack of transparency around the anti-corruption campaign, including the Ritz-Carlton detentions, mainly of Ministers, princes and businessmen, gives the international community cause for concern. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland will know that, in February last year, those remaining at the Ritz were released following a number of court settlements, or transferred to prison pending prosecution. Let us be clear: those remaining in prison must be brought to trial or released. Their assets must be unfrozen if it is not the intention of the Saudi authorities to bring charges against those individuals.

The right hon. Gentleman can be sure that the Foreign Secretary and the ambassador in Riyadh lose no opportunity to raise the plight of those individuals, and to insist that their cases must be brought to a conclusion. They must be either charged with the corruption with which they have been associated, or released and their assets unfrozen. I will ensure that we continue to apply what pressure we can on KSA in order to achieve that end. However, it is not just about the 50 who are imprisoned, about whom we remain concerned; it is also about the mechanism within the Saudi state that allows such circumstances to arise, and the judicial process that Saudi uses to apprehend and manage that case load.

The hon. Member for Leeds North East mentioned the specialised criminal court, which is used to try cases that our peers among the international community would not regard as terrorist cases at all. There have been allusions in the debate to the kinds of things that Saudi Arabia might imagine constitute terrorism. I have to say that the same practice is found in a number of states within the Gulf region—it is not unique to Saudi Arabia. It is a source of frustration for many of us who deal with consular issues to try to work out why individuals have been apprehended on particular charges that look, on the face of it, outrageous and ridiculous, but that is because we are judging by our own standards and mores.

The way that many countries in the region regard such things as terrorism and offences against the state can be very different from our own. That is in no way to justify it, but it is to begin to try to understand it. I share the concerns expressed by the hon. about the SCC, and those concerns are shared with our interlocutors on a regular basis. More generally, we believe that civil and political rights strengthen a nation. I think we all believe that—otherwise we would not be here. Those rights make the state more resilient and more stable, and it is in all our interests to see a secure, stable and moderate Saudi Arabia playing a constructive role in a highly volatile region.

Free expression allows innovation to thrive and ideas to develop—an essential foundation for economic development and social cohesion. I was particularly interested in the remarks made by my hon. Friends on the nature of that cohesion, and the implicit threat to it
if Saudi Arabia’s friends in the west behave in a way that isolates it and distances it from our norms and values. In our conversations with Saudi leaders and officials, we consistently underline the importance of respecting freedom of expression and the right to peaceful protest. In a country wedded to social media, that includes online activity. We make the case that such issues are the guarantors of long-term stability in the region.

The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have spoken to the Saudi Government about a number of the cases mentioned today. They are listed in my briefing notes, and do not make for easy reading. Some of it has been articulated in the course of the debate, but not all of it. We have raised our concerns at the most senior levels about the increasing number of people detained for crimes relating to freedom of expression, as well as allegations of torture in detention and the lack of transparency in the aforementioned judicial process.

During the UN universal periodic review of Saudi Arabia’s human rights record in November, and the UN human rights council in March, we made clear our concerns about the constrained political environment. Right hon. and hon. Members are right to say that we believe that it is getting worse rather than better. The Government utterly condemned Jamal Khashoggi’s killing in the strongest possible terms. At the UN human rights council in June, we set out our expectation for a transparent judicial process and urged Saudi Arabia to take steps to ensure that such crimes will not happen again.

I will address the questions raised by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland as fully as I can. If he feels that I have not addressed them fully, I am more than happy to exchange correspondence with him. I agree with him about the appalling spectacle of 37 mainly Shi’a men executed in April. That was an appalling, ghastly spectacle, and I have no doubt that the leadership in Saudi Arabia want to ensure that the good reputation of their country is not besmirched and stained again in the way that it undoubtedly was.

One hon. Member talked about shaming Saudi Arabia. Shaming is dangerous in respect of many of the countries in the Gulf region. Shaming is perhaps a bit of a challenge, but certainly the reputation of our interlocutors is important to them. In our discourse with them, it is important to point out in clear terms, as their embassies in London most certainly will, that such things put the relationship between the UK, and the west in general, and the country in question back many years. It is vital that those countries give full thought and consideration to what such things do in terms of their reputation with those that they wish to influence and, in many cases, to emulate.

Diplomats from our embassy in Riyadh attempt to observe all trials of international concern, with varying effectiveness. We have lobbied at the highest levels for the diplomatic observation of human rights trials to be reinstated as a matter of routine. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland rightly said that the UK condemns the death penalty in all countries and in all circumstances. I think the hon. and learned Member for Orkney and Shetland spoke about. I agree with him about the appalling spectacle of 37 mainly Shi’a men executed in April. That was an appalling, ghastly spectacle, and I have no doubt that the leadership in Saudi Arabia want to ensure that the good reputation of their country is not besmirched and stained again in the way that it undoubtedly was.

I hope it is abundantly clear from all I have said that we have held Saudi Arabia to account at every opportunity. It goes well beyond the hand-wringing that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland spoke about. I am sure he did not mean to imply that consecutive Governments, including the one in which he was a senior Minister, have indulged in hand-wringing, but I sensed in his remarks a degree of frustration that we cannot do more to achieve an effect. As a Minister in the Foreign Office, I certainly know that frustration and live with it all the time.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith tried to paint the Government into a conspiracists’ corner and cited arms exports and detainees. The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green also spoke about arms exports. It is certainly true that some people call for defence and security exports to be halted on moral grounds, which is a perfectly respectable position to adopt, but the legality of our arms exports rests on our rigorous application of the consolidated criteria. The UK takes that responsibility very seriously.

I am not persuaded by calls for a broad-brush end to defence and security exports, for three primary reasons. First, to stop our defence and security exports would signal a disregard for Saudi Arabia’s legitimate security concerns. Regional tensions are acute. Saudi Arabia has faced missile attacks on critical national infrastructure and faces cyber-attacks, as do we. Our system of export licensing supports responsible exports that meet legitimate defence and security needs. Revoking long-standing defence and security co-operation would undermine Saudi Arabia’s ability to protect itself, creating a vulnerability that could be exploited by malign regional actors. Secondly, halting exports of materials and skills in this area would not prevent Saudi Arabia from procurement elsewhere. Alternative partners of Saudi Arabia are unlikely to exhibit the same standards as our rigorous and robust arms export regimes do. Thirdly, it is no secret that Saudi Arabia is the UK’s largest defence export market. The adverse economic impact on the UK’s defence
[Dr Murrison]

industrial base, which translates into real jobs for real people in our constituencies, would be significant. Before simply waving those off and batting them away, I would have to be wholly convinced that the aforementioned two points were adequately satisfied, which I do not think I ever will be.

Let me be clear about the anguish and anxiety that I, my ministerial colleagues and officials go through in approving anything that might be used to inflict harm and damage internally or against civilian populations. I have been a Minister in this Department for two months, and the number of these matters I have seen is fairly small, but I can say to this gathering that nothing I have done has caused me more anxiety and anguish than the situation in Saudi Arabia. It is important that people know the amount of work that goes into this, and the district and appellate courts have made that perfectly clear.

Catherine West: I thank the Minister for his generosity in giving way. Will he at least consider adopting the same approach to end-use compliance as that of the US? Recent research shows that the end-use compliance of British manufactured arms is not as good as the system used by the USA, which is our closest ally.

Dr Murrison: It is always very nice to take note of what our closest ally is doing, but these days I am probably more inclined to look at what our colleagues in the European Union are doing. In so many respects, they more closely align with our general approach to issues of this sort. I say that not to disparage our best and closest international neighbour, but to state a matter of fact. It is articulated through the EU consolidated criteria, which take note of a number of factors, including where exports are likely to end up—the point to which the hon. Lady refers.

We should recognise where progress has been made in Saudi Arabia. In contrast with the constraints on civil and political rights, there is little doubt that we have seen significant social and economic changes in Saudi Arabia. The scale and scope of reform driven by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman has been unprecedented in the history of the kingdom. I am not an apologist for anybody, and I am certainly not a tourist guide for Saudi Arabia, but it is important that we acknowledge where things have been done that we support.

Andy Slaughter: The problem I am having with the Minister’s speech is that he keeps answering questions that have not been asked and caricaturing those who have been critical of the Saudi regime as somehow wanting to break off relations for all time or to end any trade with the area. It is all very well talking about social and economic rights, but this is a debate on human rights in Saudi Arabia. Will he answer the question I put to his hon. Friend the Member for Regate (Crispin Blunt): where has he seen an improvement in human rights in Saudi Arabia under the Mohammad bin Salman regime?

Dr Murrison: I think the hon. Gentleman wants proof. Well, I cannot do a controlled trial, although I used to be a scientist. We cannot do controlled trials to determine what would have happened had we not intervened. All we can do is operate on the basis of the evidence in front of us and try to work out the best way forward. That is imprecise, and it may be unsatisfactory to the hon. Gentleman, but it is none the less true. He wonders why I am not answering questions that have been put to me. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West rightly raised the position of women and girls. As it happens, she mentioned driving and made some important points that had not hitherto been made. Some people would say that women being able to drive is a trivial matter and does not in any way compare with the sort of human rights abuses cited by other right hon. and hon. Members.

Joanna Cherry: The point I was making is that it is not a trivial matter for women to be able to convey themselves from A to B in the same way as a man can. However, the more important point I was making, which the Minister will surely appreciate, is that the women who campaigned for this basic right have now been imprisoned, despite the fact that the Government have introduced it, and some of them have been tortured. That is a serious matter, and I associate myself with right hon. and hon. Members’ request for a clear response to the points made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael).

Dr Murrison: I was about to say lots of nice things about the hon. and learned Lady in respect of raising this issue, but I might have to change my mind.

I was going to say that, although some might consider this to be a trivial matter, it is really quite extraordinary in the context of what we know to be the nature of Saudi society—a deeply conservative society, particularly outside Riyadh and Jeddah—and it is totemic of wider societal changes within the kingdom that have to be encouraged. It underscores my previous point, which is where we should draw the line and what approach we should have, as a country, towards this nation state—whether we decide to go off in a huff and have nothing to do with it, and perhaps apply a more prurient approach to Riyadh, or whether we engage fully with it, as I believe we are doing. The point I am trying to make is that, although we have to be eternally vigilant, it seems that the balance is about right. Indeed, it is a balance that was struck under previous Governments, including the Government in which the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland served.

I was going to go on to celebrate the fact that women are undertaking new roles in Saudi Arabia, which I would hope the hon. and learned Lady would applaud. Women now sit on the board of the Hajj Authority, and can train as prosecutors and pilots. The first female Saudi ambassador has just been appointed to Washington. The steps taken to curtail the powers of the religious police and to reduce the scope of the guardianship system, which has been mentioned, are also cause for applause. We welcome those positive steps, but our aim is still to see the end of all gender discrimination. We will continue to encourage the full participation of women in Saudi life. As we are listened to by Riyadh, I hope that we will have some success in that endeavour.

We welcome recent statements by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on returning Saudi Arabia to a more moderate Islam that is tolerant of other faiths. To
build momentum, it is important that religious voices from across the spectrum are not excluded, and that inclusive dialogue is encouraged.

Under Vision 2030, social and cultural opportunities are increasing. After a 35-year ban, the first cinema was opened, in March 2018, and there are now 15 cinemas in the kingdom, with more planned. Again, some might think that a trivial point given the human rights abuses that have been the bulk of our discussion today, but it is not; it is totemic of a broader societal change in the kingdom.

In 2018, the General Authority for Entertainment organised more than 5,000 live shows, festivals and concerts, including art and cultural events across 56 cities—an extraordinary and remarkable thing. Again, we should resist the temptation to dismiss that as trivial against what we have discussed, because it is an important indicator of progress and of a leadership that is prepared to change within the constraints of a conservative social system.

This Government firmly believe that our relationship with Saudi Arabia continues to be of utmost strategic importance to the UK. That relationship helps us to address global security challenges, such as Iran’s malign behaviour. Our co-operation also supports security inside the United Kingdom for the people we represent. Our common interests and our long-standing partnership give us the platform to raise our concerns and the influence to encourage further developments in the Kingdom.

As we have discussed, rights and fundamental freedoms are severely limited in Saudi Arabia. Progress has been gradual and is not close to where we want the country to be. That is why Saudi Arabia will continue to be a human rights priority country—not a club that any country wants to be a member of. It is right that we continue to be confident about our values and norms and that we promote them globally. It is right that we should express our concerns about human rights in a frank and open way, and we do that with Saudi Arabia at the highest levels, both in private and in public.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) made a fine speech about modern slavery. As he will know, at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2017, Saudi Arabia endorsed the Prime Minister’s call to end modern slavery. I take that as a positive sign.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) rightly raised the issue of UK funding for police operations in Saudi Arabia. I have covered the tone of that point in my remarks, but to be specific, he will know that the Government complete rigorous human rights assessments are done before undertaking justice and security operations, to ensure that all work meets our international human rights obligations and our values. My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Reigate is an expert in those matters, and I commend him for the work that he did when he was in office.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland also asked about the integrated activity fund, which is a relatively recent fund. All IAF projects undergo assessment and review. We cannot disclose information about particular IAF projects in greater detail, as we have a duty to maintain the confidence and confidentiality of our partners, but I am happy to enter into a correspondence with him, if he would find that helpful.

The hon. Member for Leeds North East asked about funding extremism—I think it was him. I am pleased to report that Saudi Arabia attained full membership of the Financial Action Task Force last month, committing the kingdom to countering terrorism financing and money laundering. That is a positive move. We of course await further developments on that front, but it is again cause for supposing that Saudi Arabia is making progress—not at the rate he wants or I want, but at a Saudi pace. Working with an instinctively conservative country, he will understand that that has to be how this rolls out. Any more than that and we will head for the sort of difficulties referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East and my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate.

We will continue to work with like-minded Governments and organisations, and with human rights defenders, to engage with the Saudi Arabian Government to bring about positive change and to promote and defend universal freedoms. It is important to get that right, not just for the country but for the region and, ultimately, for our own security. I believe that is the right approach.

4.36 pm

Mr Carmichael: Thank you, Sir Henry, and Mr Evans before you, for chairing our proceedings. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to this excellent and thoughtful debate. I thank the Minister for his very substantial reply. I had not realised that he had been a Minister in this post for two months, which by contemporary standards is a record of durability and longevity. I wish him well in the weeks ahead.

I will take up the Minister’s kind offer of further correspondence regarding the force required in relation to the detainees, especially those from November 2017, and to the detail of the IAF funding and the College of Policing. I was perhaps remiss in not giving him advance notice of what I was going to say about that. Rest assured, if the correspondence is not fruitful, I suspect that we will be back here at some point in the future.

In particular, I thank the Minister for his clear and strong reaffirmation of the policy on the use of the death penalty. I suspect this was no accident. I say that because I have been on this beat for quite a few years. I set up the all-party parliamentary group on the abolition of the death penalty more years ago than I care to remember. I have campaigned against it in different parts of the world including the United States, South Korea and Japan. Most recently, I was in Japan at the end of February, working with the bar association there on its policy for the abolition of the death penalty in Japan. The embassy staff in Tokyo engaged on that issue in an absolutely exemplary manner. I could not have asked for better, more committed or more energetic support than I got during my time there. That has been my experience wherever I have gone, working with embassies and consulates in any part of the world in relation to this issue. To hear the Minister reaffirm that policy in the strongest possible terms is welcome and I commend him for it.
Mr Carmichael

The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) referred to this issue as a moral maze. I think that is absolutely correct. The hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) spoke of the danger of pushing Saudi Arabia into the hands of other global powers, most notably China and Russia. I completely understand the tensions at play there. There is an element of competition when we consider not just human rights records, but our trading aspirations. We have to deal with that tension all the time. The Minister dealt with that in some detail.

I will leave the House with this thought. As we know, the G20 is heading to Saudi Arabia. Before that happens, there is time for this country to give a lead in talking to other members of the G20, so that we can all go to Saudi Arabia ahead of that meeting and say, “Here are our concerns. These are the matters that will be in our newspapers and television stations when the media of the world come to Saudi Arabia for the G20. You have time on your hands now and the opportunity to do something about it.” It strikes me that that would be a useful multilateral initiative that we could take, which would avoid some of the other tensions that come into play. I hope that is the sort of approach that our Government, which are committed in a meaningful way to human rights in other parts of the world, could take.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered human rights in Saudi Arabia and the detention of opponents of the regime.

4.40 pm

Sitting adjourned.
NHS and Future Trade Deals

4.30 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered e-petition 242300 relating to future trade deals and the National Health Service.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank Mr Byron Davis for starting the petition, which to date has attracted 166,998 signatures, including more than 200 from my constituency. The petition is entitled, “Don’t put our NHS up for negotiation”, and it asks the Government to, “Please introduce concrete safeguards that will make sure our NHS is kept out of any future trade deals after Brexit.”

It goes on to say:

“Words aren’t enough—we want watertight protections that will keep our NHS off the negotiating table. Why is this important? When done well, trade deals can be good for the UK. They can help create jobs and build opportunities... But this plan would put our health service at risk.”

The Government responded on 17 June 2019:

“The Government has been clear: the NHS is not, and never will be, for sale to the private sector. The Government will ensure no trade agreements will ever be able to alter this fundamental fact.”

The Department for International Trade went on to provide a detailed 491-word response to the petition, which can be found on the Petitions Committee website. It includes commitments such as:

“the NHS is not, and never will be, for sale to the private sector, whether overseas or domestic.”

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This is a crucial debate. The Government have already awarded £9 billion-worth of contracts. Section 75 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 is the biggest threat to the NHS, as it opens up the whole NHS to the market. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must urgently repeal section 75 to safeguard our NHS?

Mike Hill: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, and I completely agree that the Government need to pay urgent attention to that.

The Government’s response continued:

“the Government will continue to ensure that decisions on how to run public services are made by UK Governments, including the Devolved Administrations, and not our trade partners.”

It also said:

“Trade agreements do not prevent governments from regulating as they see fit, and they also do not require governments to privatise any services... The Government will ensure that nothing in our future trade agreements dilutes the powers of UK regulators to maintain the NHS’s position as the best health service in the world.”

However, as the petitioner says, words are not enough. By tomorrow, we will have a new Prime Minister; by the end of the week, we will probably have a new Cabinet, a new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and possibly a new Government position on these matters. Although we hear time and again, from across the Benches, support for the great institution that is the national health service and for its abiding principle of being free at the point of need, those are only words without deeds.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on opening this debate. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) that the Government should repeal section 75 as a matter of urgency, because if they do not, they will throw the national health service to the dogs. Nobody wants that to happen, particularly with predators such as Donald Trump’s Administration. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Mike Hill: I agree that it is truly a case of words, not deeds.

Although people may find it reassuring to hear the current Secretary of State for Health and Social Care say that the NHS is not for sale and will not be on the table in any future trade talks, we cannot take his word for granted. Equally, we cannot ignore the remarks to which he was responding. They were made by the US ambassador to Britain, Woody Johnson, in an interview with the BBC’s Andrew Marr. In that interview, he confirmed that in a trade deal with the United States, the whole economy—including the NHS—would be on the table. The shadow Health Secretary described those comments as “terrifying.” He went on to say:

“The ambassador’s comments...show that a real consequence of a no-deal Brexit, followed by a trade deal with Trump, will be our NHS up for sale.”

Others such as Nigel Farage, the leader of the Brexit party, have advocated a move away from state-funded healthcare to a more Americanised model. In 2014, he told UK Independence party supporters:

“I think we are going to have to think about healthcare very, very differently. I think we are going to have to move to an insurance-based system of healthcare.”

Whatever opinions, promises or pledges are out there, it is clear that if the NHS is not for sale, it must be protected and future-proofed against the outcomes of any trade agreements with the USA and any other nation state. That, simply, is what the petition asks for.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I support my hon. Friend’s comments about the petition. I am pleased that my constituency was in the top 10 for the highest number for signatures.

My hon. Friend is right to highlight the Government’s commitments. Indeed, the October 2017 White Paper on future trade arrangements said that the protections of EU free trade agreements would continue to apply in future trade agreements. Does he agree that we need to give some strength to those commitments and some assurance to the petitioners, along the lines of what the British Medical Association has requested, and that the Government and the Minister should thereby respond to the debate by committing to put into primary legislation a commitment that economic benefits cannot take precedence over public health policy in future trade agreements?

Mike Hill: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point with which I agree. The voice of the BMA and other professional bodies is most important and must be heard.
The petition asks for the provision of “concrete safeguards” to keep NHS services out of any future trade deals. That is nothing new; that fight has been ongoing for years, even within the EU. To this very day, those British Members of the European Parliament who care about our NHS are battling to keep NHS services out of the developing Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership between the EU and the USA.

The Government said in response to the petition, “The UK’s public services are protected by specific exceptions and reservations in EU Free Trade Agreements. As we leave the EU, the UK will continue to ensure that rigorous protections are included in all trade agreements it is party to”, but that can be only an aspiration. It is not a cast-iron guarantee that the transfer of any EU regulations into UK law will specifically protect the NHS from future trade agreements. Just as the EU found with TTIP, we will need to further regulate for the exclusion of NHS services from trade agreements. Action, not words, needs to be the order of the day. Given that the Government refused in 2016 to exclude the NHS from the TTIP negotiations, that may well turn out to be a tall order.

American healthcare providers can already compete to deliver services in the UK. However, the threat to the NHS of a US trade deal would be through clauses that lock in existing levels of privatisation and prevent future Governments from rolling them back.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is clear that the NHS is already for sale. Only recently, the urgent care centre in my constituency was put out to tender. It was recommended that a private, for-profit company should run that facility, which was previously an NHS service. As has been stated, a record £9 billion of contracts have been awarded to the private sector. Does my hon. Friend agree that we would see prices rise and agreements, pressure them.”

Mike Hill: As always, my hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Let us not forget the millions spent compensating private companies that lose contracts and take the Government to court.

Trade deals are not only dangerous for the future of the NHS, as they would entrench privatisation, but undermine our democracy, as future Governments would be shackled by their binding provisions. That is why some say the only way to fully protect our NHS from trade deals is to fully exclude it from them.

Rachael Maskell: Does my hon. Friend agree that the riskiest point of entry for privatisation in our NHS is big pharma? Clearly, big pharma will seek to run other services in our NHS. It is essential that any trade deal takes seriously the threat big pharma poses to our NHS, given the service’s extensive drugs bill.

Mike Hill: Again, I agree with my hon. Friend and bow to her knowledge. We all know that pharmaceuticals is one of the major gateways to the potential privatisation of NHS services. I say again that the only way to fully protect our NHS from trade deals is to fully exclude it from them. As far as I and, I am sure, the petitioners are concerned, that is precisely what we should do.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Alex Azar, the US Health and Human Services Secretary, has said that Washington will use its muscle to push up drug prices abroad in order to lower the costs paid by patients in the United States. He said on CNBC: “On the foreign side, we need to, through our trade negotiations and agreements, pressure them.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that we would see prices rise in our NHS?

Mike Hill: Undoubtedly, and we would be hostages to fortune. My hon. Friend makes a very important point right at the end of my speech. I reiterate that I believe, as I am confident the petitioners do, that we should fully exclude the NHS from trade deals.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): It seems to me that we are debating that old chestnut, “public good, private bad.” We must take into consideration the fact that 7.6% of all NHS spending goes on what we might call private-type enterprises. They are not all for-profit enterprises; many are in the not-for-profit sector, such as community interest companies and charities. This issue is often portrayed as uniquely Conservative, with the suggestion that we want somehow to privatisate the NHS, but all the facts, including the additional expenditure on the NHS in the past few years, demonstrate completely the opposite. In 2010, when the Labour Government left office, 4.4% of NHS spending went on the alternative, non-public sector. That figure is now 7.6%. The rate of growth has been exactly the same since 2010 as it was under the Labour Government.

I am sure that what underlies the petition is the petitioners’ fear of what might happen in future trade deals. One deal did not come to pass—the old TTIP, which the rest of Europe has decided not to pursue. I for one would very much welcome a future US trade deal, and I am sure we will be in a better place to negotiate one, given the rather sluggish way the EU seems to approach international trade deals. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for acknowledging that international trade deals generally are for the good; they expand investment and much more besides in terms of international relations. At the time of TTIP, the same fears emerged, with people asking, “Will our NHS be up for sale?” Love her or loathe her, Cecilia Malmström, the EU’s then Trade Commissioner, made it very clear that national health services were not on the agenda in the UK or anywhere else in the EU.

We saw something similar with the comprehensive economic and trade agreement with Canada, which is deemed to be what we might call best in class. It is seen as a good free trade arrangement, which, obviously, I would like the UK to have with the EU in the future. CETA is an advanced trade deal that allows for the sort of good things that happy, friendly trading nations can believe, such as reciprocal recognition of qualifications, but that deal has always contained a specific exemption for Government-procured public services “supplied in the exercise of governmental authority.”

I can only envisage that we would do the same in any trade deals the UK might make as an independent country. That is in our hands. That is for this place to decide.

This country has always been open for business. I do not know the figures, but we have very few restrictions on foreign ownership of our companies. I do not know
whether I use them myself, but frankly, I do not much care if an outsourced Indonesian company provides blood testing. I want the service to be provided at the best possible price and the best quality to the taxpayer. I am sure there are many services paid for by the NHS that are owned by foreign companies—American, French, German, Swiss, Swedish and so on. I really do not care too much, because what is important about the NHS is that it is free at the point of delivery. I am sure that in very many hospitals we enjoy equipment that is made overseas. We have the World Trade Organisation pharmaceutical tariff elimination agreement, so there are very few tariffs between any of the major countries on pharmaceutical products. We should take a wider view in these discussions than just, “public good, private bad”. We need some common sense.

Remarkably—this needs to be put on the table—many Opposition Members seem to want a customs union that goes on forever, and perhaps single market rules that go on forever. However, we would not have a seat at the table as the EU negotiated future trade deals around the world. We would be caught on the coat-tails of a customs union, just as Turkey has to suffer. We could find our NHS on the table in trade negotiations between the EU and the rest of the world on deals that, as customs union members, we would just have to follow. We would be completely powerless. To me, that would be the worst of all worlds. At the moment, our Parliament—Opposition Members and Government Members—will be in control of what is on offer.

Mike Amesbury: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify how many trade deals the Government have negotiated that include aspects of healthcare?

Craig Mackinlay: To date, obviously none, because we are not able to, but many roll-over agreements are coming to fruition. The biggest, which the Department for International Trade concluded just a few weeks ago, is with Switzerland, which is a major provider of both pharmaceuticals and high-level industrial equipment, which is often used in manufacturing and in our hospitals.

Agreements are rolling over gradually, but I want us to be more ambitious. I want us to have international trade deals that open up greater transparency and friendship and boost trade. If that means we start having zero tariffs on fantastic products from Japan or elsewhere, what is the problem with that? I want the health service in this country to be the best in class and free at the point of delivery. If UK companies are able to provide services internationally, that has to be a good thing too. But the decision on procurement and whether to open up the NHS to competition from America, Australia or anywhere else should be taken in this place. We should not be caught on the coat-tails of perpetual customs union membership, which would give us no decision-making power whatsoever. In the future, this should be a decision for us—for this Parliament, in consultation with the public and indeed the very good people who put their name to the petition.

4.49 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for introducing the debate and setting out the petitioners’ concerns about this important issue.

I start by picking up the comments made by the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) that what we want is a matter for this House to discuss. It seems to me that this House, directed by my constituents and many others, is saying clearly that we do not want our NHS opened up to trade agreements and we do not want it exposed to international competition. That comes across very clearly to me as I speak to my constituents, whatever their views on Brexit. Everyone cares passionately about the NHS, and in the north-east we care about it especially. We have good services that we treasure, so my constituents are saying, “This is not for sale. It is not negotiable.” That is the setting.

As my hon. Friend said, words here are not enough. Earlier this year I took part in a debate on the Trade Bill during which we heard frequently that constituents were telling their Members of Parliament that they did not want the NHS to be opened up to competition or part of a negotiation. That message came through loud and clear. I am glad that people have been making that statement and making that argument time and again.

We need to keep reinforcing the fact that when we are talking about trade deals, that is something “up with which we shall not put”. As I said, people feel strongly about it. The Trade Bill debate went into a great deal of detail, with the NHS being one of the recurring issues. The Secretary of State and the Trade Ministers who presented and wound up the debate were keen to say that the NHS was to be protected. It is excluded from EU agreements on services, and we would want to replicate that. However, whatever happens after Brexit, we will have to negotiate new trade agreements, with all the clauses and requirements involved, which requires a hell of a lot of detail. In any negotiation, there are at least two parties—often more—with their red lines. We have ours—the NHS must be one of them—and other parties have theirs. We have differing views and different agendas, but I think the petitioners are telling us that we really must stick to those red lines. On President Trump’s visit, he made a statement about the NHS being on the table. Did he take it off the table again? We are clear that it is not on the table. It must not be on the table.

As my hon. Friend and the petitioners have said, just stating “the NHS is not for sale” is not the answer; fine words butter no parsnips. In all agreements, we need lots of detail clearly setting out how we will protect our NHS in many different circumstances. For example, there are currently charges in dentistry. How will we ensure that NHS dentistry is protected if there is already external private sector charging? Is it for profit or not for profit? We must also ensure that we can protect the existing overseas involvement in our NHS. There is a huge amount of detail. I have no doubt that a team of negotiators is looking at that, but that is the kind of fine detail that we cannot always get into when we discuss these matters in the House. It is crucial that we do get into that detail.

As we have heard, 7.3% of NHS expenditure is already spent on contracting. Many of us think that is far too much and that we should review it to ensure that we retain NHS services in-house, not because of the simplistic argument of “public good, private bad” but because we have seen too many failures of services. Yes, there are examples of good services, but plenty are not great. People will want to look at that angle. We need
much more detail, and we need a strong debate and measures to protect our NHS. We need the headline commitments, which must be not just about having an NHS free at the point of delivery but about looking after the public and preserving our services in-house in the UK. In the Trade Bill debates there was lots of talk about scrutiny of trade deals. It is imperative that we have an open and transparent way of scrutinising any proposals.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) talked about concerns about the impact on drug budgets and big pharma, as well as the fear that this may be seen as a ripe opportunity for prices to increase. I have just come from the main Chamber, where we were talking about access to medicine and treatments for Batten disease. Cost is one pressure that, sadly, can result in many people with rarer diseases being unable to get access to medicines and treatments that would improve their lives and, in some cases, extend or save them. There is a real concern that we may see drug prices increase in the future.

The petitioners have a quite simple message, but it is one that people are hearing loud and clear and want us to reiterate. We must protect our NHS in the context of any trade agreements. We do not want our NHS to be privatised or outsourced—even by accident. We care about our NHS and we must preserve it. It is one of our great features. I thank the petitioners for drawing our attention to this issue.

4.57 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): It is great to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for introducing this important debate. For people in my constituency, this issue is particularly timely. Last month, reports emerged that the Warrington and Halton Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust had begun to advertise a price list for operations that were previously free on the NHS. It offered 71 costly private operations, including vital procedures such as hip and knee replacements at over £18,000, cataracts at £2,368 and hernias at just under £8,000.

The fees were introduced as a result of Tory cuts, which are forcing the NHS to ration services that were once free at the point of use. The Opposition have consistently warned that such measures are leading to the gradual privatisation of NHS services, with vulnerable patients potentially forced to pay extortionate fees to cover medical costs. The pricing list was the first example of an NHS trust openly advertising private medical services in such a way. I was shocked to see the privatisation of our NHS advertised brazenly to my constituents, with the sick and vulnerable exploited for profit. It is an affront to the founding principles of our national health service.

I am pleased that, as a result of pressure from me, my colleagues and local campaign groups, the trust decided to pause and review the scheme. However, this is just a temporary victory, and there is no time for complacency. As we consider the bigger picture of our future trading relationships, there are great battles to be fought to defend our NHS from private interests.

In the same month that the price list was published, Donald Trump was invited to the UK at the behest of the Tory Government. Speaking at a joint press conference with the Prime Minister, he here that the national health service would form part of negotiations over a possible future trade deal between the UK and the United States. To use his exact words:

"When you're dealing in trade, everything is on the table."

What an appalling thought—that our NHS is reduced to a mere bargaining chip in negotiations.

The Tory leadership candidates are too cowardly to stand up to Donald Trump. Last week, they refused to cull his vile, bigoted attack on Ilhan Omar what it was: racism. That is not good enough. If the Tories will not stand up to Trump's racism, how can they be expected to stand up to him in trade negotiations? How can they be expected to stand up for the NHS? They cannot.

After he founded the NHS, Nye Bevan said of Great Britain:

"We now have the moral leadership of the world".

Today it does not feel like this country has any moral leadership at all. As always, we cannot trust the Tories to stand up to Donald Trump.

5 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for introducing the debate and speaking so well on behalf of the petitioners.

Let me start with a reference to Brexit, because I suspect that many of the concerns about trade deals, which may bring the NHS into play, will be driven by the loss of trade associated with Brexit. Let us remind ourselves of what the UK Government’s long-term economic analysis said. Under all the versions of Brexit that they analysed—the White Paper, the European economic area-type agreement, an average free trade agreement, and no deal—trade and GDP would be lower at the end of the forecast period than they otherwise would have been. The analysis went on to say that, under all those options—with the exception of the EEA, which does not apply—the situation would be worse if we had net zero migration from EEA workers. So before I come on to talk about trade, it is worth pointing out that we face a challenge relating to the retention and recruitment of staff if whatever Brexit we end up with drives a hideous and illogical end to the free movement of people.

The National Institute of Economic and Social Research’s analysis suggests that, depending on the type of Brexit, we could see a 22% to 30% fall in total trade. It went on to suggest that a free trade agreement with Brazil, Russia, India, China and all the major English-speaking economies, including the USA, would result in an approximately 6% uplift. I suspect that, if Brexit happens, Government thinking will end up being that, in order to make up some of the losses, we will have to have a quick win—a quick gain—probably with the USA. It is hard to see, for a variety of reasons, why the NHS would not be included in that.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is very concerning that, when the President was here on his state visit, he seemed to say that that was the No. 1 priority, despite the fact that our Prime Minister tried to deny that on the day?
Stewart Hosie: It was concerning that his initial response was, “Yeah, sure, the NHS—everything is on the table.” It was clawed back slightly the next day, but one wonders whether he understood what he said on the first day, or even what he said on the second day. The concerns out there among the public are very real, for the reasons I have set out. If we need to make up trade gains from the losses that almost every single forecast suggests we will have, it is hard to see how the NHS, or broader aspects of health, might not be included in some kind of trade deal.

The starting point for me is that we should not be contemplating exposing the NHS through trade deals, not least because the EU has made more trade deals with third countries than any other bloc, which we benefit from, and it has done so while protecting public services. It makes little or no sense to throw that away. The EU has protected public services such as the NHS in all trade negotiations. It has shown itself to be principled in its approach. Not only would we potentially lose access to those markets, but we do not have the means to replicate the agreements we already benefit from. The hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) mentioned the Swiss deal, but it was of course not rolled over in its entirety. Indeed, a number of the reports that came out at the time said: “The deal risks new limits on the export of agricultural products from the UK to Switzerland—for example, a possible ban on organic products...”

At the same time, a second roll-over deal was announced—the Norwegian one—but while it included zero duty for industrial goods, it did not include services. It was described in the Norwegian press as a “crisis agreement”, and it did not cover technical regulations and rules for trade in food, animals or plants.

I mention those two because they highlight the UK’s weakness in the Brexit process. If we are not able to roll over in full with friendly countries with which we have long trading relationships, how on earth are the public expected to believe that we will be able to cut a deal with the USA to make up some of the losses from Brexit without having to sacrifice the NHS? On my last visit to the United States, I was told time after time that the US will be required to put everything on the table, and the US will be required to put nothing on the table.

Catherine West: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. Does he agree that one sector for which there will be implications is research and innovation? Is he as concerned as me about the prospect that a lot of our universities and the collaborations they do, which are in effect services, will be at risk? It will take an awful long time and an awful lot of effort to replicate them in a US trade deal.

Stewart Hosie: I am concerned about that. I am concerned that, even now, we are seeing relationships, partnerships and academic work being restricted, and doubt being cast on their continuation, for those very reasons. It would be tragic if health improvement work was not done or was lost from the excellent universities that undertake those studies.

The weaknesses that I speak about are where many of the concerns about the NHS lie, particularly in relation to a US-UK deal. They drive the impression, rightly or wrongly, that the UK will be involved in some kind of investor-state dispute settlement mechanism, and that Governments or other public bodies could be sued simply for protecting our health service.

I will give three examples to demonstrate why there are real concerns and why the public are extremely anxious. The first took place between 1995 and 1997. The Canadian Government banned the export of polychlorinated biphenyl waste to comply with obligations under the Basel convention, to which the US was not a party. The waste treatment company SD Myers then sued the Canadian Government for £20 million in net damages under chapter 11 of the North American free trade agreement—an ISDS-type arbitration scheme. That claim was upheld under NAFTA, even though Canada had taken action to remain in compliance with an international treaty.

In the second case, in 1997, the Canadian Parliament again banned the import and transport of the petrol additive methylcyclopentadienyl manganese tricarbonyl over concerns that it caused a significant public health risk. Ethyl Corporation, the manufacturer of the additive, sued the Canadian Government, again under NAFTA chapter 11, for $251 million to cover losses resulting from what it called the “expropriation” of its plant and to its “good reputation”. That action was upheld by the Canadian dispute settlement panel. The Canadian Government repealed the ban and paid Ethyl Corporation $50 million in compensation.

Cases that involve toxic polychlorinated biphenyl waste and a petrol additive that was deemed to have a public health impact were overturned. It is quite wrong for any corporation to be able to sue a Government simply for taking steps to protect the wellbeing of their citizens. I use those two examples on purpose; they may not have a direct clinical NHS procurement characteristic, but no one could doubt they were public health measures that were overturned as a result of a trade deal that allowed private investors to do certain things.

My final example is more local. Some time ago in Scotland, we had an increase in the prevalence of hospital-acquired infection. One of the actions the Scottish Government took was to remove private cleaners and return cleaning to NHS staff. Lo and behold, the incidence of hospital-acquired infection reduced dramatically. It does not take an enormous leap of the imagination for non-core work, such as cleaning, to be put out for competition. Had that been an international company, utilising an ISDS-type arbitration scheme, one can easily see how it may have sued the Scottish Government to win back that work and continue to make profit, irrespective of the health consequences.

I have heard what the petitioners have said, and I welcome the commitments made so far that the NHS will not be included in any future trade deal. However, it would be foolish not to recognise the concerns the public have or that fraying around the edges, when it comes to what appears to be non-core, non-clinical work, can still lead to the kind of problems the petitioners are concerned about. I await with interest what the Minister says. I congratulate those who signed the petition and brought this important matter before us today.
on opening this important debate and speaking so eloquently on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I thank hon. Members who contributed to the debate, including my hon. Friends the Members for York Central (Rachael Maskell), for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid), as well as the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay).

The petition calls on the Government to categorically rule out including the NHS in future trade deals. It has been signed by more than 166,000 people, while another petition organised by Keep Our NHS Public has been signed by more than half a million people. Last week the Government published a summary of responses to their consultation on trade negotiations with the US, Australia and New Zealand, as well as potential accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. Over 600,000 people responded, with an overwhelming number of those responses calling explicitly for protections for the NHS in trade deals.

The British public are absolutely clear: they do not want the NHS to be bargained away as part of a trade deal, they do not want companies to have the right to sue our Government for decisions taken in the interests of public health, and they do not want drug prices to be pushed up by American pharmaceutical giants. We on the Labour Benches firmly agree with that. We are extremely proud of the Labour-created NHS and we know how important it is to the people of the United Kingdom. We will always defend the principles of universality and the NHS being free at the point of use.

A number of hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Members for Hartlepool, for Coventry South, for Blaydon, for Warrington South and for Hornsey and Wood Green, mentioned the comment made by the President of the United States when he said the NHS would be “on the table” in any US-UK trade deal. A few hours later, perhaps after some encouragement from the current Prime Minister, he appeared to row back somewhat. On Wednesday we are entering a brave new world, with a new Prime Minister. The person almost certain to be that new Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), has repeatedly stated that he regards concluding a quick trade deal with the US as an absolute priority. So this is a timely debate and one that will no doubt continue in the coming months and years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon made the point that the NHS cannot be part of trade deal; that is her red line. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South spoke about our moral duty. In my remaining time, I want to mention a number of areas where aspects of trade deals could threaten the NHS if proper safeguards and guarantees are not put in place. I will then turn to the importance of the proper scrutiny of trade deals, both in Parliament and more generally, to ensure that no Government can put our NHS in danger.

First is the risk that trade deals could increase and consolidate privatisation of the NHS. Services chapters in free trade agreements typically include provisions that lock in liberalisation measures, such as privatisation. There is genuine concern that trade agreements could force us to lock in market liberalisation of the NHS, so that future Governments are unable to bring these services back in house. The move from positive lists, where only listed services are subject to liberalisation, to negative lists, where all services are deemed open to liberalisation, unless explicitly excluded, makes that significantly more likely.

Under the negative list system, the UK would have to explicitly opt out all healthcare and related services. If we did not, it could be difficult to ever bring privatised services back in house. In my area of Bradford, I am fighting alongside Unison to stop the creation of a wholly owned company for NHS staff such as cleaners and porters. If this goes ahead, and we agree a trade deal without the correct exceptions, bringing those services back into the NHS will be even more difficult and complex.

There are similar concerns about the inclusion of ISDS procedures in trade agreements. The threat of Government or NHS bodies being sued under ISDS, for example for bringing a service back in house, can have a major chilling effect on public policy decisions. There are numerous examples of this around the world. The Labour party has taken a clear position on ISDS. We do not think it is necessary and we do not think it is right. We believe there are many alternatives that balance the need for investor protection with proper guarantees, so that Governments can make public policy decisions without fear of corporate legal action.

A potential deal with the US is of major concern in respect of drug pricing. Last year, President Trump accused the rest of the world of freeloading on the US, resulting in high drug prices in the US. He claimed that: “When foreign governments extort unreasonably low prices from U.S. drug makers, Americans have to pay more to subsidize the enormous cost of research and development”. In particular, he blamed countries that “use socialized healthcare to command unfairly low prices from U.S. drug makers”. The NHS purchases drugs in significant volumes and therefore uses its bargaining power to set the price at the lowest possible levels. When the Office of the US Trade Representative published an outline of negotiating priorities for a US-UK trade deal in February, it included in a section entitled “Procedural Fairness for Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices” a statement that the US would “seek standards to ensure that government regulatory reimbursement regimes are transparent, provide procedural fairness, are non-discriminatory, and provide full market access for U.S. products”. The threat here should be evident. The US Secretary of Health and Human Services put it even more starkly when he said that the US would “pressure” other countries through trade negotiations, “so we pay less, they pay more.”

The Government may say that that is not what they intend, but we must recognise the very real risk that, in the rush to complete a trade deal with the US, it will happen—a case of marrying in haste and repenting at leisure. In negotiations with Australia and New Zealand, the US has already tried to force changes to their medicines pricing policies. In those cases, the US backed down to achieve other trade objectives, but that is highly unlikely to be the case with the UK, given the size and scope of the NHS’s purchasing power. That could lead
to higher prices and less choice for the drugs the NHS needs. The effect on the NHS would be significant and potentially devastating for patients.

As many hon. Members have made clear, there are numerous and credible threats to our NHS in potential future trade agreements. That is why parliamentary scrutiny of trade agreements is critical. We in the Labour party have repeatedly fought for the Government to bring forward an inclusive, transparent and meaningful system of scrutiny and accountability. We tabled amendments to the Trade Bill and the Lords passed amendment 12 to the Bill, which secured Parliament’s right to vote on the mandate and to have a meaningful debate on any signed deal before ratification. Alas, it seems that the Trade Bill has disappeared. Can the Minister confirm today whether it will ever see the light of day again? It must be this Parliament’s right to scrutinise and approve trade deals and it is our duty to protect the NHS in trade agreements.

To finish, I thank all my hon. Friends. Many of us—probably all of us—have an “NHS story” to tell of a time when the NHS helped us or those we love. I am afraid that mine is a story of when the NHS was Britain's greatest achievement. Given that strength of feeling, why would this or any future Government who purported to represent the people use free trade deals in that way anyway.

The NHS is an excellent healthcare system. It tops the Commonwealth Fund’s rankings of the best healthcare systems in the world. More than 160,000 petitioners who put their signatures to the document.

It is clear that the NHS is something that all of us here and the public as a whole care deeply about. There can be no doubt about that. We have heard and seen it in many forums before and we know it is true. However, I want to set this out right at the start, because I do not want there to be any room at all for ambiguity: I guarantee the House that the Government will protect the NHS in trade negotiations. That means no requirement to increase private provision, no allowing American companies to ramp up drug prices, and no undermining the safeguards on healthcare data. That is a guarantee that I, the Secretary of State and many others have repeated on many different occasions—most recently, when I appeared before the International Trade Committee last week and said the self-same thing there.

The NHS is an excellent healthcare system. It tops the Commonwealth Fund’s rankings of the best healthcare systems in the world. More than that, it is there for all of us when we need it the most. Those are not just words. Many of us—probably all of us—have an “NHS story” to tell of a time when the NHS helped us or those we love. I am afraid that mine is a story of when the NHS could not be there for someone.

I am married to an American. My brother-in-law could not afford proper healthcare for his illness because his insurance broker made the mistake of not renewing his health insurance for one week. There was one week’s gap, and in that one week he was diagnosed with a brain tumour and was thus both uninsured and uninsurable. I do not particularly want to dwell on all that the family went through and faced over the next three years of his life, but it was pretty miserable. I was convinced before that it was only civilised to have the sort of system that we have here in the UK, and that experience did nothing but reinforce that view. It is simply not civilised not to provide healthcare for our citizens when we can afford to do so. The US health system is one where even those with insurance can never be sure whether their insurance will pay out; where insurance policies can often be limited in extent, condemning families to penury even when they started with quite a lot; where people with insurance routinely do not seek help at all because of the excess policies and where those who cannot afford to cover themselves are left to depend entirely on charity at best, or at worst are wholly abandoned.

As hon. Members might imagine, I want to protect the NHS and so do this Government. I cannot imagine a Government who would not want to do so. I have also called both campaigns today to make absolutely certain that the candidates whose names are on the ballot paper for leadership of the Conservative party also agree with that position—just to be 100% sure. Of course, they do both take that position.

Even if there ever were a proposal to pursue such a course, I think we in this room all know that, quite rightly, the British people simply would not have it. More than 160,000 people signed the petition that we are discussing today, and only last year a YouGov poll found that more than two thirds of people thought the NHS was Britain’s greatest achievement. Given that strength of feeling, why would this or any future Government who purported to represent the people use trade deals as some kind of back door to privatise the NHS? It just does not make any sense in anybody’s language. Even if a Government tried to do so, how would a trade deal get through Parliament? Not only could it not be ratified without scrutiny by Parliament, but there is separation between international and domestic law in our constitution, so any changes made to the NHS through a trade deal would need domestic implementing legislation, not just in England, but in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. There is no back door here to sidestep Parliament. So much would have to change in our domestic legislation, and I cannot see any way—even if a Government were to decide they wanted to do things that way—that it could actually happen. The good news is that nobody has any intention to use free trade deals in that way anyway.

I simply ask that we agree that there is no prospect whatever of any British Government of any colour or flavour seeking to privatise the NHS by the back door. Can we please put that one to bed? There are perfectly legitimate reasons to discuss issues around the NHS, which I will come to in a moment, but let us please stop scaremongering and pretending that the Government are about to try to privatise the NHS. It is not going to happen.

So what about the particulars? How we protect our public services in trade deals is well known. We already have multiple layers of protection around the NHS and all our public services. The WTO’s general agreement on trade in services explicitly exempts services that are “supplied in the exercise of governmental authority”.

The trade in services aspects of all agreements to which the UK is currently a party explicitly set out exceptions for health services. The trade in services aspects of all agreements to which the UK is currently a party explicitly set out exceptions for health services.

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[George Hollingbery]

Commissioner for the European Union, issued a letter at the time of TTIP making that absolutely crystal clear to anybody who wished to read it. She said that people could object to any number of things about TTIP in all sorts of ways, but the one thing they could not do was pretend that this was a way for US health interests to take over publicly provided health services in the European Union. It plainly was not.

No trade agreement has ever affected our ability to keep our public services public, and no one has ever forced us to change the way we run them. The Nuffield Trust, which is one of the most respected commentators on healthcare in the UK, has pointed out that:

“A trade deal would not have the power to stop the NHS being a free, universal service.”

I think it was the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who is no longer in her place, who made a point on section 75 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012. The Act was not about privatisation, but about placing the financial power to change health services in the hands of the NHS professionals whom the public trust most, and putting clinicians, rather than politicians, in control of healthcare. The 2012 Act did not introduce competition into the NHS; previous Governments introduced competition as a core part of their earlier reforms. The Act established a level playing field in which any qualified provider can provide NHS-funded services, to encourage greater diversity in supply and improve patient choice.

I ask Members to consider for a moment where they think NHS procurement and provision finishes and starts. I cannot imagine a world where we would not buy our pharmaceuticals from the private sector. There is no Government in the world—other than perhaps the Cuban Government—who design pharmaceuticals. Is it suggested that outsourcing accounting is somehow a bad idea? How different can accounting for the NHS be, honestly? What about building hospitals? Does that have to be done by the NHS? What about the equipment used in operating theatres? Does it have to be provided by the NHS? I think we all know that there are areas where it makes sense for the private sector to be involved.

Like the hon. Members who have spoken in the debate, I have no particular interest in the private sector providing actual straightforward healthcare. There are some cases where even that seems sensible. Perhaps if there is not capacity in a certain area of expertise and the capacity exits outside, it might be right to commission it. I think we can all agree that there are some areas around the national health service where there will always be provision by the private sector, because that simply makes more sense.

It is said that investor-state dispute settlement mechanisms would allow foreign firms to take the UK to court for not opening the NHS up to further competition. That, of course, is a concern, but it is not the truth. Let us be clear: ISDS does not and cannot force the privatisation of public services. The mechanisms only provide protection for established investments that companies have made in a partner’s market. At the end of 2017, UK businesses and investors of all sorts had around £1.3 trillion invested around the world, so those protections can be crucial, particularly where legal jurisdictions are perhaps a little less rigorous than they are here.

Catherine West: The Minister is being generous in giving way. Does he agree that there are precedents where companies, such as tobacco companies, have taken elected Governments to court and wasted, in private courts, a lot of money that could have been spent on public services, and that that is a serious dent in democracy as we know it?

George Hollingbery: The hon. Lady anticipates exactly the section of my speech that I am about to come on to.

I was talking about the £1.3 trillion invested overseas and the fact that ISDS arrangements are incredibly useful in guaranteeing the delivery of justice of some sort for those who have invested under certain terms in less certain legal markets. However, they cannot force the UK to change the way we run our public services. The proof of that—I hope that this will answer the hon. Lady’s question—is in the results. The UK has more than 90 bilateral investment treaties in place, yet there has never been a single successful ISDS claim against the UK Government on any issue. Nor has there the threat of potential claims affected the Government’s legislative programme. I therefore do not believe that there is a chilling effect. The UK Government have legislated exactly as they wished on every issue, despite those 90 bilateral investment treaties.

That is not to say that bringing services that have already been opened up to private providers back into public ownership might not lead to challenges. That is true, and we should not sit in the Chamber today and not admit it. Of course, that does not necessarily rely on ISDS agreements. In the UK we have perfectly competent courts, and I suspect that many people might pursue those issues through the regular courts under contract law. However, ISDS indeed provides another avenue. Even the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), recognises that compensation would have to be offered if any fairly let contracts were not honoured because of a change in policy. That much is clear, and we have heard him say so directly. However, that is wholly different from being able to force the private letting of contracts that a state wants to remain public. That cannot happen under any ISDS arrangement.

Another concern that has raised its head today is medicine costs, and the idea that a trade deal with the United States would raise the cost of medicines the NHS needs. Across all nations of the UK, we have an excellent set of systems that generate great outcomes for patients at an affordable price. We are proud of the way we assess the value of and agree commercial deals for medicines here in the UK, which is good for the NHS, for patients, and for companies that want to do business with us. We are absolutely clear that in any future negotiations we could not agree to any proposals on medicines pricing or access that would put NHS finances at risk or reduce clinician and patient choice—and what on earth would the incentive be? We have a system in place that works, ensuring that patients have access to medicines they need at prices that are affordable to the NHS. That is in the best interests of patients in the UK.

It is simply not a matter for the UK that the US is a highly fragmented market for pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, and so has reduced buying power. Neither is that issue a matter to be contemplated in any potential trade deal. There is no protectionism here; it is simply a
matter of market power. Ultimately, it is a matter for US domestic politics. If the US takes a different route, it will have more buying power. We have taken a different route, and we have much more buying power. I can think of a thousand different markets where the US has much larger buying power than us. Are we supposed to petition it suddenly in a US trade agreement to bargain away its buying power? I do not think so, and I do not see why it should be any different in this case.

Some people—not in this debate, but it is worth dealing with, as there has been so much interest in the debate, in terms of the number of signatories to the petition—have raised the related issues of patent protection, extensions and generics. There is a complex web of interactions around those issues. On the one hand, there is a need to allow innovation in pharmaceutical and medical technology research and, on the other, there is a need to ensure that when patents expire—I nearly said “when patients expire”—I nearly said “when patients expire”; forgive me—generic or bio-similar alternatives are quickly brought to market. We will seek to balance those as we always have, in a way that stimulates research and innovation, together with the cost of supplying healthcare free at the point of use in the UK.

Let me turn to concerns about the potential use of NHS data. The Government take seriously the use and sharing of that data. I reiterate what the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care said recently: “NHS data must always be held securely, with the appropriate and proper strong privacy and cyber-security protections.”—[Official Report, 18 June 2019; Vol. 662, c. 114].

The Government will ensure that trade negotiations do not undermine the safeguards that we have in place around health and care data. Those safeguards allow the public to have trust in how and why their data is used, and it is incredibly important that we maintain them.

To be clear, free trade agreements of course have a role in data. At the Department for International Trade, we are tasked with ensuring that data flows on a legal, safe and secure basis. We would seek to review any rules in place to safeguard data, such as data localisation requirements, and ensure that they are not overly protectionist. However, that should not be confused with the data that actually flows. We set up the pipework, but whether or not the taps are turned on is a matter for the regulators. In our case, that is the Information Commissioner’s Office, which is entirely clear about the need for privacy and cyber-security.

I will deal with one or two other issues that were raised that do not fit neatly into the categories in my written speech. First, on FTA scrutiny, the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) will know full well that we laid a Command Paper earlier this year that made a full and generous offer on scrutiny. I am well aware of her party’s position on scrutiny, and I absolutely agree with her and her Front-Bench colleagues on the need for real transparency on and scrutiny of free trade deals. I absolutely understand about the incentives to control every part of the passage through Parliament by votes. I would happily sit down with her at some stage and talk through why I think that is perhaps not deliverable, and perhaps not exactly what she wants.

I am clear that we must have responsible scrutiny, and that the Government must be as transparent as they can under the auspices of an FTA. When negotiating an FTA, plainly there are things that we cannot reveal in public; otherwise, we simply give away any negotiating advantage we might have. At the same time, there needs to be accountability to Parliament. I therefore think we are largely of one mind, at least on the principle, if not the actual solution.

The hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) chose very carefully the two examples he gave—Norway and Switzerland. They, of course, are two free trade agreements that the EU has with partners that have very close arrangements with it in any event, in other ways. It is precisely because of the relationships that they have with the European Union that they cannot match in a continuity agreement what they can match in an agreement with the EU. The fact that those agreements are not as comprehensive as they might be is a consequence of our leaving the European Union, not of our inability to negotiate or, somehow, a failure on the part of the Government. I think we have achieved remarkable amounts, given the circumstances that Switzerland and particularly the EEA countries face.

I shall comment briefly on positive and negative lists, ratchets and so forth. In the end, having taken advice and listened to arguments from officials one way and the other, I have to say that, on the whole, it does not matter a great deal whether the list is positive or negative; the only thing that matters is that it is right, so that the outcomes—what the agreements actually achieve—are precisely what the UK wants. We can either include everything on the list and strike bits out, or exclude everything from the list and allow things in, but it seems to me that in the end that is a nice distinction, in the legal sense, and that actually what matters is the effect when we have finished. This is something that people talk about a great deal. In the end, all I want to do is ensure that we actually get the outputs that we need.

I hope we can agree that the picture is at least slightly rosier now than when this debate started. The legal protections are there to provide robust protection for the national health service. The commitment from the Government is there to ensure that that remains the case. The opportunities are there for us to make the most of our world-class experience and expertise in healthcare and the life sciences. As we look back at all the NHS has given us—particularly after its 70th birthday last year—we can be hugely proud of our past, but we can also be extremely optimistic about our future on the global stage.

I shall finish by repeating what I said earlier. This Government, the two candidates for the leadership, the outgoing Prime Minister and, indeed, all of us on the Government Benches are clear that we have no interest in privatising the national health service. We do not want to use free trade deals to do that either. We understand the concerns of the petitioners, and I hope very much that what I have set out today gives some reassurance.

5.41 pm

Mike Hill: First, I thank the petitioners for raising this petition and the House of Commons Petitions Committee staff, who put so much effort into advertising the petition in advance of today. I also thank hon. Members for their contributions. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid), the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), the Front Benchers—the hon.
[Mike Hill]

Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) —and all those who made interventions.

Our NHS trusts are in deficit and creaking at the seams. NHS leaders are already in the USA, including NHS leaders from my local trust, looking at best practice over there. If the Government’s reassurances are right, the NHS will not be for sale, but as the petitioners rightly say, “Words aren’t enough”. We need the right checks and balances to protect us from trade agreements and marketisation. Ultimately, as hon. Members have said, we need to consider revoking the Health and Social Care Act 2012 in order to protect those services that thus far have not been privatised.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered e-petition 242300 relating to future trade deals and the National Health Service.

5.43 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 23 July 2019

[PHILIP DAVIES in the Chair]

UK Trade and Investment Strategy

9.30 am

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Before I call Julia Lopez to move the motion, the eagle-eyed among you may have noticed that I have decided that jackets may be removed for this debate.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered UK trade and investment strategy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and to see some colleagues here; I must admit that, with all the anticipation of the morning, I was expecting to see tumbleweed rather than MPs in the Chamber.

By the time the morning is out, we will know who has the honour of being our next Prime Minister. The challenges ahead of that person will be profound, but so will the opportunities to reshape this great nation. Precisely 100 days will lie ahead of them until 31 October, when the extension to our EU membership expires. Each of those days will have to be used to prepare the UK’s people and businesses for any eventuality and to move forward with confidence, intent and gritty resolve into our next chapter. In so doing, we must articulate a clear vision of our place in the world, at the heart of the most dynamic, stable, open and innovative democracies in the world.

I intend to use the debate to press the Minister on what he sees as the Department for International Trade’s role in those 100 days; to present some thoughts about our trade and investment strategy from the two years I have served on the International Trade Committee; and to raise the profile of DIT as it prepares to take on a more central role after three years in the back room, to present some thoughts about our trade and investment strategy can deliver prosperity to the people we represent.

Formed straight after the referendum as one of the new Brexit Departments, DIT has faced the ongoing challenge of being excluded from the Brexit process, which has been driven by the Department for Exiting the European Union, the Cabinet Office and No. 10, leaving it vulnerable to the decisions and delays of others. That has stifled proper debate about the extent to which any terms agreed with the EU will limit our ability to devise an independent global trading strategy. Accounting for the threat of the backstop and the long-term view to mirror the EU’s rules via a so-called common rulebook, the Department has had to plan for everything from protracted EU negotiations that limit our room to manoeuvre to the complete freedom and vulnerability of a no-deal situation.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for securing this timely debate. She mentioned that Parliament in particular has not really debated these issues. Actually, we have. I put it to her that the Government have not been clear about what sort of trade deals, and how many, they have agreed around the world. Perhaps she can give us an answer.

Julia Lopez: I am not entirely sure I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point. Does he want to know why the Government have not been clear about how many trade agreements they have secured?

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this timely debate. She mentioned that Parliament in particular has not really debated these issues. Actually, we have. I put it to her that the Government have not been clear about what is eventually negotiated with the EU to know what they have secured.

Mr Jim Cunningham indicated assent.

Julia Lopez: Well, at the moment the Government are not able to enter into negotiations on FTAs, but they are able to try to agree roll-overs of those deals. As I set out, the problem for the Department has been that it does not quite know what scope it has to negotiate those roll-overs, so partners have been waiting to see what is eventually negotiated with the EU to know what negotiating leverage they have over us. That leaves the Department in a rather difficult position, and that has had an impact on our ability to roll over trade agreements.

Mr Jim Cunningham: If the hon. Lady has looked at the news this morning, she will know that Canada and India, for a start, are not at this stage prepared to enter into a trade deal with the British Government.

Julia Lopez: I am not entirely sure I heard that—I do apologise.

The state of unreality we have got into in our trade debate must end now, not least because it undermines our credibility as a negotiating partner. It is time to decide our desired trading destiny, work out how we get
there and then determine how to maximise our leverage along the way. If we are honest, we all want trade with the EU to remain virtually untouched at the same time as we open up new market opportunities. We want to acquire the right to regulate and tax as we please, and we would like to stop club membership rules such as freedom of movement. That is what the EU would term a “cake and eat it” strategy.

Boiling down the last three years, they have largely been about what price tag the EU wants to place on that goal and whether such a prospect is even for sale. In effect, the EU’s answer has been that no such deal is on offer and that we must instead pay to leave, tie ourselves into the EU’s regulatory sphere without a place at the table and wait to see whether we are granted any freedom to diverge. Unless we can find a middle ground between those positions, we will be walking away from the counter, which will introduce trade frictions and potentially tariffs into our relationship. It is important that we deal rapidly with the consequences of doing that, and DIT will have to be put front and centre of that task.

Earlier this month, when the International Trade Secretary appeared before the Select Committee, I was staggered to learn that DIT had apparently played so small a role in advance of the 29 March and 12 April deadlines for our leaving the EU. Overnight, we could plausibly have been left with no formal trading arrangements with the EU to allow for the continuation of tariff-free exchange. Indeed, that remains a very real prospect. Yet when I asked whether DIT had had any discussions within Government about drafting a simple framework for a future FTA to offer the EU at that juncture, the Secretary of State advised that the responsibility was DExEU’s, and that there would be little point in tabling an offer because the EU would simply reject it.

I do not want to open a debate about the contentious World Trade Organisation article 24 process and the likelihood of the EU agreeing to such a mechanism to maintain tariff-free trade. However, surely we can at least agree, because both the EU and the UK have said so, that in any point in the future—either immediately or after some time—the two parties will want to strike a free trade agreement. Why, therefore, have the Government not yet drafted an outline of how they would like such an agreement to look, and why is DIT being squeezed out of this important conversation? I have also heard surprising reports about how little the Government have utilised our expensive chief trade negotiator in our Brexit negotiations. The under-utilisation of DIT’s resource has been a strategic mistake.

In the next 100 days, we must prioritise the close working, if not the merger, of DIT and DExEU, such that our future relationship with the EU is seen in the wider context of what we are trying to achieve in trade. EU-UK trade, of course, will be a vital strand of our future prosperity, but it will not be the only strand. The past three years have been defined by aggressive lobbying by companies and organisations that would benefit most from everything staying the same. That is understandable, but we are not giving equal airtime to the costs of ongoing alignment.

To give a couple of examples, the Select Committee has heard from experts that the EU regulation concerning the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals is so onerous and expensive that all the fastest-growing developing markets are looking at adopting the non-EU model of chemicals regulation. Other experts advise that the EU’s hazard-based approach to farming standards excludes important technological advancement that could reduce the environmental impact of farming.

We must seek immediately to draft a generous framework document for an EU-UK FTA alongside a series of explicitly temporary stop-gap continuity agreements with third countries that would allow diagonal cumulation of rules of origin with pan-Euro-Mediterranean countries. At the same time, we need to return to DIT’s proposed no-deal tariff schedule and think carefully about how it can best provide leverage in any negotiation with the EU.

The Secretary of State assured our Committee that his Department would have adequate resource on 1 November to begin simultaneous negotiations on FTAs with Australia, New Zealand and the US. There is no doubt that that could introduce useful pressure and urgency to maintain a good relationship with the EU. However, we must be careful not to fetishise FTAs or to oversell what they can achieve and how quickly.

I was particularly pleased last week to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) manage expectations about a US deal. The US are notoriously tough trade negotiators, with in effect two negotiating partners in the Administration and in Congress, and there is a limit to what can be achieved given the breadth of matters decided at sub-federal level. None the less, as the Minister for Trade Policy, my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (George Hollingbery), advised our Committee last week, given the breadth and depth of our trading links with the US, even a relatively shallow agreement could reap substantial rewards.

Our North American trade commissioner, Antony Phillipson, set out to the Department this month his strategy for US-UK trade. I would be grateful if the Minister gave us an overview of what was said, particularly on how we intend to build a strong relationship at state level and whether we have the right resources to do so. The parliamentary mandate for opening formal US-UK trade talks and ongoing parliamentary scrutiny of negotiations will be critical if such a deal is not to fall at the final hurdle or to be brought down by misinformation campaigns.

The Secretary of State is proud that the public consultation on the deal was one of the largest such exercises ever undertaken. However, I noted that of the 158,000 responses on a US-UK FTA, 152,000 were individual campaign emails and only 234 responses came from businesses. I fear that that may be indicative of a 38 Degrees-style effort to cause alarm about the future of the NHS or reduced animal welfare standards: two matters on which Ministers have already offered countless assurances.

We can do plenty beyond the US-UK FTA that will be less contentious and arguably reap benefits more quickly. Amid the important debate about the future of our fishing industry and sheep farmers, we overlook the fact that our economy is most heavily dependent on our world-beating financial and professional services. The FPS sector remains key to our ongoing prosperity, with its exports more than double those of any other sector. Our strength in this area far exceeds that of any other
European financial centre. Meanwhile, over 30% of the trade value added in the UK’s manufacturing sector comes from services.

There are no guarantees in the withdrawal agreement of preferential access to the EU market for our critical service industries, and many in the City are now questioning whether we really want an enhanced equivalence deal that would leave us subject to the whims of EU regulators. The EU should have understood some time ago that growth in financial services is beyond Europe, with London business as likely to be lost to Singapore and New York as to Frankfurt, Paris or Dublin if it tries to diminish the City’s competitiveness. Nonetheless, it seems likely to impose tougher recognition requirements on us. Instead of responding with mercantilist reciprocity, we must seek quickly to demonstrate that markets can trade with one another without needing to regulate each other.

The best way of testing such a model could be an ambitious global financial partnership with Switzerland, which is having plenty of its own difficulties with the EU following the expiration of its equivalence regime. A dynamic Swiss-UK agreement including right of market access, mutual recognition and regulatory co-operation could set a gold standard in future services agreements that could in time be rolled out to other important financial hubs. That will require a more involved regulator, the active co-operation of the Treasury and the engagement of professional bodies to allow for recognition of qualifications.

That is where DIT’s role as convener will become so important. The Department has established a network of new trade diplomats who sit within embassies to identify market access issues, build commercial relationships and triage problems among relevant Departments. I recommend that in key services markets we add to their number representatives from our own financial regulators, copying the example of the Monetary Authority of Singapore, which has offices around the globe, in recognition of the fact that services deals are as much about regulator-to-regulator as Government-to-Government co-operation.

A gold standard financial services agreement could be complemented by gold standard FTAs with New Zealand and Australia. I have said many times that these are not the biggest markets, but in both we have willing partners who can help advance our wider global trading agenda. They have experience in big and growing Asian markets. There is complementarity of language, culture and legal systems and an appetite to co-operate on quality food production, retail, healthcare, FinTech, defence and education. Meanwhile, at the WTO we can work together to embed important work on e-commerce and reinforce the multilateral rules-based system.

Plenty of diplomatic work can be done to enhance other trading relationships without needing an immediate FTA, though FTAs can be incredibly useful in providing momentum and focus. The Minister for Trade Policy talked at the Select Committee about the staggering size of the Chinese cosmetics market, which we find hard to access due to Chinese rules that require animal testing. If work could be done to demonstrate the quality and provenance of UK goods, such additional market access could be worth in the region of $10 billion. That would overshadow the benefits of most FTAs with smaller countries.

The Institute of Directors talked of similar barriers to trade for UK engineers, architects and planners over Chinese design licences. Seemingly intractable market barriers in China can sometimes be lifted quickly in response to citizens’ concerns, particularly in areas such as food and healthcare, where a demand for high-quality international products followed a series of consumer scandals.

DIT can not only flag such barriers and work with diplomats to remove them but highlight to our domestic businesses what kinds of opportunities are out there. The Secretary of State spoke last week about how DIT has helped a Cumbrian milk producer attend a trade fair in China that opened business to him worth hundreds of thousands of pounds.

It is important that we spot legislative developments, too. To give one example, Indonesia is to demand sharia compliance of financial products by 2025. With London one of the few financial centres with expertise in the field, our insurers and financiers could steal a march in this huge market. At the latest belt and road summit in April, the Chinese state pledged to put no more capital into belt and road initiative projects, capping the level at which Chinese banks can fund each project. That change of approach could open new opportunities to UK legal advisers, financiers and construction firms.

We need to empower the Department to do even more of that work. That will require skilled personnel. I was delighted to see the launch of DIT’s new training scheme last week for trade negotiators and diplomats. We need to leave them in post long enough to develop the long-term relationships and market knowledge that reap dividends. There is currently too much churn, which is particularly problematic in markets such as China, where guanxi—relationship building with provincial governments—is key.

In advance of this debate, I was sent a briefing by the Open World Research Initiative, a collaboration between 15 UK universities, which is calling for a chief Government linguist to embed language policy across Government. That is a great idea. Technology is moving on at pace in this area, but to understand a language and its nuances is to gain deeper cultural understanding and stronger relationships in future markets of importance.

I would also like us to soup up the work of our international chambers of commerce as well as long-term, party-to-party political relationship building. I have spoken before about how good Germany is at that through its Stiftung model, which operates almost as a political diplomatic service, and its very activist chambers of commerce have presence not just in capitals but in important regional centres. We must bear in mind that some of these big Asian cities are prominent economic actors in their own right, often larger than small European countries.

Going forward, I want to see DIT work much more closely with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development to merge our international output into a coherent strategy. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) highlights frequently, the strength of our voice on trade is fundamental to our relevance as a respected actor on the international stage.

I was pleased to see yesterday the announcement that DIT will be able to access the overseas aid budget to link our trade and aid work much more closely. In that
vein, the Government should work with and challenge the City of London to become the sustainable development finance hub of choice, cementing its position as the go-to financial centre for Africa and South Asia’s gateway to global capital markets.

DIT also has a big role to play domestically. One of the problems facing UK business is not a lack of demand for their products but a reticence in bidding for international contracts and a real nervousness about exporting. DIT has been addressing that with energy and creativity, but such work is not given the prominence it deserves. The export toolkit launched last week is an attempt by the Department to give MPs responsibility for identifying businesses and projects in their constituencies that could benefit from export and inward investment opportunities.

DIT is uniquely placed to know how to make our domestic market attractive to the kind of inward investment that creates jobs, adds value and increases tax take here in the UK. Its end-to-end service for international investors is important, but we must also look at a single window for business registration and investment information. Similarly, it is vital that we keep an eye on the competition, because the trade promotion bodies of France, Germany and Spain are stepping up their game.

There is already a business environment advisory team that flags barriers on skills, migration, tax and development, and I would like to see its work given more prominence so that we can make the UK one of the most attractive, tax-competitive markets in the world. It should also look at how we give our financial regulators an explicit competition mandate to embed our dominance in financial services. Work must be done with the Home Office to break the link between long-term labour migration and mode 4, so that our desire to control immigration numbers does not hamper the ability of companies to move key personnel.

We must be equally alert to investment that is against our national interest. There is a big difference between greenfield foreign direct investment that creates jobs, embeds skills and generates long-term tax revenue in the UK and speculative investment—the use of these shores to park dodgy money or the strategic purchase of critical assets accelerated by the cheap pound.

I was horrified to see the exposé in The Sunday Times of the tier 1 investor visa, and I am similarly concerned about the security implications of allowing critical infrastructure to be foreign-owned. Our Committee is likely to recommend improved modes of data collection on FDI, so that we can better sort the wheat from the chaff and get a more accurate sense of investment trends.

We have perhaps suffered from the naivety in recent years that all inward investment is good investment, fearful that if we clamp down on flows into the UK, people will think we are closing in on ourselves. Australia and Singapore take a much more robust approach to property and infrastructure investment—particularly that affecting national security—and that does not seem to detract from their reputations as open economies. I ask that we look at the Australian model of a foreign investment review board, which rarely sees sales blocked but can add conditions to any investment, and which applies caution over foreign influence. I am pleased that the Government are already reviewing our approach via the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy White Paper on investment that was launched in July 2018, and I would be grateful if the Minister updated us on that work.

As I said in my introduction, the next 100 days will be critical in addressing some of the strategic errors made in the Brexit process over past three years, and the Department for International Trade must play a full role in that work. It is frustrating that so little progress has been made in determining the future EU-UK trading relationship, but DIT has now had three years to establish opportunities, expand networks, and increase trade expertise, so that it is ready to go. Now is the time for the Department to be unleashed so that we can draw up a trading strategy that will grow our economy, entrench our values on the world stage, and deliver exciting exporting and value-adding investment opportunities to each and every corner of our United Kingdom.
My constituency contains agri-food industries, such as Lakeland Dairies, which has a factory in Newtownards—and, indeed, it has two factories in Northern Ireland—and two in the Republic of Ireland, and it is knocking on eastern doors. The International Trade Secretary was instrumental in securing a substantial contract worth £250 million over five years for milk products. I was also involved with that deal, but the Secretary of State pulled it over the line. We must knock on all doors with our reasonably priced and superior-quality produce. The chief executive officer of Lakeland Dairies, Michael Hanley, is clear that although he, I and others want a deal with the European Union, whatever happens—deal or no deal—Lakeland Dairies will still trade in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and across the world. In reality, things go on. Life does not stop; the sun does not stop shining. The roof will not fall in, and many things will continue as always.

Strangford is a large rural community with towns in the middle, and together with many dairy farmers I look to the future with both optimism and, in some cases, scepticism. Although I am ecstatic and very happy that farmers will have access to a greater market, we must solve the Republic of Ireland problem, stop the grandstanding of Varadkar and others, and get down to the business of a mutually beneficial deal. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) said, it is in all our interests to work towards that goal, and the quicker a bit of reality creeps in, the better.

The backstop must be removed. I am happy and pleased that both potential leaders of the Conservative party—the future Prime Minister—are committed to the removal of the backstop, which the Democrat Unionist party welcomes. The Good Friday agreement is never in danger—people throw that cherry into the mix all the time, but the agreement is never under pressure. There is no need for a hard border. Interestingly, Varadkar has said there is no need for a hard border, as has the EU and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We are all agreed that there is no need for a hard border, so why bother having one? There are technological ways to solve the problems if there is the willingness to do so. It is now time to get behind the new Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative party, and support the process to get that deal. Perhaps the cold reality that comes with new leadership, new commitment and new fervour will take us over the line.

With a US-UK trade deal in the mix for when we eventually leave the EU, farmers in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom should look ahead with optimism because such a deal may include dairy imports. Agri-food businesses in my area already export to the USA, and that can be expanded if the right links are created, as the Minister is doing. A trade deal with China—the largest food importer in the world—will place our farmers in a position of optimism and opportunity. China has a population of 1.4 billion and its food imports have increased from approximately $6 million in 2005 to $300 million in 2015. Such levels of food imports are likely to continue as the country’s economy grows, and that is a potential market for us to build on. Such links offer our farmers an exciting opportunity to export their high-quality products to China if a trade agreement is reached. Again, we need optimism and to look forward in the correct way.

It is important that Northern Ireland’s interests are protected in any future free trade negotiations, and we must reach a compromise on the future of trade on the island of Ireland between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. We must ensure that the Union is not weakened—that must never be allowed to happen—and that our economy has access to the pool of opportunities that Brexit creates, rather than being cut off from the rest of the UK and trapped in the customs union. The Irish backstop must go, for the sake of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, as that will suit both countries.

Trade must continue as normal between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland—I believe anything other than that is suicide for the Republic of Ireland, which relies on the UK through Northern Ireland as a solid trading partner. None of that should be new to anyone in the Chamber, as such issues have been debated clearly for the past two and a half years. I seek to renew focus and remind people of where we should be headed, rather than become distracted by all that swirls around us.

In conclusion, if we are as focused and hardworking as businesses throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can be, we cannot help but succeed. If we continue to be distracted, the blame will lie not at the feet of those who voted leave—the majority of people in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—but with those in this place who refused to honour that referendum result and work towards the best leave deal possible. I thank again the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) for securing this debate, and I look forward to hearing contributions from other hon. Members and the Minister’s response.
Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): The Prime Minister negotiated a deal, which the hon. Gentleman had the opportunity to vote for. He is suggesting that the campaign was based on the offer of a deal, but one was offered and he chose not to vote for it. Surely, he is trying to thwart the outcome of the referendum, whether he accepts the result or not.

Peter Grant: I have been absolutely consistent, before, during and after the referendum, that I will continue to campaign for the best trade deal that we will ever have, which is membership of the most successful trading partnership the world has ever seen. As I have said before, but perhaps the hon. Gentleman was not there—

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: I will deal with one interruption before I take another.

I accept the verdict of the people of my nation and of this nation. I demand—I do not ask, beg or plead—that the sovereign will of the people of my nation to remain in the European Union be respected. In return for that, I will undertake to respect the sovereign will of the people of this nation who voted to leave.

Luke Graham: The hon. Gentleman talks about the sovereign will of our nation, but we sit in the United Kingdom Parliament. Our country is the United Kingdom, and the people of our nation voted to stay part of the United Kingdom. Why does he not respect the will of the people in Scotland from 2014, but suddenly respects it from 2016? He talks about the best and most successful trading partnership in history, but of course, that is the United Kingdom, of which I hope we will always be proud to sit as part.

Peter Grant: I am puzzled as to how refusing to respect a referendum that said that Scotland should continue to elect Members of Parliament to sit in this place could be consistent with the fact that I am in this place carrying out my responsibilities as an elected Member of the United Kingdom Parliament for a Scottish constituency.

The hon. Gentleman has forgotten to mention, again, that the single biggest argument of the no campaign in the 2014 independence referendum—I am ready to have a further full discussion about independence wherever he wants—was that if we leave the United Kingdom, we are out of the European Union, so if we stay in the United Kingdom, we guarantee Scotland’s membership of the European Union. That promise has been shown to be utterly worthless.

We have a democratically elected Parliament and Government in Scotland with a mandate to give the people of Scotland a choice to decide on our future. It would be a democratic outrage for anybody to attempt to thwart that, especially considering that this Parliament, not long ago, unanimously and without a Division agreed that sovereignty over the nation of Scotland resides with the people of Scotland. Anybody who did not like that view had the chance to oppose it when it was put to the House; nobody did.

Jim Shannon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: I want to get back to the topic that the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster diligently set out. As I said, when the starting gun is fired, I will be ready to debate why Scotland’s future is not as a part of the United Kingdom, but that is not why we are here. We are here to debate how the United Kingdom, with or without some of its constituent parts, can find a new place in the world of international trade, having taken a mistaken decision to cut itself off from the biggest and most successful trading partnership the world has ever seen.

Three or four months after we should have been implementing our future trade strategy, we do not know what the aims and ground rules will be; what importance will be given to other trading partners’ respect for international environmental standards; or what requirements will be set in respect of workers’ rights in the countries that produce the goods that we are going to start trading in. Some of our trading partners do not have a good track record on looking after workers in their factories. Nor do we know what weight if any will be attached to the human rights records of the countries that we are chasing for international trade deals.

Since the 2016 European Union referendum, one area of British exports that has done well is weapons sales, because the number of arms licences to sell British weapons to countries that are on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office human rights watch list has doubled. In the last 10 years, the United Kingdom has agreed to the sale of weapons to every single country that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office regards as having a bad track record on human rights, with the exception—I wonder for how long—of North Korea.

Is the purpose of our world trade strategy of global Britain not so much that Britain is great, but that weapons are great? Do we intend to continue to expand the policy of selling weapons with little or no regard to their real purpose? Will we start importing goods without any concern as to the conditions that were imposed on the workers who manufactured them? That would be consistent with an independent trade strategy, but I think it would be unacceptable. I hope that the Minister will confirm that it would be unacceptable and that the trade deals that the United Kingdom will enter into to replace the 40 trade deals that we enjoy through the European Union will insist that standards of environmental protection, product safety and workers’ conditions and rights are at least as high in our trading partner countries as they are under those existing trade deals.

In 2017, the Secretary of State for International Trade promised that the Government would “replicate the 40 EU free trade agreements that exist before we leave the European Union, so we’ve got no disruption of trade.” Will the Minister take a second or two of his summing up to list exactly which of those 40 trade deals we have replicated? I suspect that it will not take him long. Again, a promise that was made before and after the referendum—that all those trade deals would be replaced before we left the European Union—has been shown to be utterly worthless. Of course, that promise was not painted on a bus by somebody who claimed that they were not acting as a Minister, but was made by a serving Minister of the Crown.

The hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster mentioned the concern that the price of a trade deal might be to open up parts of our services to privatisation and outsourcing where domestic Governments would not have permitted that.
The Government have been very careful to say, “We’re not going to allow the NHS to be privatised.” That is good, but in this part of the United Kingdom, far too much of the NHS is already privatised for my liking. A lot more of the NHS is privatised in this country than would ever be permitted in my country. That is fair enough—if the people of England want to vote for Governments who choose to outsource more and more of their NHS and NHS support services, good luck to them. That is their right. However, the people of Scotland have voted for a Government who have explicitly said, “There will be no privatisation anywhere in our NHS.” As a statement from a national Government, that is something that must be respected.

Luke Graham: As the hon. Gentleman is talking about privatisation within the NHS, perhaps he can inform the Chamber now of the percentage increase in privatisation in the Scottish NHS and the increase in expenditure for temporary, locum and non-NHS workers used within our devolved NHS back in Scotland?

Peter Grant: The hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that the NHS in Scotland, like the NHS throughout the United Kingdom, has a serious shortage of expert, professional specialist staff. Part of the reason for that is that his Government are making the United Kingdom a less attractive place for people to come and work. They have created a hostile environment. The hon. Gentleman can snigger up his sleeve behind me, but I have cases in my constituency where a healthcare provider had to terminate the contracts of two professionally qualified healthcare specialists because they did not meet the United Kingdom Government’s salary level requirements to be allowed to stay.

If those specialists had worked in London, where everything—prices, rents, wages—is higher, they would have met the threshold. The same provider is allowed to provide services to people in London, but the people providing services to my constituents had their contracts terminated and had to leave the United Kingdom. That is not the fault of the Scottish Government or the European Union; it is the fault of an immigration service that is based on numbers, not on human beings or the need to continue to attract the best talent and the best people we can into our NHS. It is a simple fact that there are aspects of the NHS in some parts of the United Kingdom that are run for profit that, under the policy of the Scottish Government, will not be allowed to run for profit. They will be owned directly and provided for by the public sector.

We can all have different opinions about the best way to run a health service, but it would be utterly unacceptable for a United Kingdom Government or a Scottish Government to impose a way of doing things on health authorities in England that they believed was not in the best interests of their people. It would be equally unacceptable for any Government of the United Kingdom to enter into a trade deal, without the consent of the Government of one of the devolved nations, that would undermine the devolved authority that those nations have. I have not yet heard a categorical, cast-iron guarantee, so I will give the Minister another chance to give an absolute guarantee in his summing-up that there will be nothing outsourced in Scotland’s NHS without the explicit consent of the Government and Parliament of Scotland.

One of the arguments used for our leaving the European Union—I am pleased that the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster did not use it today, because it is completely ridiculous—was the claim that, as the United Kingdom has a trade deficit with the European Union and a trade surplus with the rest of the world, the answer was to leave the European Union and only trade with the bits of the rest of the world that we have a trade surplus with. If we only trade with people who we have a trade surplus with, the only people who are going to trade with us are those who have a trade surplus with us, so nobody can trade and it does not get us any further forward.

That argument also completely fails to recognise why it is that, particularly in manufactured goods, the United Kingdom has struggled to trade as an equal competitor with the rest of the European Union. It is because other parts of the European Union take the profits of their industry and put them back into the industry, to make it more efficient, cost-effective and competitive. For too long in the United Kingdom, the profits of industry have disappeared to a tax haven somewhere in the Caribbean or Mediterranean. Because of the way that United Kingdom businesses have run their businesses, they have not kept up.

If we look at the productivity of businesses in the United Kingdom compared with their equivalent direct competitors in parts of the United Kingdom, there is nothing in European legislation that means that Europeans sell more stuff and more profitably than the equivalent companies in the United Kingdom. That happens because they can often do it more efficiently and reliably, sometimes even in industries where the UK previously had a record as one of the best in the world.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): In fact, we have seen significant manufacturing growth in this country in the past few years under Conservative rule. We saw rapid decline of manufacturing industries under the Blair and Brown Governments, but under the Conservatives we have seen significant growth in the manufacturing industries in this country.

Peter Grant: The fact remains that industry in the United Kingdom is not nearly competitive enough compared with industry in some of the countries that we should regard ourselves as seeking to match. I will not get into an argument about whether the previous Labour Government or the current Conservative Government are more disastrous for the people of Scotland, because frankly neither have delivered any of the things they promised to Scotland. I am aware that the hon. Member for Strangford wanted to intervene; I apologise for forgetting and I am happy to give way to him now.

Jim Shannon: We obviously have a difference of opinion, but I had an opportunity last week to go to one of the Department for International Trade’s breakfast presentations. It was clear to me from that presentation that, while the promotion says, “Great Britain is great” or “The United Kingdom is great”, it does not mean that the United Kingdom is great; it means that Scotland is great, that Wales is great and that Northern Ireland is great. Therefore, together we are all doing well. I gently suggest that if the hon. Gentleman has an opportunity,
he should contact the Department for International Trade and he will see just where we feature. We are third in the world when it comes to promotion, and some of the things we are doing in this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are beneficial for everyone.

**Peter Grant**: I do not doubt what the hon. Gentleman says, but that leads on to something else I was going to mention. If anything is seen to be quintessentially British, I do not have a problem with our sticking a Union flag and a picture of Big Ben—the Elizabeth tower, as it is now—on it and selling it to the world on the basis of its Britishness. I do not have an issue with that. We sell according to the strong point.

But who in their right mind is going to market British whisky with a Union flag on it? Who on earth thinks that that is a strong brand? Who is going to talk about selling British haggis? Haggis is not British; haggis is Scottish. If we stick a saltire on it, it sells better and more quickly. Who came up with these ideas? In the same way, to sell Cornish pasties we put “Cornish” on them; we do not call them “British pasties”. We might put a wee British flag on it, just to remind people the Cornwall is still part of the United Kingdom.

There are a lot of national and regional identities, particularly associated with food and drink, in the United Kingdom, and the producers rightly are intensely proud of the reputation that Welsh lamb or Irish dairy products have, for example. Why on earth would anybody want to stop marketing Irish butter and Irish cheese as Irish and start trying to invent a different brand for it as British? Why would people choose to sell quintessentially English products as not being English?

**Julia Lopez**: One of the most wonderful receptions I went to when we were on a trade trip to the WTO in Geneva was the British ambassador’s reception, where they promoted and showcased all the wonderful produce of Scotland—particularly whisky, but also other things. What positive strategy can the hon. Gentleman set out for the Scottish National party’s devolved Administration and the SNP representation here in Westminster will try to participate in the trade promotion of their own products?

**Philip Davies (in the Chair)**: Order. Before the hon. Gentleman replies, let me say that Front Benchers traditionally have 10 minutes in these debates. Because of the time allowed, I have given quite a bit of latitude, but he is now up to double that time. Can I urge him to wind himself down so that we can move on to the other Front-Bench speeches?

**Peter Grant**: I apologise, Mr Davies.

I say briefly to the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster that the Scottish Government and previous Scottish Executives run by other parties have done that. One of the biggest obstacles is that every time the Scottish Government try to promote Scotland abroad or the Welsh Government try to promote Wales abroad, the UK Foreign Office says, “Hold on a minute. That’s our job.” Look at the snide comments every time a Minister of the Crown from the Scottish Government goes overseas to promote Scotland.

The negative, patronising, sneering attitude—not from the hon. Lady—that the national Governments of the United Kingdom all too often experience from the UK Government must finish. The United Kingdom Government have a job to do in selling the United Kingdom abroad, and the national Governments have a job to do in selling their respective nations abroad. That does not mean that they have to get in each other’s way or fight with each other about it. It is disappointing when attempts by the devolved nations to market themselves abroad are undermined by the UK Government, simply because, as a matter of democratic reality, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Governments have different views and a different political life from the UK Government. That is what devolution is for.

I realise that I have taken more interventions than I would normally in such a short speech—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Peter Grant**: Before I let the Minister intervene, I ask him to confirm that the United Kingdom Government recognise that although the United Kingdom has a trade deficit with the European Union, Scotland has a trade surplus with it. Anything that damages or even temporarily interrupts Scotland’s successful trading relationship with the European Union will be deeply damaging to the Scottish economy and therefore to the United Kingdom economy.

**Graham Stuart**: I am disturbed to hear about this pattern of behaviour whereby the UK Government are allegedly inhibiting the Scottish Government’s promoting Scotland. We perhaps do not have time to discuss that right now, but I would be delighted if the hon. Gentleman wrote to me setting out instances of that. I promise to investigate them fully. I have never heard such allegations before, and I would be interested to hear about them and investigate them, if he can provide them.

**Peter Grant**: There was a recent case in which the Foreign and Commonwealth Office refused to support visits abroad by the First Minister of Scotland. That refusal was welcomed by the Scottish Conservative party.

**Luke Graham**: On a point of order, Mr Davies.

**Philip Davies (in the Chair)**: I am afraid this will not be a point of order.

**Luke Graham**: I seek your guidance, Mr Davies. An incident has been mentioned regarding the First Minister of Scotland, but there are no facts to back that up. She was supported on the trip to New York to speak to the UN, which I believe the hon. Gentleman was referring to. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office facilitated that. There was a lot of discussion afterwards, but we should stick to the facts. I seek your guidance on that matter, Mr Davies.

**Philip Davies (in the Chair)**: As I anticipated, that was not a point of order but a point of debate, and not a matter for the Chair.
Peter Grant: I want Scotland to continue to be a successful trading nation. I want the United Kingdom to go back to being a successful trading nation, as it once was, but on completely different terms. Some may think that we are going back to the days of empire, when everybody else worked for nothing in hellish conditions to keep a handful of people in the United Kingdom wealthy, but that is not going to happen. The individual nations of the United Kingdom have the talent and ingenuity to succeed and compete successfully against almost any other nation in the world, but the first thing that the United Kingdom must do to achieve that is to recognise that it is no more than an equal with the rest of the world. Nobody owes it a living or is beholden to it anymore.

The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned the Republic of Ireland, which used to do 90% of its trade with the United Kingdom; today, it is about 10%. I wonder what the Irish have got right. Perhaps it is something that the United Kingdom could learn from.

10.23 am

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) on her thorough speech. In her stout advocacy for the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), whom she mentioned more than once in the course of her remarks—

Julia Lopez: Only once.

Bill Esterson: Was it only once? It felt like so much more—I cannot think why.

The hon. Lady called for the merger of the Department for International Trade and DExEU. I wonder where the Minister might fit in the brave new world of the new combined Department—whether, indeed, he has a place in it. I wondered also whether the hon. Lady’s challenges to him were part of his job application for one of the roles among the new Ministers. Perhaps how well he does in that job application will depend on his responses to her questions.

I agree with the hon. Lady about the need for a coherent and global world trade strategy that is attractive to investors. We probably diverge a bit after that point, but we agree about the importance of a strong trade and investment strategy.

The folly of the Government’s strategy—or lack of one—was shown in the comments of their Canada trade envoy, who set out the stupidity of publishing zero tariff schedules. It is now pointless for the Government of Canada to spend time negotiating an agreement with us, as it will not be better than the deal that we have already unilaterally given away. Zero tariffs mean opening up to importers with no guarantee of anything in return. An effective strategy would, of course, ensure the best market access to our main trading partners and build confidence among investors.

We are about to have a new Prime Minister—I am assuming it will be the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip—who advocates a no-deal Brexit and is keen on the idea of undermining our economic relationship with our nearest neighbours and a trading bloc that accounts for well over half of our trade, either directly or through agreements with 70 countries to which we are party through our membership of that critical trading bloc. It is madness to be considering no deal. It is the opposite of the robust, considered and credible strategy that is needed. It is an act of economic self-destruction, and Parliament must do all in its power to prevent such an outcome.

Investors want us to have the best access to the EU, and so does the Labour party. Businesses need frictionless trade and regulatory alignment, and so do workers. The prospect of no deal is causing enormous damage, as businesses and investors wait or decide to move elsewhere while we delay. No deal must be ruled out. It is in our strategic interest to do so, and it is what business organisations and trade unions are calling for.

The fall in inward investment shows what is happening as a result of the lack of certainty. There has been a massive fall in investment projects and new job creation, while the number of jobs saved through investment has fallen by nearly 80%. The number of foreign direct investment projects has also dropped sharply. On the point about uncertainty, Kent County Council said in its evidence to the International Trade Committee that there is no doubt that the UK’s reputation has been significantly damaged by Brexit-related uncertainty.

The British Chambers of Commerce says that we lack consistency in provision of trade support for both imports and exports, and ADS draws attention to the poor funding of the British presence at trade shows; other countries have much larger pavilions and a more coherent national offer to prospective customers. They also give a strong signal that the Government back their domestic sector. The Society of Maritime Industries made the same point in its evidence to the International Trade Committee. It submitted a photograph of the German pavilion, which was much larger than the neighbouring British pavilion. It asked: which country’s message is more effective—the simple “Made in Germany” in large letters or “Innovation is GREAT” in much smaller letters? It also asked which pavilion made the companies more attractive to visit. It was in no doubt that its German competitors had better support. Our reputation has been damaged through Brexit incompetence. There is a lack of support for exporters, and no sign anywhere of a strategy for trade and investment.

To succeed in international trade, we must align our domestic and international strategies. That means delivering on the Government’s stated aim of moving to a zero-carbon economy. Labour recognises the benefits to be had in jobs and prosperity from investing in the $26 trillion global opportunity of moving to a zero-carbon world. That figure comes from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

The Government say that they are committed to net zero by 2050. However, that does not stack up when we remember that we are funding fossil fuel development overseas; 99.4% of UK Export Finance provision in the energy sector went on fossil fuel development in places such as oil refineries in Bahrain. Just £1 million was spent on renewables, but £4.8 billion went on oil and gas. Raiding the international development budget—something announced yesterday by the Secretary of State—is not the answer. We should use aid to help developing nations, not to give further support to the fossil fuel industry.
UK Export Finance should be helping with the development of renewables; otherwise, we are just exporting our emissions to the developing world and elsewhere, as of course is the case when we do not include emissions from shipping and air freight in our carbon reduction targets. The emissions do not go away as if by magic just because we pretend they are not part of our carbon footprint. Christian Aid rightly says that the support for fossil fuels is incoherent. We have world-leading marine technology in tidal energy. Where is the focus on renewable energy at the heart of an exciting and financially rewarding export strategy?

Under article 2(c) of the Paris agreement, the Government’s policy priority should be:

“Making finance flows consistent with a pathway towards low greenhouse gas emissions and climate-resilient development.”

The figure of 99.4% going to fossil fuels from UK Export Finance is the exact opposite of the stated policy of our Government. As Global Witness told the Select Committee, UK Export Finance should measure the greenhouse gas impact of the projects it funds. The US Overseas Private Investment Corporation adopted a greenhouse gas cap for its projects in 2007, and it is no surprise that it has shifted towards clean energy investments. If the private sector in the United States can do that, why cannot we? Labour believe we can.

Global Witness says that, for trade and domestic policies to match, UKEF should no longer invest in fossil fuel projects. Ministers like to remind us that UKEF is an award winner—but why should it not win awards for its low-carbon policy? The Canadian and French export credit agencies have more stringent controls on fossil fuel support. One of the two Swedish agencies did not lend to any fossil fuel projects in 2015 or 2016. If they can do that, why cannot we? Global Witness also says that the Department for International Trade should realign export support to renewable energy. There is an export opportunity for us, if we want to grasp it, in what it describes as floating offshore wind. Why not? UKEF has stopped investing in businesses that rely on child labour. Why not take the same approach to global warming?

The Government have woefully underprepared the UK for operating an independent trade policy. Trade remedies legislation is still not ready. There is no sign of the Trade Bill passing through Parliament. Existing trade deals are vulnerable to lapsing without replacement, not least because of the incompetence of the International Trade Secretary in announcing zero tariffs, as the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) reminded us in his resignation statement as the Canada trade envoy. He described it, let us remember, as “cack-handed” planning and felt patronised by the Secretary of State when he warned of the dangers of a no-deal tariff schedule and its impact on the prospects for the roll-over of trade agreements. As the hon. Gentleman has asked, why would those who are already getting 95% of what they want rush to sign up to what the UK want in the event of no deal? It does not bode well when a Buck Bencher has a better grasp of international trade policy than the Secretary of State.

Labour will align our trade and industrial strategies to promote sustainable low-carbon export growth. We will introduce a transparent and consultative framework for the development of trade agreements, and be a strong and supportive partner of our small and medium-sized enterprise exporters. We will use trade policy as a tool to elevate rights and standards domestically and with our international partners, to ensure that the benefits of global trade are shared through society—whether that is in moving to a zero-carbon world or in enhancing the achievement of the sustainable development goals.

Trade must not be used to lock future Governments into a deregulatory agenda or to erode the capacity of Governments to legislate in the public interest. Neither can trade strategy be a series of controversial arms sales. In stark contrast to the present Government and their new Prime Minister, it is only Labour that is committed to delivering the robust trade strategy that our country needs. We will play a leading role in demonstrating that trade can be the force for good that it should be.

10.35 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) on securing the debate and on her excellent opening to it. The subject, as we heard in many excellent and some peculiar contributions, is an interesting one. Our success in trade and investment will be crucial to delivering a more prosperous, stable and secure future for the country as we leave the EU.

There has been a massive change in the importance of trade and investment in the global economy and in the UK economy. That is one of the things to be grasped. In 1990, exports constituted a little more than 20% of GDP, but now they are more than 30%. We have the aspiration of reaching 35%, making us one of the greatest exporting nations in the G7. If we look at foreign direct investment, the stock value of that represented as a percentage of GDP was a little over 20% in 1990. Now it is more than 66%. As we have just heard from the Opposition spokesman, it is worth noting that, as we neared the end of the last Labour Government, France came up nearly to meet the level of foreign direct investment stock held in this United Kingdom; whereas, I am pleased to say, on last year’s figures from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the UK’s stock of foreign direct investment—with the hundreds of thousands of jobs that result from it in the United Kingdom—is now greater than that of France and Germany combined. That may be one element in explaining how we have gone from a youth unemployment rate that was 45% up by the time the Labour Government left office to one that is now at the lowest level since records began.

While we talk about trade and investment we must remember what it is all about, which is the quality of life—the living standards, prosperity and security—of this nation. That is why this Government and Conservative Prime Ministers since 2010 have had such priorities. The numbers are there. People can give all the speeches they like, but if we follow the numbers, we will see the transformation that has been brought about. That is reflected in outcomes—the reduction in unemployment and increases in employment.
Bill Esterson: I am glad that the Minister mentioned numbers and outcomes. Let us look at some. Jobs saved through investment fell, from 2016 when they were 28,000, to just 6,000 in 2019. That is an 80% fall. Those are numbers. They are not exactly encouraging, are they? They are not exactly a sign of the Government’s success. Meanwhile, 13% of Asian investors have reduced their investment and 14% have put activity on hold, and there are similar figures for north America—slightly lower for western Europe. How is that a record of success on the numbers?

Graham Stuart: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for that intervention. The danger is in selectively seeking those things. On every possible measure, we see the UK—[Interruption.] I hope the hon. Gentleman will stop barracking; he knows what is coming. Even though he pretends not to, he must have seen the UNCTAD numbers—the official UN numbers—for 2018. What did they show? They showed that in 2018, according to the UN, the global stock of foreign direct investment—the yearly amount of total flows—fell.

Bill Esterson: What, by 80%?

Graham Stuart: The overall stock fell. The hon. Gentleman is talking about flows; he should try and get to grips with this. Maybe this will be a useful seminar for him to do so.

If the hon. Gentleman looks at the stock line for Europe, which is the accumulated level—not at the flow line, as flows go up and down year by year and are essentially volatile; they always have been and I project they always will be—he will find that it fell in Europe too. The net amount fell; there was net disinvestment in Europe and in the world. What happened in the UK? It went up again, but not quite as quickly as it did before. It is the global context. By every possible measure—flow, stock, greenfield, mergers and acquisitions—we lead Europe.

We have strengthened our position in Europe. Why has that happened? It is because of the business-friendly policies that we have put in place. As the shadow Minister is feeling so aggressive, I put it to him: in what possible parallel universe in which there is increasing competition for mobile global investment, with the massive number of jobs and the prosperity that brings, would jacking up corporation tax rates lead to more jobs, more opportunities and more prosperity for people in this country? That is the trade and investment strategy of Labour.

We do not need to think just about what Labour’s current policies will do; we can look back at every previous Labour Government. By the end of the 2000s, France was just about overtaking the UK; now we have more than twice as much as France. Just think of the hundreds and hundreds of thousands of jobs—I am most interested in that number. While the hon. Gentleman and his party play politics, we deliver the investments that lead to prosperity and jobs. If he is interested in going further into the subject, he should look at Ernst & Young and the pattern over the last few years. What have we seen? We have seen an increase in investments outside London and the south-east, and an increase in the share of the FDI going into manufacturing, which has been maintained and strengthened in this country.

That is the exact opposite of the picture that the hon. Gentleman tried to lay out. It is there in every figure—from the OECD, UNCTAD, the Economist Intelligence Unit, Deloitte and IDI Markets. That is a fascinating one. Some people say, “If you include mergers and acquisitions, and you include intra-company transfers, that is not real FDI. We should look at greenfield and new start-ups, not someone buying a factory. What difference does that make? What about creating a new one? Let’s look at that.” Who looks at that? That would be IDI Markets. What did it show last year? From memory, it showed that the UK got 1,268 projects, that France temporarily overtook Germany, with 580 projects—well done President Macron, who has put a lot of work into that—and that Germany had 560 projects. In other words, despite Brexit uncertainty, in 2018 the UK had more greenfield investment projects than Germany and France combined. On what basis would anyone other than the most devout and misguided socialist try to suggest that those figures are not good?

Jack Brereton: Does my hon. Friend agree that the manufacturing figures referred to demonstrate exactly the picture of this Government and show the investment in exports that is going on? In the Blair and Brown years we saw a dramatic decline, with factories in manufacturing industries closing up and down the country. Under the Conservatives, we have seen a massive growth in manufacturing industries, clearly in part because of the exporting success and the support for exporting in this country.

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is a particular champion of industries in his area, not least ceramics in Stoke. I thank him for speaking in my constituency last Friday and talking about the success that has come from the effort put into that local economy to help to turn it around and strengthen it.

Since 2010, we have been working to turn around the toxic economy legacy bequeathed by the last Labour Government and to support the pioneering, innovative, entrepreneurial brilliance of British business once again. Success has come from policies designed to promote the dynamism, openness and flexibility of our economy. A further important step was taken by the Prime Minister when she established a dedicated trade Department for the first time in British political history. The Department for International Trade has just celebrated its third birthday and is crucial to the delivery of trade and investment success.

Given that this could be a valedictory performance by me, as we get a new Prime Minister later, I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), for the brilliant work he has done leading and establishing this Department of State. Its work will become even more vital after we leave the European Union. We must build a global, outward-looking Britain that is a dynamic and independent champion of free, fair, rules-based international trade.

Our trade and investment strategy seeks three basic things: higher exports, greater foreign and outward investment, and reduced trade barriers. Contrary to what we have heard, exports are booming. Total UK exports now stand at a record high of £647 billion,
bearing out exactly what my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) just said. They are up in real terms—[Interruption.] Maybe the shadow Minister only looks at numbers that suit his narrative? They are up 25% in real terms.

In 2017-18 alone, the Department for International Trade helped UK businesses to export goods and services worth around £30.5 billion, which is a year-on-year increase of 4%. We are proud of our work in encouraging more companies to export, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster said in her excellent opening speech. A lot of the difficulty is in overcoming the timidity and the concerns that companies have in exporting. Nearly 111,000 firms exported goods in the first quarter of 2019, which is 5,000 more than in the same period last year.

I have talked about the foreign direct investment numbers, but the latest figures from UNCTAD show that the UK hit a record high of almost £1.5 trillion in FDI stock by the end of last year, which is more than Germany and France combined, creating 76,000 new jobs and safeguarding 15,000 more. That was in one year and in marked contrast to 2010, when France was overtook by Germany and France combined, creating 76,000 new jobs and safeguarding 15,000 more. That was in one year and in marked contrast to 2010, when France was.

To put the FDI numbers into further context, UNCTAD's figures show that FDI flows—flows not stocks; I hope the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) knows the difference—fell by 19% globally in 2018. [Interruption.] I am now talking about flows as opposed to stocks, so it is repetition, but about a different aspect of something that I hope the hon. Gentleman would take an interest in. FDI flows fell by 19% globally and by 73% in continental Europe. What happened to FDI into the UK? The flows increased by 20%. So much for the negative effects of Brexit uncertainty.¹

The pace of change in the global economy is increasing but, for the agile, opportunities abound. The Department for International Trade provides the platform to give the UK a unique trade advantage, by locating export promotion, trade finance, trade remedies, export licensing and international negotiations all in a single Government Department.

I want to respond to some points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster. She asked about the 100 days. We will continue to prepare for no deal to be the outcome, which is not the avowed intent of either of the leadership contenders for the Conservative party. We prepared and were in a good position ahead of 29 March, and we are working with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to be able to meet questions coming in from businesses. We are ready to meet any surge in demand at that level.

My hon. Friend asked about state-level engagement with the US. The Secretary of State and I met with Senators from Florida and Texas the other day. As we expand and strengthen the Department's reach, we recognise that it is not all about working at the national and federal level, whether in the US or elsewhere, such as in Brazil. I was pleased to meet the Governor of São Paulo, which itself has more than 30% of the GDP of Brazil. There is a lot more to be done at that more granular level in order to identify barriers and overcome them.

¹ [Official Report, 3 September 2019, Vol. 664, c. 2MC.]
I am proud of what we have done with UK Export Finance. We have doubled its appetite since 2010 and revolutionised its performance as a world-leading export credit agency. It now has a capacity of £50 billion and its offer has been extended; it is now available in 62 international currencies, so when support is provided, that can be done in the local currency, thereby reducing risk. That has helped too. We have run it at no cost to the taxpayer, lowered its cost ratio since 2010 and ensured that no UK export fails for lack of finance or insurance. Earlier this year we went further. Now, companies that are not exporters themselves but are part of the supply chain of companies that do export can access UK Export Finance too.

We have convened the Board of Trade for the first time in 150 years to promote a culture of exporting and investing, spreading the benefits and prosperity of international trade to every corner of our United Kingdom. Whether I have been in Stirling or Belfast with the Board of Trade, I have been delighted to see the local response and people's enthusiasm for what we are doing at the DIT to promote trade from those areas.

Time has passed, and you would probably like me to bring my remarks to a close, Mr Davies. If I may, I shall continue just briefly. We have created an overseas network of Her Majesty's trade commissioners, the most recent one being for Australasia. There are 10 of them and they have been selected for their expertise in particular markets. They are building our regional export plans and working to secure market access across the globe.

Whether it is on promoting exports with our export strategy or promoting foreign direct investment—for which we remain the No. 1 destination in Europe, well ahead of our competitors; in fact, we are third in the world, behind only the United States and China/Hong Kong—we are determined to go further. And of course in the area of trade policy, there is not only the issue of free trade agreements; my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster was right to say that we should not fetishise them. As our second permanent secretary and chief negotiator has noted, for every one person working on FTAs, we want three or four working on market access.

Therefore, whether it involves opening up Taiwan's pork market, cosmetics in China or lowering duties on Scotch whisky going into Latin American countries, we are, across the piece, upping our game. Having a dedicated trade Department—this might be my last speech while a member of it—was a significant and important step forward, particularly given the growing importance of trade and investment to the prosperity of this country and the world. The Department—with or without me—will continue to be an advocate for an open, rules-based, liberal trading system. It will continue to work to reverse the negative impacts on manufacturing and so much of our other trade and investment performance that happened inevitably—it happened in almost all cases—under the last Labour Government. We must ensure that Labour never comes into government again, and that this Government can go out there and continue to strengthen the DIT and strengthen our prosperity in the world. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster very much for securing the debate today.

10.56 am

Julia Lopez: I thank all hon. Members and the Minister for engaging in this very important debate.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked of the vital agricultural interests in his constituency and the freedom that they might have in the opening up of new markets in India, the US and China—a market that is growing particularly rapidly. He says that the sun will not stop shining if we leave the EU, and he is quite right.

The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) has a notoriously upbeat and sunny disposition. I do not want to be impish by saying that I was very interested to learn of his intense respect for the will of the people, given the simultaneous passion that he expressed for overturning the results of both recent referendums. It is a curious world in which we live.

Scotland will play an even more important role in the future in attracting regional investment and boosting exports of in-demand products such as whisky to growing markets such as China. It would have been helpful to have had a better understanding of how the devolved SNP Government wish fully to participate in what is a very exciting project.

I appreciate that the hon. Member for Selton Central (Bill Esterson) finds himself within a party that perhaps now welcomes only newspeak from its comrades, but I am fairly certain that my right hon. Friend for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is not advocating no deal as his primary objective. I would like to reassure the hon. Gentleman that his dystopian imaginings about the DIT's work and the trade figures are rather wide of the mark. He expressed concern about an absence of green objectives in our trade work. He might be reassured by some of the exciting things that we are doing on green finance initiatives with the likes of Singapore, and might be interested to know about some of the work that we saw with the Select Committee in South Korea—in particular, on renewable energy and how that is helping it to reach its targets.

The Minister reminded us of what trade and investment is all about, which is the delivery of prosperity and prospects to the people whom we represent. On every single investment measure, we lead Europe. We are spreading wealth not just to London and the south-east, but to every region of the UK. My hon. Friend unashamedly peddles optimism, and my goodness this country is ready for it. My constituents and local businesses are rather wide of the mark. He expressed concern about some of the exciting things that we are doing on green finance initiatives with the likes of Singapore, and might be interested to know about some of the work that we saw with the Select Committee in South Korea—in particular, on renewable energy and how that is helping it to reach its targets.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered UK trade and investment strategy.
**Roadside Recovery Vehicles: Red Lights**

11 am

**Tracey Crouch** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered roadside recovery vehicles and the use of red lights.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and to speak under the watchful eye of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), who is the chairman of the all-party parliamentary groups looking at this important issue.

In September 2017, a roadside recovery worker and constituent of mine, Steve Godbold, was hit and killed by a lorry on the M25. He was assisting a driver at the side of the road, wearing high visibility clothing and with amber lights flashing on his vehicle when he was struck. This tragedy has caused unthinkable pain to Steve’s family and partner Sam Cockerill, while the driver of the broken-down vehicle, Nathan, has suffered with post-traumatic stress disorder after the experience.

Many would have given up after the loss of their beloved, but Sam, who is here in the Gallery today, became a spokesperson for the Campaign for Safer Roadside Rescue and Recovery: a group that has provided a united voice within the roadside recovery industry to lobby both Government and Highways England to improve safety for roadside recovery operators. The campaign is calling for greater recognition of the dangers faced by roadside recovery operators, identifying four key areas that could prevent further fatalities in the future.

The campaign is calling for a halt to the current roll-out of smart motorways, until Highways England can prove they are safe; for the Department for Transport to collect data on the number of accidents specifically involving roadside recovery workers, to provide greater understanding of the problem; and, following the success of the “Slow Down, Move Over UK” campaign, for a change to the highway code that makes clear to road users what to do when approaching a breakdown. This has been implemented in all 50 states in the US, treating drivers who disobey the safety rules of the road the same as drunk or reckless drivers.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this debate; I spoke to her before it started. Does she agree that roadside recovery workers would be much safer if red lights were used, as opposed to amber ones, given that they portray a greater sense of danger? That might change how drivers react. Pilots of these schemes could be tested in a short space of time, thereby providing the long-term benefits that she and other hon. Members wish to see.

**Tracey Crouch**: That will be the focus of my speech. There are nearly half a million roadside recovery operators, in a variety of guises, who deserve protection. There are many parts to the wider campaign, but I want to focus on one specific call: to allow the use of red lights by the roadside recovery industry. We are simply asking for recovery operators to be permitted to use prominent red warning beacons while attending accidents and breakdowns on the hard shoulder or on other roads; I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead has particular concerns around countryside roads in his area.

This campaign is supported by the wider industry of both independent firms and nationwide operators such as the RAC and the AA, and I am grateful for their briefings. Evidence given by the AA suggested that although UK motorways are the safest roads to drive on when calculated using serious accidents per billion miles, they are also the most dangerous to work on as a breakdown patrol or vehicle recovery operator; there have been at least three known fatalities of operators in the past 18 months.

There is a firm view within the industry that the use of red lights while attending a breakdown would alter behaviours enough for drivers to become more cautionary in their approach, and there is enough science to back this up. In a previous speech in the House on the wider campaign, I referenced the Rayleigh effect, which means that red can be seen from further away. With significant help from Stephen Westland, a professor of colour science at Leeds University, and Hugh Barton, from Opticonsulting Ltd, I have learned a lot more on this, including regarding the neurological response to red.

Mr Barton helpfully points out that red light as a danger signal can be traced back to the 1820s, when the first passenger trains were signalled using red, green and white flags, which were later replaced by red and green semaphore signals. Red is a useful colour for long-range warning signals, because it suffers from atmospheric scatter to a lesser degree than other colours, due to the effects of Rayleigh and Mie scattering processes: at the limit of visual detection red lights are seen as red, whereas other colours are seen as lights with no specific colour attribute.

Professor Westland provided me with some comments regarding the psychological aspect of red and its association with stop and danger. In a traffic situation, everyone knows that red means stop and danger. He kindly forwarded me an interesting paper in an ergonomics journal, which provided some interesting data on this. In one experiment, for example, the researchers presented words on a screen in one of three colours: red, grey or green. Participants had to categorise the words as being danger words or safety words. The reaction time to identify the words in the danger category was quicker when the words were red than when they were green or grey. The same sort of effect was found with danger symbols rather than words: red danger symbols are more quickly categorised as danger symbols than, say, green danger symbols. In other words, although this is a psychological effect, there are implications for performance. One could rightly surmise that a driver noticing a red light on the hard shoulder would be more likely to slow down than if they saw an orange light, and their reaction times would likely be quicker.

With that science in mind, I ask the Minister to review the Road Vehicles Lighting Regulations 1989, which currently prohibit roadside recovery vehicles from using red lights. This change in policy can be easily implemented. Highways England vehicles have recently joined the fire service in being exempt from these regulations via a statutory instrument; they are permitted to use red lights in their regulation of traffic around accidents and other road incidents. The Campaign for Safer Roadside Rescue and Recovery argue that the work that roadside
workers do on the side of the road, whether a motorway or a country lane, is dangerous and ought to receive the same level of protection. I would argue that, too. The issue is not just their safety, but the safety of those they are there to help.

Before I conclude, it would be remiss of me not to mention that one in 12 men and one in 200 women are colour blind. Although the primary purpose of this debate is to call for a change of use from amber to red beacons to protect recovery workers, for some it would make less of a difference. Perhaps part of a review could be to consider how we support colour blind drivers too, perhaps through shaping or flashing techniques within the beacon.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. When I was the Minister with this portfolio, sitting where the Minister sits today, one objection to this deregulation, which could save lives, was that the police did not support it. I am sure that my hon. Friend and the Minister have seen the evidence that the police now support this measure, which will save lives.

Tracey Crouch: I agree. Now that the police have lifted that objection, I see absolutely no reason why roadside recovery operators should not have that same level of protection. At the end of the day, they help the police and Highways England to open up the network, so that our roads can continue to operate and provide the great economic value that having an open and flowing network brings to the country. I hope the Minister has seen that evidence suggesting the police have lifted their objection to this and will bear that in mind in his response.

This debate was borne from tragedy, and I pay tribute to Sam for the campaign she continues to champion. This just one part of the wider campaign but it is also the simplest to achieve. As the baton passes from one Administration to another, and we all consider what we want to be remembered for, maybe this is something—a small thing—that will make an enormous difference in protecting those who come out, rain or shine, when we are at our most vulnerable on the side of the road.

11.10 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) on securing this important debate about roadside recovery vehicles and the use of red flashing lights. I would like to take the opportunity, if I may, to express my sympathy for those affected by the individual, tragic case that she referred to and that provoked the debate. I am also grateful for the intervention and speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning).

I very much admire the work performed by the men and women of the roadside rescue and recovery operations. They provide a crucial service to stranded motorists and motorists in danger, and they do it 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, in all weathers including severe weather conditions. As well as providing comfort and relief to those who have broken down and having a substantial positive impact on the individuals they rescue, they support the wider economy by getting goods moving and preventing the build-up of congestion on our very busy road network. A report published by Highways England in 2017 noted that business sectors reliant on the strategic road network contributed more than
[Michael Ellis]

£314 billion to the UK’s economy, while current projections suggest that the cost of congestion to the freight industry will be £14 billion in 2040.

It is clear that the work of recovery operators can be hazardous, particularly when they operate on roads with fast traffic, such as motorways and other parts of our strategic road network. It is important that we do all we can to provide a safe environment for operators to work in and for people who use the network to travel through. I am sure it has not gone unnoticed that the United Kingdom has some of the safest roads in the world, but the effect of every death and serious injury on our roads is devastating for the individuals involved and for their families; I absolutely recognise that.

The Government will continue to lead the way in improving road safety. This is a major national issue that demands close co-ordination across government agencies, the devolved Administrations, local government, enforcement authorities and a range of other bodies. We therefore published our road safety statement very recently. The road safety action plan last week outlined no fewer than 74 actions to reduce the number of people killed and injured on our roads.

Tracey Crouch: I have to beg the Minister’s forgiveness, because I have not read every detail of the road safety plan, but can he tell me how many of those 74 actions relate to roadside recovery operators?

Michael Ellis: I commend the document to my hon. Friend. I cannot give her the exact number at the moment, but perhaps she will allow me to write to her about it.

Highways England is the Government company charged with operating, maintaining and improving England’s strategic road network of motorways and major A roads. It therefore has a key role to play in moving broken-down vehicles to a place of relative safety to await recovery or in closing a lane to make it safe, in exercise of its powers under the Traffic Management Act 2004 to stop and direct traffic.

Sir Mike Penning: I am fascinated to hear that Highways England is now moving vehicles and pulling them off the motorways. When I was the Minister, I asked how many vehicles it moved and the answer was zero, so I do not know quite where the Minister’s information is coming from.

Michael Ellis: What I said was that Highways England has a key role to play in moving broken-down vehicles. Of course, it is all part of a team effort, including the blue-light emergency services as well as Highways England, when it comes to closing roads to improve safety after a road traffic collision or other breakdown circumstances.

Highways England is part of the SURVIVE group, which has developed and sponsors a detailed national standard to improve the safety of breakdown operatives, employees and customers during breakdown and recovery operations. Certification to the standard demonstrates that management systems are in place, with procedures established to meet safety standards, legislation and best practice for the industry and help road recovery operatives to carry out safe and rapid recovery of vehicles with minimal risk. The SURVIVE standard was introduced in 2015 and amended in 2018, and more than 500 organisations are currently accredited to it—a significant achievement that demonstrates real professionalism within the industry, which I congratulate.

The Government also recognise the benefit of improved vehicle construction standards. The road vehicles lighting regulations were amended in 2010 to require all new goods vehicles over 7.5 tonnes, including those used for road recovery purposes, to be fitted with conspicuous markings to the rear and side to illuminate the vehicle at night. Fitting such markings is optional for smaller vehicles, including the smaller recovery vehicles, but vehicles over 7.5 tonnes must have them. That requirement was brought in by this Government in 2010.

Amber warning beacons can be a valuable tool for conveying important information to other road users. The road vehicles lighting regulations restrict the fitting of amber warning beacons to vehicles with a specified purpose—including recovery vehicles, as well as vehicles used for highway maintenance, refuse vehicles and so on. Additional requirements limit the use of amber beacons to specific functions in order to avoid proliferation; for example, recovery vehicles may use the amber warning beacon only when attending an accident or breakdown, or while towing a broken-down vehicle.

Despite these existing measures, I realise that there is a call from the industry for the use of red flashing lights, because it sees added benefit in them. The police and some fire service vehicles are legally permitted to use red flashing lights, but even those blue-light services must use them under additional guidance issued to their trained drivers. Highways England traffic officer vehicles, which patrol our strategic road network of A roads and motorways, are permitted red flashing lights, but only when operating on live carriageways, not on the hard shoulder. I am aware that comparisons are often drawn between the operations of traffic officer vehicles and those of road recovery operators. Both traffic officers and road recovery operators perform incredibly important work, but as we know, recovery operators should not operate in live running lanes. To emphasise an important distinction, Highways England traffic officers should only use red flashing lights when operating in the live lane to control traffic. They, too, should use amber lights when stationary in other situations.

Tracey Crouch: I humbly suggest that after the debate, the Minister looks at some of the additional briefing papers that have been sent to him in advance of it, because I have not read every detail of the road safety plan, but can he tell me how many of those 74 actions relate to roadside recovery operators?

Michael Ellis: I am not suggesting that it is—I know it is not—but I am making an allusion to Highways England traffic officer vehicles and what their rules are, so as to differentiate between the current rules for traffic officer vehicles and those for recovery vehicles.
The evidence that we have is key, and I have noted what my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford has said about the Rayleigh effect and the scientific evidence about colour. Research into the effectiveness of red flashing lights on vehicles was also carried out in 2010 by the respected Transport Research Laboratory for what was then the Highways Agency, in support of its traffic officer services, so some work has been done on this topic in the recent past. In that study, drivers’ responses to the display of amber and red lights, both on the hard shoulder and in a live lane, were considered to identify which configuration produced the lowest risk to traffic officers. It concluded that flashing lights may make something more visible by attracting attention, but also that too many lights or lights of too great intensity may cause distraction or obscure pedestrians in or around a stationary vehicle.

Assuming that drivers are paying attention to the lights on a stationary vehicle, it is vital that they identify what the hazard is and what action might be necessary while they still have reasonable time to act. That requires early recognition of whether the hazard is in a live lane or on a hard shoulder. Permitting the wider use of any restricted lighting function, including red flashing lights, needs careful consideration, because the warning message they are intended to give will become diluted if they are used too often. Ultimately, that will be to the disadvantage of those who currently use them.

Sir Mike Penning: I was the Minister in 2010 when that report was done, and I questioned whether it was a defence of the Highways Agency—as it was at the time—or was trying to improve what the regulation was doing all the way through.

I was out on patrol with the police on the M1 only six or seven weeks ago, and the concept that only Highways England traffic officers use their red lights in a live lane is tosh. They were sitting on the hard shoulder with us, and thank goodness they did, because we had some very near misses while we were waiting for a recovery vehicle. Telematics are available, so that could be stopped, and that is exactly what the industry is offering now, but we are not talking about live lanes; we are talking about the hard shoulder, where these people—I am sorry to use emotive language. Mr. Davies—are frankly being wiped out. I am sorry, but the Department for Transport is not looking at this with an open mind; I will say that the Secretary of State is, because this debate is completely different from the conversation I had with him.

Michael Ellis: I assure my right hon. Friend that the Department is looking at this with an open mind, as I hope will become clear as I continue my remarks.

Apart from recovery operations, there are many other legitimate reasons for vehicles to operate on the roadside. We have to bear in mind that any move to extend the use of red flashing lights will need to consider those additional purposes and the broader effects. However, I emphasise that I am aware of the work of the all-party parliamentary group for roadside rescue and recovery and the Campaign for Safer Roadside Rescue and Recovery, and the excellent work they have been doing to engage with stakeholders and witnesses from across the industry to develop an evidence base to support the call for a change in regulation that my right hon. and hon. Friends have referred to.

I understand that the APPG’s call for evidence resulted in a number of detailed responses, including from the AA and RAC, two of the largest recovery operators in the UK. Responses were also received from the National Police Chiefs Council and several other organisations representing the interests of those involved in the industry and supporting those injured during their work. We will need to properly consult the blue-light emergency services on their views about the use of red lights on recovery vehicles, and I am conscious of the fact that this campaign has attracted the support of many right hon. and hon. Members of this House.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport has raised this issue with me, in light of the conversation he had with my right hon. Friend. I assure my right hon. Friend that the Department for Transport has raised this issue with me, in light of the conversation he had with my right hon. and hon. Friends and by the APPG and others, we have asked officials to carry out a review of the available evidence in the context of existing policy on red flashing lights, and seek advice on whether a more flexible approach might be appropriate. I think that is the principal wish of my right hon. and hon. Friends, and it is something that we can agree to. That review is expected to take several months, and it will be done efficiently.

In the meantime, I draw the attention of the House to the measures that recovery operators can already take to improve the conspicuity of their vehicles beyond amber warning beacons, within the existing regulatory framework. Those include the use of retro-reflective materials to increase conspicuity at night or under low-light conditions, and the use of fluorescent materials to improve daytime visibility. It is also possible to use additional rear position lights, brake lights and hazard warning lamps. Work lamps may be used to illuminate the working area for the operator when the vehicle is stationary, and illuminated signs reading, for example, “recovery vehicle” may be used.

In the longer term, the Government recognise the need for better evidence and are currently undertaking a review of the national casualty data that we collect. As part of that review, consideration will be given to the merits of collecting specific casualty data for personnel performing roadside recovery or repair. I heard what my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead said at the beginning of this debate, and we will look into that issue.

Sir Mike Penning: I am really pleased that there is going to be a review. Can we wait for the evidence and recommendations of the APPG for roadside rescue and recovery before any decisions are made? There will be lots of evidence in that review.

Michael Ellis: I would certainly expect, and will require, that my officials have the fullest possible reference to the work of the APPG on this subject.

My Department has awarded the RAC Foundation almost half a million pounds to pilot new ways of investigating road crashes. It will trial a different approach to identifying and understanding common themes and patterns that result in death and injury on the public highway, and can help to shape future policy.
I believe that operators using the broad range of measures available to them and following the best practice guidance set out by the SURVIVE group should be able to recover stranded vehicles in relative safety. However, as I have mentioned, the Department for Transport is very conscious of the excellent work that that group does. We will be reviewing this issue over the coming months, and will undertake a review of existing policy and report back.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
Another way the Child Maintenance Service has been raised is through a private Member’s Bill sponsored by my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). The Child Maintenance Bill aims to remove certain fees charged by the Child Maintenance Service, and to make provisions for child maintenance payment calculations. The Bill was read the First time on 6 November last year, but still awaits its Second Reading. Perhaps the time has come for it to make some progress.

Furthermore, just last month the Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2019, which amend child maintenance legislation to enable the delivery of the child maintenance compliance and arrears strategy, were approved in the House. The then Minister, who is also present today, announced that the Child Maintenance Service was working well, and pointed to the “tough new sanctions for those who evade their responsibilities”. — [Official Report, 11 June 2019; Vol. 661, c. 583.]

However, I called for today’s debate because, as its regular appearances in parliamentary matters, which I have just highlighted, clearly show, the Child Maintenance Service might be working well for some but is certainly not working well for all. The debate requests that relate in particular to the processes and performance of the Child Maintenance Service show that many constituents across the British Isles, both paying and receiving parents, are being let down by the current system.

I warmly welcome the introduction of tough new sanctions for those who evade their parental responsibilities, but if the enforcement actions are not applied they are a blunt tool that does nothing to encourage paying parents to meet their obligations. We must not see a repeat of the National Audit Office report of March 2017, which noted that, compared with 2012-13, in 2015-16 there had been, with regard to the use of some types of collection and enforcement action, a 69% decrease in the use of deductions from earnings orders; a 73% decrease in bailiff referrals; a 77% decrease in liability orders, which allow enforcement powers to be used; and a 98% decrease in prosecutions.

Today’s debate will consider the difficulties faced by so many of our constituents and the reasons why the Child Maintenance Service is failing them. In doing so, our discussions will hopefully also consider what can be done to remedy those failings, so that all children can benefit from receiving maintenance payments that are consistent and compatible with the paying parent’s income level.

In my constituency alone, I have been contacted by 55 people who have essentially reached crisis point due to the treatment that they have received because of the Child Maintenance Service procedures. Those 55 cases represent the tip of the iceberg in my opinion. It has an impact across extended families as well. A father of one parent with care felt compelled to speak to me independently to describe the financial and emotional devastation that his daughter and grandchildren were experiencing because the paying parent was doing everything in his power to dodge his responsibilities.

I will momentarily discuss that case in more detail, and others in my constituency, but there must be a fundamental deficit in any system that allows that to happen. We must do all that we can to address that deficiency. The numbers that I am seeing suggest hundreds of detrimentally affected family members in my constituency alone, and tens of thousands across the UK. Clearly, the ineffectiveness of the Child Maintenance Service has a negative impact on a significant number of people.

That is certainly supported by the nearly 1,000 people who responded to the House of Commons Facebook post and the Mumsnet thread that invited comments ahead of the debate. I thank each and every person who made the effort to share their experiences on those forums —many of them were quite traumatic tales. Unfortunately, time limitations restrict me from disseminating individual accounts, although I will highlight the stories of my constituents, which mirror many of the issues raised on those forums. However, I can state that almost none of the paying and receiving parents who responded had had a positive experience in dealing with the Child Maintenance Service. Recurring themes included problems arising from payments being calculated on gross income and on incorrect and out-of-date information, and how calculations result in poverty and debt, which lead to mental health impairment and even suicidal tendencies. Additionally, users experience inconsistent information and standards of service.

My constituent Susie first approached me nearly four years ago, in September 2015, after the father of her children moved to self-employed status and dramatically decreased the maintenance he paid for his children’s upkeep. Indeed, during the non-resident parent’s change of employment status he paid nothing towards his children’s upkeep for almost a year. Susie suspected that he was not being truthful about his declared earnings, as they did not equate with the lifestyle he enjoyed. She approached the Child Maintenance Service to investigate but was duly advised to contact Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, which in turn told her to contact a private investigator—an unlikely financial priority when someone is struggling to provide for their children. HMRC procedures are arguably another matter for debate in this place, but that will have to wait for another day.

Before the 2012 child maintenance scheme was introduced, the resident parent could apply for a variation if a non-resident parent had either a lifestyle inconsistent with their income or assets of more than £65,000. In May 2017, the Work and Pensions Committee called for those provisions for parents to challenge child maintenance awards on the grounds of assets and lifestyle inconsistent with income to be reinstated—a call that I reiterate and support—and two private Members’ Bills have been introduced since April 2017 that have, thus far unsuccessfully, sought to implement such a change. However, although the Government’s position is that they have “no plans to reintroduce this provision”, they have, since December 2018, introduced a new notional income criterion that they say would “be useful in a range of scenarios including where we believe paying parents have made an effort to use complex financial arrangements to evade their responsibility.”

At least one step has therefore been made in tackling that type of liability dodging, but it needs decisive action to back it up, not the decrease in action that I have witnessed.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for setting out the issues so clearly. I have a constituency case at the moment in which the absent father’s business is clearly...
doing very well—we just have to look at his Facebook page to see how much business is coming his way—yet his employer and the director of his business, who happens to be his mum, claims that the business has no income at all. That is not an uncommon situation. Does my hon. Friend agree that more has to be done to punish those who would try to get round the current system to get out of paying for their own children?

Martyn Day: I agree with everything my hon. Friend says. That type of scenario is one of the recurring themes that I have seen repeatedly in the 55 cases that my office is dealing with.

After five months and numerous interventions, it was eventually accepted by the Department for Work and Pensions’ financial investigations unit that the paying parent did have additional unreported income, yet my constituent’s hardships continued when she was asked to complete a variation form that would start an investigation, as there had been no record of contact before 12 February 2016. My office forwarded a complaint that was finally responded to 10 months later, in December 2016.

Six months after that, Susie found herself in a similar situation and had to make another formal complaint to the Child Maintenance Service because of its inefficiency, which resulted in a second conciliatory payment being made to her. Then, in October 2017, she won an appeal that the paying parent had raised, and wrote to the Child Maintenance Service with some queries about the award. However, despite numerous calls and letters, she received no response until January 2018, after seeking my intervention again.

I could continue to relay the consistent and ceaseless catalogue of errors that constitutes Susie’s case; suffice it to say that, currently, the paying parent has raised yet another appeal, while Susie is still waiting to receive the award from the first tribunal and has had to make another formal complaint, due to the Child Maintenance Service again ignoring her correspondence and thereby not complying with its own guidelines. Four years down the line, and around 90 recorded interventions on my constituent’s case later, there is no conclusive resolution to her difficulties.

Despite the availability of a spectrum of collection actions and enforcement powers to collect arrears, they are seldom used. Indeed, the single parent charity Gingerbread has contended that there can be “a lot of prevarication and foot dragging” before the CMS uses its powers to collect arrears; the Work and Pensions Committee said in May 2017 that the data published by the Child Maintenance Service “reinforced the impression provided by stakeholders that the CMS is reluctant to use its enforcement powers.”

 Sadly, Susie’s is not an isolated case. Another constituent, Anne-Marie, contacted me last August after enduring three years with no financial support from her child’s father. In this case, the paying parent had been so unco-operative with the Child Maintenance Service that he had been put on to a deductions from earnings order, where his employer was obliged to make maintenance payments directly from his wages to the Child Maintenance Service. However, to avoid the 20% charge that that method of payment incurred, the paying parent requested to go on to the direct pay system, cutting out both his employer and the Child Maintenance Service, and leaving the receiving parent dependent on his sense of fairness. Without my constituent’s permission, his request was granted.

Anne-Marie eventually received an apology from the Child Maintenance Service for doing that, but the admission of regret did not prevent her difficulties from escalating. The Child Maintenance Service did not tell the paying parent’s employer that it had changed the payment method, resulting in another payment being sent to it that it refused to pass on to the receiving parent. By August, when Anne-Marie contacted me, she had not received any child maintenance for nearly six months and that continued, despite the deductions from earnings order being reinstated, for another four months. By the time she finally received a payment, nearly 10 months had passed.

The reinstated payments were short-lived and they lapsed again after a payment on 25 January 2019. Instead of the service complying with the evidence given by the DWP to the Work and Pensions Committee in 2016 and 2017 that “all cases move across to enforcement immediately after the first missed payment was missed”, Anne-Marie had to contact the service herself on 4 March. She discovered that, once again, no action had been taken. On 11 March, she wrote to me again, explaining the reality of her frustrations. I quote from her correspondence:

“I am finding it difficult to get in constant contact with them as I am on hold for at least 20 minutes before I even get through to someone then I need to explain the whole case to a stranger which then takes at least 30/45 mins. I cannot always do this during my work time and after work they are reduced to skeleton staff at CMS and are unable to help. I am at my wits’ end and do not know how I can progress with this.”

This was a common sentiment in many of the cases.

One of my staff members contacted the Child Maintenance Service on 26 April to try to understand the failings in this case. When she asked why immediate action was not being taken when the deductions from earnings order was not being complied with, she was told that although the CMS is alerted as soon as a payment is missed, it does not have the resources—the staff—to deal with it immediately, as the staff work chronologically. When she further enquired why no enforcement action had been taken against the employer, despite it not complying three times, she was told that any court action raised is stopped if there is subsequently compliance, which means the whole cycle has to start again if the employer makes another payment and then it stops again. It is a constant stop/start process. My staff member was ultimately advised that the procedures for enforcing the payment of arrears in child maintenance were not being adhered to because the operational powers laid out in legislation fall short in practice.

Speaking to Anne-Marie again on 10 July revealed that, after all this time and despite my involvement, things have still not improved for her. That is hardly surprising. During the Adjournment debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East, the Minister said:

“We are continuing to increase the operational resources allocated to enforcement, with 290 full-time enforcement case managers in place as of September 2017.”—[Official Report, 16 November 2017, Vol. 631, c. 701.]
In answer to a written parliamentary question, I was advised last week that the overall head count of part-time and full-time enforcement case managers on 30 June 2019 equated to an overall full-time equivalent resource of 220.91, with 104 being employed full time. Clearly, operational resources have not been increased; they have actually decreased. It is therefore also unsurprising that Department for Work and Pensions figures show that arrears owed in respect of child maintenance rose by more than £7 million in just three months, between December 2018 and March 2019.

It is not only the receiving parents who are being failed by the Child Maintenance Service. One of my constituents, Craig, had a shortfall of direct payments due to work circumstances. The shortfall amounted to about £90, which he paid after the Child Maintenance Service contacted him. He contacted me in February, because even though he provided proof of payment to the CMS several times, it continued to arrest his wages without any warning. Three weeks later, the Child Maintenance Service found the evidence that Craig had in fact paid the outstanding amount that he had been contacted about. However, he was not refunded the 20% charge that had been incurred, or even offered an apology.

It has been well documented that the 2012 child maintenance scheme was designed to encourage parents to work together following separation and, where possible, make private, family-based arrangements for the child. That premise was reiterated in the Commons Chamber when the statutory instrument to the child support regulations was commended to the House last month. Yet, although both Craig and the receiving parent in this case agreed that direct pay would work best for them, that option was not facilitated by the Child Maintenance Service.

On 6 March, a payment breakdown was requested to clarify what payments were to be paid and when they were to be expected and, up until yesterday, that had still not been received. Craig’s experience has been that he was not listened to and was, in fact, harassed; it made him feel that the system was biased against the paying parent. That feeling has been echoed in correspondence that I have received over the last four days from people in other constituencies all over the British Isles—one of whom actually said that the Child Maintenance Service “encourages parental alienation and assists financial abuse and coercive control.”

I find it deeply regrettable that the situations I have highlighted here today, and those I have very recently become aware of but have been unable to highlight due to time constraints, indicate that the Child Maintenance Service is not fulfilling its charter commitments to keep the interests of children at the heart of everything it does, by being responsive, reliable and respectful of the best ways to manage individual cases.

In each of the three constituency cases that I have highlighted, and in others beyond, the lack of communication between the Child Maintenance Service and the paying and receiving parents has been a significant factor. That could be so easily remedied, yet would be an important amelioration for the service users. I hope the Minister will take that on board.

2.49 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. For the past four to five years, I have been the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on alternative dispute resolution. I am also an associate of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators, with a professional interest in mediation. I pay special tribute to all those who carry out mediation in the difficult circumstances of a family break-up. It is far better for parents to come to their own arrangements than have a one-size-fits-all approach imposed on them. I have seen that in my professional and personal experience.

The Child Maintenance Service sets out a process for reaching an amicable agreement. It is not a naive, buddy-buddy approach for trying to get people to work together. It recognises that there are fundamental differences and difficulties that have arisen as a result of the break-up of a marriage. It encourages civility in the way people address each other and take forward their discussions, which leaves the CMS to deal with the really difficult cases—the ones in which there is a tremendous amount of acrimony. Indeed, I would suggest that most cases we face, and the cases that the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) has described, fall into the category of difficult cases that do not lend themselves to amicable agreement.

Despite the times we live in, we recognise that it is usually the mother who has custody of the children, but that is not always the case. Fathers can face crisis because their circumstances have changed. However, each case is unique and takes time to work out. To go back to what I said earlier, they cannot face a one-size-fits-all approach. All such cases are emotionally charged—they have to be, given the circumstances in which they occur. When they are emotionally charged, there is enormous potential for complaints. I have come across many mistakes made by the CMS that have left people with very little disposable income.

Under the previous Secretary of State or the one before her, I put forward a complete list of things in the benefits system and CMS—not to complain about them, but to help her focus on how to improve them. It is a great shame that nothing has come of them. If I forward to the Minister the list of things that I had already forwarded to the Secretary of State, will he take them up to ensure that we can deal with these problems as we go along?

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that on many occasions—certainly in my constituency case load—the cases are primarily about a change in circumstances that has been notified to the Child Maintenance Service, but for some reason the notification has not been acknowledged and acted on? It is only months later, after a lot of trauma and difficulty, that it is rectified. It could all too easily have been resolved if it had been investigated at the time when the information was forwarded.

John Howell: The hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly legitimate case for the sort of example that he gives. I agree that speed is of the essence in dealing with these things, but the CMS does not simply handle difficult cases. The system has not been fully explained to either party so that they understand exactly what will happen, what their rights are, and how they can deal with the case.
In my experience, it is also true that many of the individuals involved in these difficult cases have not had explained to them in detail what information is required of them. There is a tremendous amount of going back to the beginning and helping people through this process.

The CMS has plenty of powers to ensure that people do not disguise their true income, and that we fully take into account unearned income—for example, income from property and land. The CMS has the power to remove passports, to cope with the situation in which an errant former spouse might have gone off to sun himself on the beaches of Monte Carlo and is not paying his child maintenance.

This whole situation is quite new, and we need to wait a little time to allow it to work itself out, so that we can see whether the CMS can be made to work better. However, it is showing itself to be slow and, as the hon. Gentleman described, failing to take action when cases have been brought before it. That means one thing: it is not the other parent, but the child, who loses out. That should be at the centre of all our thoughts and all that we are trying to do with the CMS.

2.56 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on securing this important debate, and on his comprehensive introduction to the subject. Like him and other hon. Members, I receive many complaints about the Child Maintenance Service. It is one of the constant themes in constituency surgeries—so much so that I recently took the opportunity in business questions to call for a debate on whether the service is meeting expectations. In my view, it often falls short. Following that request, the Minister’s predecessor invited me to come and meet him—to his credit, he took an active interest in the issues I raised, and I was impressed by his commitment to refine and update the system. It is true that there is a very difficult balance to be struck, and there are always examples of where the system is not working, so I welcome the opportunity to raise certain issues.

My constituents feel that the system is not doing as well as it could do. It is no exaggeration to say that the issues I will raise are matters that my caseworker and I were progressing through only last Friday. It seems to be a common theme that issues arise very frequently. It is not good enough, for a service that is supposed to support vulnerable people at their time of need. In an ideal world we would not need such a service because parents could reach an agreement between themselves, with no third-party involvement, and stick to those arrangements. However, we do not live in an ideal world, and it is quite often necessary for the Child Maintenance Service to get involved. It hopefully ensures, at least in theory, that the parents contribute to the cost of bringing up their children after a relationship has broken down.

Meeting the needs of children should be the most important thing. The reality is that child maintenance is a vital source of income for many families, especially those on low incomes. Gingerbread reports that child maintenance lifts a fifth of low-income, single-parent families out of poverty, so we cannot underestimate the impact that a good system has on improving children’s lives.

It is deeply concerning that we have several cases of non-payment at the moment. Of course, constituents do not come and see us to say that the payments are all going through smoothly. I am sure that hon. Members have very similar experiences—I am particularly talking about cases in which the paying parent has been on the collect and pay service, but after six months of compliance they request a move to direct pay, to avoid the fees that the collect and pay service incurs. Unfortunately, we often find that payments are not received once the paying parent has moved back to direct pay, leaving the receiving parent having to chase the matter through the Child Maintenance Service until it refers the case back again to collect and pay. That whole process can often result in several months of no maintenance payments being received; obviously, that can leave parents financially vulnerable. That is not just the case for my constituents; Gingerbread said in its survey that receiving parents are often forced into lengthy, time-consuming efforts to recover late payments.

Much more consideration should be given to the history of payments before it is agreed that someone can leave the collect and pay service. A history of many years of non-payment or late payments should not be disregarded just because of six months of compliance where compulsion is involved. Non-payment leads to arrears, which in the worst case can run to thousands of pounds and can add additional difficulties in getting regular payments made on time.

Although the Government have introduced measures to improve enforcement and collection of arrears, I am concerned that the level of arrears is creeping up. The lack of effective enforcement could be a cause, which would not surprise me since some of my constituents feel that the Child Maintenance System is often more concerned about meeting the priorities of the paying parent than the receiving parent. It seems to take the view that some payment is better than no payment at all, and it does not want to push the paying parent too hard for fear of losing everything. I understand that anxiety, but it can be interpreted as a desire to limit the number of cases administered through the collect and pay service. That view is bolstered by the Department’s evidence to the Select Committee on Work and Pensions in 2017, in which it said that it knew that some parents were staying in an ineffective direct pay arrangement rather than moving to collect and pay.

The 25% threshold for changes in income that has to be reached before payments are recalculated is artificially high. If someone gets an annual cost-of-living pay rise each year, it could be a decade before a recalculation is needed.

My constituents are experiencing unreasonably delays with the complaints resolution team. In one case, we have been waiting two months for a response from the Child Maintenance Service. Despite regular chasing in another case, we have been waiting three months for a decision on reimbursement that was referred to the service by the Minister’s predecessor some time ago. Such long delays cause unnecessary emotional and financial stress, leaving the parent without the day-to-day support that they are trying to recover.
Finally, I would like to say a little about my caseworkers. We all benefit from the hard work of caseworkers, and I pay tribute to those who, day in, day out, work very hard for the people for Ellesmere Port and Neston. When they raise child maintenance issues, they usually use the MP correspondence unit in the first instance. However, there are occasions when the issue is more about the way the legislation works. In that case, it is appropriate for me to raise those matters with the Minister directly. However, my caseworkers find that even in those cases, they are sometimes referred to the director of the Child Maintenance Group rather than the Minister. That leads me to question whether the Minister sees the issues raised. I hope that the Minister, if he remains the Minister—he could be elevated to much-deserved higher office very shortly—will investigate those concerns.

I should make it clear that the Child Maintenance Service is operating far more effectively than the Child Support Agency did. I have an example of how poor the old system was. A constituent's income had significantly increased but the CSA did not carry out any recalculation, so he assumed that he did not need to increase his maintenance payments. When his son reached 18 and his case was closed, it decided to recalculate and found that he owed £17,000. He clearly owed that money, but because the system did not work properly, he is now paying his ex-wife a considerable amount every month for the care of his son who is now an adult and living with him. That is an absurd situation, which I hope we will not see under the new regime.

With child benefit and child tax credits frozen since 2016, child poverty on the rise and nearly half of all children in lone-parent families in poverty, it is vital that we get this right. The Child Maintenance Service must deliver, and it must do so promptly, reasonably and fairly.

3.4 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on securing this important and timely debate.

My constituents continue to bring me their concerns and issues with the Child Maintenance Service. I am grateful for the way that my exceptionally capable casework team at Borescote Crescent in Stirling, Rachel Nunn and Euan Blockley, deal with them. There are undoubtedly good people at the Child Maintenance Service—I pay tribute to them for their hard work and service—but I am concerned about what my constituents and my caseworkers tell me when they come to my office to get help.

People understandably already feel fraught and upset—they are in a situation that they never anticipated, and feel vulnerable and sometimes deeply hurt and angry. That means that communication on these sensitive matters must be clear and understandable. Too many vulnerable people caring for children feel that the system is less than transparent and too confusing. Sometimes, for good reason, they feel lost or trapped in a process they do not fully understand, and they are frustrated and upset.

The good people at the CMS often deal with very sensitive cases; I can only imagine how hard it is. That said, I know too many constituents who feel they have been treated unfairly—being left hanging on the phone for ages, as has been mentioned; not being able to speak to the relevant people despite repeated attempts to contact them directly; being accused of lying and cheating; and not knowing what is happening. That concerns me, as I know it will the Minister. Quite rightly, the CMS tries to get parents to sort things out between themselves—that is a good principle—but when that fails, the CMS needs to take prompt action to give support to families with children. It is often slow, for some unfathomable reason, to escalate its support and to use collect and pay.

I am sure the Minister has heard this many times before, probably from me: I understand the 20% collection fee on the paying parent, but I still do not understand why the receiving parent should have to pay 4% on an ongoing basis. I can fully understand the principle of encouraging both parents to sort things out for themselves, but on an ongoing basis, where there is obfuscation on the part of the paying parent and where the receiving parent most often needs every penny they can get their hands on, why should they have to go on paying a fee on what is collected for their children?

I acknowledge the challenges of collection. There are challenges when the paying parent's income is not evident or is disguised or hidden, or the person is self-employed, and through some invisible support they declare little or no net income year upon year, or they keep changing their jobs and cannot be tracked down. But what difference have the measures announced a year ago made to the performance of the CMS in limiting child maintenance avoidance? What has been the impact, for example, of beefing up the financial investigation unit at the DWP? Is the Minister, a man I greatly admire and respect, satisfied that the current set of enforcement powers is adequate? Is it now beyond question in the Minister's mind—because the question arises in other people's minds—that the CMS is fit for purpose? May I seek assurances in respect to the actual day-to-day delivery of the CMS client services? I want to be specific about this.

First, does the client system that the CMS uses flag outstanding action points? My constituents have to go through the whole story every time they phone up. Why does not the system alert the CMS managers when actions and feedback are due to go to clients? In my experience,
in just about every setting, too much communication is a bad thing. Secondly, is there a standard for answering calls and speaking to clients? Constituents tell me that they wait a very long time to get a call answered and then are kept waiting before they can speak to the relevant contact. Cutting waiting times on the phone alone will reduce the levels of frustration that people who need the help of the CMS experience.

Finally, is there a searchable system of frequently asked questions that CMS managers and officers can use to answer routine questions, so that the advice is not only correct every time, but consistent? Consistency in advice to vulnerable people is an undoubted virtue, and greatly desirable. We have put in place a system because it is essential for the sake of the people whom we should keep in focus—the children in families that have split up. It is no fault of the child if their parents decide to end their relationship. We should therefore move heaven and earth to support the welfare of our children. In most cases people will stand up to their responsibility and provide for their children, but where they do not, we must take all steps to see that support is paid. We have a duty to get that right and to be as fair as possible. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s reply.

3.12 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for setting the scene so well, with lots of detail. The thrust of the issue is this: no matter what constituency we hail from, I can guarantee that questions have been raised over the effectiveness of the Child Maintenance Service. Each of us who has spoken so far, and the others who will speak after, will reinforce that.

On the news I have read numerous reports of single parents being left with thousands of pounds of debt because of the loopholes that the scheme is cluttered with. In my own office, not a month goes by without several Child Maintenance Service cases, and each one is unbelievably annoying and frustrating for my staff and me. They are even more frustrating for those trying to get the money that they are owed. There are issues with non-resident parents finding a loophole through being self-employed.

The biggest issue is with the self-employed. My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) referred to how their circumstances change. I will give a couple of examples, without mentioning any names. When we understand the resources that somebody had three months ago and what they suddenly have today or maybe a year later, we wonder what happened. Did they lose it all on the horses? Where did it go? I am talking about people who own properties and cars and so on. There are many such cases because of the complicated financial arrangements required, which raises the issue of the effectiveness of the Child Maintenance Service alone. We know that the Minister is really interested in his subject matter and is committed to what he does. I appreciate that, but there needs to be change, especially for the self-employed.

My constituents tell me that another problem is that when they phone up the Child Maintenance Service, they get a different person every time and have to tell their story again. There must be a methodology.

I understand that there is a high turnover of staff in the Child Maintenance Service, probably because of the complications of the job. Some people stay, but not enough. I suspect that that is because of their knowledge of the subject. Despite the legal requirement for the ex-partner to help cover the expenses of the single parent, the majority of whom—not all—are women, it has been reported that that is not the case. According to a National Audit Office report in 2017, the DWP acknowledged that 75% of alleged arrears were impossible to collect. Are they impossible to collect? Perhaps some might be. It is possible that people could be out of work or could be ill, but I suggest they are trying to avoid making their child maintenance payments.

Some figures show that the DWP does not track compliance for the monthly payment scheme for seven in 10 cases. With respect, I say to the Minister that tracking compliance seems elementary for the DWP and should be done without any nudging or requests from anyone in this debate today. Clearly, the Child Maintenance Service has far to go before we can extol the work being done. I am also mindful of the civil servants working in one of the most highly pressured situations. They do their best, but are tied by what it is becoming clear to me is ineffective legislation and regulation. Some of the staff members tell me that we need better legislation, better regulation and resources as well. If that is the case, let us see whether we can do that.

Figures from UK law firm Slater and Gordon have identified that 11% of mothers have been forced to depend on food banks to provide food for their children. This is factual. It is a fact in my constituency and it is a fact for the mothers as well. We have food banks in my constituency of Strangford. I have seen the mothers come in. A self-employed person who has a fairly high standard of living has left the mother with the children, and with the mortgage as well, because they have walked off and left it. They probably had a joint credit card and the male partner has run up the debt. I must be careful with my language and remember we are in Westminster Hall in the House of Commons. They have cleared off—I was thinking of another word, but I cannot use it—and left the credit card debt for the mother to find. It makes me, and I suspect others, very angry. The aim of the scheme was to ensure that that did not happen, and it is very sad that some parents—I stress the word “some”—will not play their part in feeding their family after they have left the home.

Other husbands who have left their wives have made payments voluntarily, so some people do the right thing, but then we come to cases such as the one I had in the office a month ago. The guy had multiple properties and a six-figure sum in the bank, and all of a sudden, within less than nine months or thereabouts, it was all away. Where has it gone? Why are the wife and the children not being looked after when clearly there were resources there? Again, circumstances change. He moves house and it seems to be a game of cat and mouse to try to get him, but it goes on and on.

Department for Work and Pensions figures show that CMS arrears rose in the three months between December and March by £7.4 million. Clearly, the DWP is not collecting the money that it should. It tells me that more cases are coming in, but it also tells me that the DWP is not being effective. The problem is not getting better or being fixed, which is why I support...
The question of the effectiveness of the CMS is one that my team and I frequently discuss in the office, after yet another case is brought forward. I suspect that all of us in the Chamber could have used up 90 minutes ourselves, talking about our experience. I am grateful that we have the opportunity to air some of the issues today. I want to focus on two cases that my office has been dealing with that sum up the issues that both paying and receiving parents often face.

One case that I have been working on for a long time, of which the Minister is aware, concerns a paying parent who has gone through much adversity throughout his life. Following the breakdown of the relationship, the receiving parent took the case to the CMS, which contacted HMRC and obtained the most recent income information from 2015. My constituent at that time had a well-paid job, so the maintenance calculation was substantial, but he had left that employment in the previous tax year and, combined with the breakdown of his relationship and the sudden death of his brother, who was killed in a hit and run, he struggled to cope mentally. Nevertheless, the maintenance calculation would obviously remain until he could prove that he no longer earned that income. He phoned up many times to start the process but could never follow it through because of a chaotic lifestyle and deteriorating mental health. He frequently went AWOL and would be uncontactable even by his family, who were having to help him with his rent and bills to try to get him back on his feet.

My constituent found the CMS unapproachable and difficult and simply could not deal with the situation he was in. He did what many people do when they feel that they are at the bottom of a rut in their lives, and shut the whole situation out, not responding to or even opening letters. Despite a P60 the following tax year proving that he did not earn anywhere near the income on which the maintenance was based, the CMS refused to reconsider the decision. The paying parent was out of time to appeal, because he lacked the knowledge, capacity or support to do so, and is now thousands of pounds in arrears that are entirely incorrect, based on the CMS’s rules, and completely unpayable, owing to the dramatic decline in his income.

Of course, MPs frequently see receiving parents who have an incredibly difficult time getting the money they are owed. Recently, a receiving parent asked the CMS for a variation, as their ex-partner was earning about £100,000 per annum. As is common for someone on such an income, that paying parent had a rather good accountant and was able to disclose to the CMS an income of less than £400 per week—a completely bogus figure. The maintenance calculation was minuscule as a result. Other receiving parents have highlighted issues with their former partner diverting money into pension schemes and other arrangements, to reduce their income and hence their maintenance contributions.

While the CMS is there to ensure that paying parents pay their liabilities, it should have a responsibility to every person involved in the claim—the parent who is paying maintenance but in many cases is unable to see their own child; the receiving parent who has lost a household income and is supporting a child, often on their own; and of course the child or children at the heart of the whole thing, whose family has broken down and who may now find themselves at the centre of an angry battle between their parents over maintenance.
It is not right that some of our constituents are paying wrong amounts and incorrect arrears, and it is certainly not right that parents are not getting the money they are entitled to and are left struggling because of loopholes. The CMS has an incredibly difficult task, but while things have undoubtedly got better than they were under its predecessor organisation, it is not in my experience effective in handling particularly difficult or complex cases.

Relationship breakdowns are never easy on anyone, so it is essential to have a functional system, with an understanding that it is dealing with real people, who may be going through the most difficult times in their lives. Too often, dealing with the CMS can feel robotic and impersonal, with neither parent feeling properly listened to or supported. We can do better.

3.26 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship again, Sir Edward. I sincerely congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on securing this important debate.

Children living in single-parent families are at almost twice the risk of poverty of children who live with both parents. Tory austerity cuts, coupled with the rise in living costs, mean that maintenance matters even more to protect children from poverty. Victims and survivors of domestic abuse should be protected by the UK Government, not punished financially for their inability to engage with their abusive ex-partner. We have heard from hon. Members about various issues to do with the CMS. Indeed, I suggest that almost all Members who have spoken today could have exchanged speeches and still felt that what they said was their own.

My knowledge of the CMS comes from speaking with and helping both non-resident parents and parents with care who are let down by the system; however, it is ultimately children who are being let down. I am sure that many Members taking part today who advocate more effective enforcement will no doubt have received messages from non-resident parents who think that MPs are not standing up for them. I should like to put the record straight right now: the CMS is failing all Members are not standing up for them. I should like to put the record straight right now: the CMS is failing all children living in single-parent families are at almost twice the risk of poverty of children who live with both parents. Tory austerity cuts, coupled with the rise in living costs, mean that maintenance matters even more to protect children from poverty. Victims and survivors of domestic abuse should be protected by the UK Government, not punished financially for their inability to engage with their abusive ex-partner. We have heard from hon. Members about various issues to do with the CMS. Indeed, I suggest that almost all Members who have spoken today could have exchanged speeches and still felt that what they said was their own.

My knowledge of the CMS comes from speaking with and helping both non-resident parents and parents with care who are let down by the system; however, it is ultimately children who are being let down. I am sure that many Members taking part today who advocate more effective enforcement will no doubt have received messages from non-resident parents who think that MPs are not standing up for them. I should like to put the record straight right now: the CMS is failing all parents and there are indeed ways in which it could be reformed to be fairer to everyone.

There are many non-resident parents who meet their full responsibilities and more. Everyone involved in this debate, and those watching it, should bear in mind that the CMS is about ensuring the welfare of children. I have been campaigning for its reform for some time. Indeed, I introduced a private Member’s Bill, the Child Maintenance Bill, based on the many issues that were highlighted as I tried to help constituents. The CMS has been roundly criticised by all parties in this place, which should signal to the Minister that it is time for sweeping reforms and an urgent root-and-branch review. The Government have a clear responsibility not just to parents or Parliament, but to the children whose lives can be changed for the better.

A cultural problem with enforcement exists in the CMS, which allows parents to evade their responsibilities, and arrears to build. Between December last year and March this year, arrears under the CMS rose by £7.4 million, from £966 million to £973.4 million. During the same period, £58.5 million was owed under CMS’s collect and pay service, through which the CMS monitors and pursues collections, yet only £40.6 million was paid. Some 33% of parents referred to the collect and pay service have paid nothing, and the remaining 67% can be guaranteed only to have paid “some” maintenance.

The UK Government wrote off £2.5 billion of arrears that had built up under the former Child Support Agency—money that still rightly belongs to children. The new CMS is now going down the same path because arrears are building up. The UK Government must crack down on enforcing payments to ensure that children receive their rightful maintenance. When £973.4 million of arrears have built up and that number is increasing, it is obvious that the CMS requires a full and thorough review.

Recent powers to confiscate passports look good on paper, but passport confiscations are seen as a PR stunt designed to scare parents into payment rather than direct enforcement. The Department for Work and Pensions estimated that approximately—wait for it—20 passports would be confiscated each year. Those are token powers, as well as being costly and time consuming to pursue. Greater emphasis must be placed on collecting arrears, and I hope the Minister will commit to ensuring a cultural shift within the CMS.

In Australia, departure prohibition orders are in use for those evading maintenance payments. The UK currently uses DPOs for tax evaders and those who have been dubbed “NHS tourists”. Unlike confiscating a passport, which takes time and lasts only for two years, DPOs can prevent people with two passports from leaving until their arrears are paid. Strict criteria could be applied before triggering a DPO, and I ask the Minister to consider such a provision. In most cases it is difficult to legislate to improve maintenance collection. We need an institutional willingness, both within the CMS and from Ministers, to crack down on non-payment.

Many hon. Members have already mentioned customer service, and from my experience, parents often testify that the quality of service offered by the CMS is extremely poor. My staff and I have also experienced that. The CMS uses an extremely complex system full of caveats. More must be done to inform parents about how it works. Common themes that emerge from my casework include a lack of explanation, differing explanations, a lack of consistency between caseworkers and a lack of written communication. More must be done to lift the standard of service generally.

Parents should be encouraged to make their own maintenance arrangements, but where that is not possible, parents with care should not be subject to the 4% maintenance tax. It is not right that a child is deprived of essential support because of their parent’s persistent non-payment. The UK Government have rightly waived the £20 application fee for victims of domestic abuse or violence, and the maintenance tax must also be waived. That tax is incurred by a parent through no fault of their own and exists as another act of harm against a non-resident parent’s ex-partner and their children. Will Ministers commit to looking seriously at the fairness of the maintenance tax on families?

On one particular point—the income change threshold—the law is unfair to non-resident parents. I agree with the former Minister that there must be a balance between
financial stability for both parents and the operational efficiency of the CMS, but the 25% threshold can disproportionately benefit wealthier parents and impact on poorer parents when income changes. We should return to the 5% threshold of the CSA; instead, we should set a more reasonable threshold of between 15% and 20%. Will the Minister consider that proposal?

Many non-resident parents keep to their maintenance calculations and make the payments required of them to support their children. We should focus on improving the situation of those who are being let down by their ex-partner, the CMS, and the UK Government. A parent with care might find it difficult to find work that is flexible enough to accommodate caring for their child, or to afford childcare without giving up something else. They could be hit by the two-child tax credit cap, and might struggle to access the personal independence payment or see their income decrease under universal credit. They might find that a family-based arrangement is not possible, but if they approach the CMS, they are charged £20 for it to provide a calculation.

A parent might move on to the direct pay scheme, but find that their ex-partner refuses to meet payments. They might frequently report that to the CMS, but have to explain their situation to a new call handler every time. It is months before any action is taken, during which time the parent is unsure about what is going on because written communication is minimal—we heard from the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) about how difficult it can be to understand a written communication from the CMS.

The CMS may eventually use a deduction from earnings order, but perhaps the ex-partner earns much more and hides their income and fails to be properly assessed. Because the ability to request a variation for unearned income must be prompted and the parent with care might be unaware of that, maintenance calculations are frequently lower than they should be. Through no fault of their own, by having to rely on state help to force their ex-partner to pay for their child, the parent with care is charged a 4% maintenance tax when payments are eventually collected. That might be the worst-case scenario, but it is what many families experience.

We have heard from Members of all parties about the ways in which the CMS fails parents with care, non-resident parents and ultimately the children who rely on it. When discussing child maintenance, people often lose sight of why the CMS exists in the first place. We should all try our best to put party politics aside when discussing this issue—you will agree, Sir Edward, that we have achieved that today—but if there is continued inaction, then the party in government should rightly be held to account, especially if it is ignoring advice and views from its own members who have passionately advocated for reform through action.

As arrears under the CMS near £1 billion, the UK Government have been lucky that this issue has not received the public attention it deserves. People are right to criticise the Conservative party’s austerity agenda—universal credit, the two-child cap, the bedroom tax and all those other policies implemented by this Government. The growing debt owed to children in Scotland and the rest of the UK deserves to join that list. When the charity Gingerbread says that maintenance can lift one in five children out of poverty, the UK Government must sit up and listen.

Will the Minister conduct a full root-and-branch review of the Child Maintenance Service that must consider the 4% maintenance tax, lowering the income change threshold, the standard of service and an institutional shift to crack down on maintenance arrears, both current and historical? Children are at the centre of this debate and they should be at the centre of CMS and UK Government priorities. I hope the Government will listen to the concerns of Members and parents, and start to take radical action to secure the support that children truly deserve.

3.39 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for securing such an important debate and for his continued work on this issue.

Before I address the substantive and specific issues about the Child Maintenance Service, I want to start by recognising the timing of the debate and the context in which we are having it. This week, many schools across my constituency break up for the summer holidays, and of course, in the constituencies of Scottish Members, many have already done so. Summer holidays should be a time for fun, activities, rest and relaxation, but for far too many children, their experience—and, tragically, their future memories—will be of hunger, hardship and sadness.

A recent report from the Trussell Trust showed that food banks experienced a 20% rise in demand for emergency food parcels for children last summer. More than 87,000 food parcels went to children in the UK during the summer holidays in 2018, which was an increase of one fifth on 2017. Shockingly, the Trussell Trust is concerned that the summer holidays will be even busier this year, as overall demand continues to rise across the UK.

Whatever the challenges or otherwise of the administration and technicalities of the Child Maintenance Service, it is important to recognise, as hon. Members have argued, that it does not operate in isolation from the wider pressures and challenges on children and families. When we discuss it, we do so with the objective of ensuring that those children, who are often the most vulnerable, can access the support that every one of them deserves, as rightly argued by the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr).

Child maintenance payments can be vital for families, especially those on low incomes, to protect children from poverty. As my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), highlighted, research shows that they alone lift a fifth of low-income single-parent families out of poverty. We must remember that lone parents are particularly vulnerable to poverty. One in four is in persistent poverty, twice as many as in any other group, according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The inadequacy of social security arguably makes child maintenance an even more vital source of income for struggling single parents.

We recognise the importance of ensuring that families and children receive what they are entitled to. However, as we have heard today, it is fair to say that there is limited evidence that the system is achieving that aim. A recent report from the charity Gingerbread has shown that there are major problems with the system of direct
pay and, worse, that the Government are not doing anything to effectively address them. The Department for Work and Pensions does not track whether payments are made, which means that it cannot report on compliance in two thirds of cases.

According to Gingerbread, collect and pay charges are not sufficient to deter parents from not paying in full and on time, nor is there any evidence that it encourages collaboration between parents. Furthermore, it found that “arrangements are prolonged by unclear thresholds for enforcement”, with the Department experiencing a 69% decrease in the use of deduction from earnings orders, “with inconsistent follow up from caseworkers and poor communication”.

as many hon. Members have highlighted. That is despite a previous ministerial pledge that the Department would act within 72 hours of a missed payment.

The Gingerbread report continued:

“The hands-off approach, compounded by poor administration, places the burden of responsibility for pushing for Direct Pay enforcement onto receiving parents”.

That will sound familiar to many hon. Members, who have constituents with similar stories from many other areas of the DWP’s responsibility. The fact that it feels so familiar suggests that the problem lies not with individual professional members of staff, but with the culture and leadership at the top of the Department. Indeed, some of the testimonials make it abundantly clear that the system is not working.

We must not forget that this is not simply a question of processes or systems; it is about children, relationships and emotions. A system that divorces itself from the realities, or ignores the consequences, is not fit for purpose. Parents interviewed by Gingerbread said:

“The balance of power is completely wrong. I have to basically keep him sweet so that he contributes”

and

“We had no other option...it’s just unbelievable that the child would have to pay 4 per cent out of their money when they’ve never done anything wrong.”

If the Government’s objective is to ensure that children do not become the victim, financial or otherwise, of relationship breakdown, it seems clear that that is not being met by the current approach. As we have heard, 33% of paying parents were non-compliant in the first quarter of 2019 and by the end of March 2019, cumulative arrears under the CMS were £275.3 million. That is £275.3 million that should be going to children. The cases that we have heard leave even more gaping holes in a system that should be supporting children.

We have several clear asks of the Minister. First, does he accept that the current system—not just the Child Maintenance Service, but many other aspects of social security, such as the five-week wait for universal credit, the benefits freeze and the two-child limit—is not fit for purpose and needs to change? Secondly, will he introduce tighter monitoring of direct pay compliance, so that we have a clear picture of its effectiveness? Thirdly, will he commit to introducing an improved and more transparent service so that we can ensure effective enforcement for late payments and offer hard-working staff the appropriate guidance, training and, importantly, as highlighted by hon. Members across the Chamber, resources? Fourthly, will he review the effectiveness of collect and pay charges for receiving parents?

There appears to be little evidence that the current arrangements encourage payment or communication between parents. The result is that many children end up paying a further penalty and some parents are forced to collaborate with a previous partner, which can create a toxic environment for the children.

I look forward to the Minister’s response. I very much hope that if we return to this subject in 12 months’ time, we will have an improved picture that fundamentally puts children centre stage.

3.47 pm

[Mike Amesbury]
I mentioned the shortcomings of the CSA, which did not provide the right support to parents and was expensive to run. We have learned from mistakes of the past: where the previous system often drove a wedge between parents by taking away their responsibility and choice, the new system encourages collaboration at every stage. We know that a constructive, co-operative relationship between separated parents has a direct positive impact on child outcomes such as health, emotional wellbeing and academic attainment—a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell). That is why, wherever possible, we support separated mothers and fathers to work together in the interests of their children and set up their own family-based maintenance arrangements.

Private family-based arrangements allow families to create flexible arrangements that work for their individual circumstances. Such flexible arrangements can include sharing of care, agreements over who will pay for essentials and treats, and financial transfers. They can change as the children grow and can help children to experience having both their parents take an active role in their lives.

We recognise that, post separation, the majority of parents want to continue to do the right thing for their children. We want to ensure that as many families as possible have an effective arrangement for maintenance in place; for those who are unable to make a private arrangement, the Child Maintenance Service provides the support of a statutory scheme. The Child Maintenance Service delivers a simplified statutory system with increased levels of automation, which allows cases to be processed much more quickly and with higher levels of accuracy than was achieved under previous schemes.

The CMS provides an effective, efficient service, to be used as a last resort where parents are unwilling to meet their responsibility to financially support their children voluntarily. This means that cases in the statutory service tend to be more difficult and relationships between the parents in these cases are often fraught and conflicted. While we continue to use all the tools at our disposal to maintain compliance and recover arrears, it is sadly inevitable that some arrears will accrue, as some parents go to great lengths to avoid their responsibilities. That is not acceptable and we are taking action to tackle it. Last November, this House approved regulations tackling a number of issues—closing down loopholes, introducing tough new sanctions for those who evade their responsibilities, and dealing with the historic arrears that built up under the Child Support Agency.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk and my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) raised questions about the CMS’s performance. The Child Maintenance Service is performing well. The most recent statistics show that 94% of new applications were cleared within 12 weeks and 79% of change of circumstances actions were cleared within 28 days. We are seeing unprecedentedly high levels of compliance, with 67% of parents due to pay child maintenance through the collect and pay service having paid some maintenance in the quarter ending March 2019, up from 60% one year earlier.

Although the case load on the service has been growing steadily since it opened in 2012, the number of complaints and appeals received still represents less than 1% of that case load. We have continued to refine our processes to maximise compliance and debt recovery. Debt as a proportion of all maintenance arranged by the service has fallen since the launch of the 2012 scheme, from 17% in March 2015 to 11% in March 2019.

A number of colleagues, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), Members for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), rightly mentioned customer service. The focus so far has largely been on tackling arrears and on recovery of debt, but my clear steer to officials is that I want the focus to be on customer services. We know that more than 80% of calls are answered, although I still think the 20% that are not is too many, and I want them answered in a timely fashion. My focus, while I remain in this role, will be on customer service.

A number of hon. Members raised the issue of enforcement, and we are taking far more action in that regard. We now have several court-based powers, including the use of enforcement agents, otherwise known as bailiffs, to seize goods, forcing the sale of the paying parent’s property. Approximately 7,100 paying parents in England and Wales are currently being pursued by civil enforcement agents for unpaid maintenance following a referral by the CMS.

Hon. Members also mentioned that the service can apply to have the paying parent sanctioned by being committed to prison or disqualified from driving, for example. In addition to that, in regulations in November last year we launched the ability to disqualify non-compliant parents from holding a UK passport, which we believe will act as a strong deterrent. The service initiated 900 sanctions in the quarter ending March 2019 as a last resort against non-compliant paying parents.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised the question of complex earners. We are aware of a small number of parents whose maintenance liability is inconsistent with their financial resources. Some choose to support themselves via a complex arrangement of assets rather than taking a salary. We are taking action to address that.

Parents can request a variation so that most forms of taxable income can be taken into account in the maintenance calculation, which will make it harder for individuals to avoid their responsibilities by minimising the amount of child maintenance they pay. The new powers that we introduced last year allow us to target complex earners via a calculation of notional income based on assets. In addition to the gross annual income provided by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, we can capture income derived from property, savings and investments, including dividends, and other miscellaneous income. We also have the Financial Investigation Unit, which can investigate those parents who declare suspicious earnings or, where appropriate, refer to HMRC for tax fraud.

The FIU was first introduced in 2014, and since 2017 we have tripled the number of staff in that unit. It will look at any case where the receiving parent raises a concern over income and provides basic evidence to support it. I should stress that around 60% of FIU cases show no evidence of suppression of income. Nevertheless, it is an important part of the service. The hon. Gentleman also referred to the self-employed, which I suppose is similar to the situation of complex earners. We have new powers, enabling us to do deep-dive exercises and to the bottom of cases where individuals are trying to suppress or disguise income. Perhaps I will meet him separately to go through that in a little more detail.
Vanessa George: Early Release from Prison

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

4 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op):

That this House has considered the early release of Vanessa George from prison.

It is good to see you in the Chair for such an important debate, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to hon. Members from both sides of the House who are here to stand in solidarity with the parents and children affected by this case. I am here to speak on behalf of the children who attended Little Ted’s nursery in Plymouth, their parents and their families. I hope to give a voice to their fears, anger, pain, horror and genuine concern about the early release of convicted serial child abuser Vanessa George.

Vanessa George was sentenced in December 2009 and charged with seven offences—two of sexual assault by penetration and two of sexual assault by touching. She was also charged with making, possessing and distributing indecent images of children. She was given an indeterminate sentence for reasons of public protection, and was to serve a minimum of seven years for her crimes against toddlers and babies.

The judge—Mr Justice Royce—said to Vanessa George on sentencing:

“...I cannot emphasise too strongly that this is not a seven-year sentence. It is emphatically not. It is, in effect, a life sentence. Many, and I suspect everyone so deeply affected by your dreadful deeds, will say that would not be a day too long.”

The parents were let down twice: first, by the lack of a robust system to protect their children, whom they entrusted to Vanessa George and Little Ted’s nursery; and secondly, as they have told me—some through tears—as the woman who abused so many children will be released early. I will return to this in a moment, but it is worth noting that most of the parents I have spoken to found out about the early release through the media, not from the Parole Board or the authorities. As soon as I heard about the release, I wrote to the Secretary of State asking him to intervene, and personally and urgently to review the decision to release Vanessa George. The more details that emerge, such as the fact that she still refuses to name all the children she abused, the more I am sure it is still too early for that woman to be released.

We are here today because I—we—believe that Vanessa George should not be released early. I believe that the decision should be reviewed urgently, and that every step should be taken to keep her behind bars. I believe that she should be in prison for the entire childhood of the children she abused. I believe that she should not be released or considered for release until she has named all the children she abused. I believe the police should reopen investigations into cases not on the original charge sheet but for which she is the sole or principal suspect. I believe that any criminal justice system that carries such a low bar for remorse that she is not required to name her victims to be eligible for early release is a system that is not working properly in the public interest. I believe that there needs to be a greater role for victims in early releases.
I believe all that because I want every child that George filmed and photographed being sexually assaulted to live for the rest of their childhood in safety. I want their parents to know that the woman who committed those unspeakable acts is locked away and out of reach of their kids until they become adults themselves. She robbed those children of their childhood, and we should protect what remains of it. She has refused to confirm the extent of her actions and the total number of her victims. That leaves every parent who sent their child to Little Ted’s nursery living with a life sentence of not knowing whether their child was one she abused and whether images of their child being abused still exist in some rotten corner of the dark web or on a pervert’s hard drive somewhere. She should not be released until she has named every single one of the babies and toddlers she abused.

I have been made aware of legal precedent whereby additional charges have been investigated, and further charges put to gain justice for those crimes, which would have the effect of keeping that woman behind bars. I want the police to reopen investigations into these crimes, so that George can be kept behind bars if she is guilty of them in addition to the offences of which she was convicted.

Furthermore, the victims need to be given more information and the reports that they are currently denied. They should receive more appreciation for their brave and courageous advocacy—especially the parents who gave evidence and submitted testimony to the Parole Board. The Parole Board acts under the direction of the Secretary of State and Parliament. This debate is necessary and timely in helping to update that direction.

I feel so strongly about this because over the past few weeks I have taken the time to listen to the parents of the children Vanessa George abused. These are some of their comments.

“How can I tell my child that I don’t know whether she was abused or not?” said one. Another said:

“I do not know what I will say to her if she were to ask me about the offender.”

Another told me:

“She will be out soon, but it doesn’t end for us.”

Another said:

“I told them what releasing her early would mean and they ignored it.”

Another said:

“I gave the police my email address and phone number as I wanted updates about her! I’ve had no email or phone call from them whatsoever!”

Another said:

“It seems to me she is saying the words but if she had real remorse then she would have shared more information to help the families”. Perhaps most simply and brutally, one said:

“I found out on Facebook that the woman who abused my child was being let out. We were supposed to be told, but we weren’t.”

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case, albeit one that is difficult to hear. One of the challenges is that we do not know the true extent of this individual’s offending, and therefore the true number of victims. Does he think that changes ought to be made so that people can be attached as people of interest to the case, so they are not missed out and do not find out through Facebook, which is abysmal?

Luke Pollard: I do. There is a difficulty in this case in the difference in the definition of a statutory victim and a discretionary victim. My hon. Friend’s suggestion is a good one, because regardless of the official tick-box definition of the victims, the people connected with the case must be kept informed, especially about the release of the offender.

I am grateful to the Minister for the time he spent with me ahead of this debate and for his professional, non-partisan and sincere support for the victims in this case. On behalf of the parents, I have a number of questions. Will the Minister review the Parole Board’s decision to release Vanessa George early? Will the powers that the Government have taken following the case of serial rapist John Worboys apply in the case of Vanessa George? The Minister has told me those powers have not yet commenced. Will he tell me whether that is true, and whether Vanessa George’s legal team argued for consideration of her case ahead of those powers commencing? Did she try to get out early, knowing that she would not be able to if she left it any longer?

The serious case review into Vanessa George found:

“Although she was not senior in her position, other factors such as her age, personality and length of service could have created an illusion of position of power and encouraged a sense of trust...It is also the case that George is of the ability to behave in a highly manipulative manner and hence gain high levels of trust in others.”

May I ask the Minister for the strongest possible assurances that the manipulative nature of Vanessa George has been properly assessed by the Parole Board?

Furthermore, I have been made aware of legal precedents from similar cases that may provide a chance, no matter how slim, to keep Vanessa George off our streets. It would ensure that there is an investigation of additional crimes that were not on the original charge sheet but for which she was the sole and primary suspect.

On how many counts was George originally charged? How many of those remain on file with her as the principal suspect? I understand that she was charged with just seven, but that scores more remain on file. Is the Minister aware of any recent cases when it was brought to the Parole Board’s attention that the main suspect due for release was the main suspect in many other cases that were not on the charge sheet? Was that considered in this case? Did the police make representations to the Parole Board where cases in which George was suspected were not proceeded with? I realise that the police and the CPS do not always send the full charge list to the courts for fear that juries may be confused. Trials may be too long and other charges may be put at risk. Are there cases where George was the sole or primary suspect in which charges have not been laid but could be?

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I take the opportunity to pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his tireless campaigning in this area. He has shown himself to be a passionate champion of the people of Plymouth, and he has my full support.
Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. The fact that my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter), and I are both here demonstrates that we have cross-party support and is testimony to the fact that all of Plymouth stands in revulsion at what has happened and in support of the families.

I turn to the broader issue of how parents were informed about the early release of Vanessa George. The vast majority of the parents I have spoken to told me that they found out from Facebook and local media. I know that in cases where the identity of victims is uncertain it is hard to identify statutory victims for ongoing communication, and informing everyone can be hard, but more effort should have been made in this case to tell victims ahead of Vanessa George’s release that that would be happening. Will the Minister therefore ask the Parole Board to look again at how it communicates with victims, both statutory and discretionary, in particular in cases of extreme child abuse?

That is not just relevant to this case: the all-party parliamentary group on adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse found that most survivors were not informed of their abuser’s release. That poses a particular risk where the abuser is settled in a town or city close to the survivor. In this case, I believe restrictions will be in place so that Vanessa George cannot settle in Devon or Cornwall, but victims should be told in a timely and respectful manner of the release of an offender. Surely, that is even more important in cases of extreme child abuse.

Will the Minister join me in extending an invitation to the new Victims’ Commissioner to come to Plymouth and meet the parents in order to feed into a stronger and more robust victims code, which I know the Minister’s Department is currently consulting on? If the victims code is to be better understood and supported, cases such as that of Vanessa George must inform how the Parole Board better communicates with and informs, listens to and engages with victims; otherwise, the Minister’s ambition for the victims code to be a living statement of rights will not be achieved.

Finally, will the Minister look at what constitutes adequate remorse for parole in extreme child abuse cases such as this one? All offenders released early must show remorse for their crimes. They have to take steps to show that they understand the severity of the crimes they were convicted of and their impact on the victims, and to show genuine contrition. I cannot reconcile that with Vanessa George’s continued refusal to name which babies and toddlers she abused and which she did not.

That we do not know who was abused denies those children tailored help for the consequences of that abuse and leaves each parent with a life sentence from which there is no early release. Not knowing whether their child was one of the babies Vanessa George penetrated and filmed must eat away at them every waking moment, and being forced to live with that trauma is unimaginably devastating. Will the Minister set out what guidance is provided to the Parole Board and whether he believes the terms around remorse are sufficiently robust? Currently, I do not think they are. Vanessa George should not be released until she has named every one of her victims.

In conclusion, I want to say something directly to the children who attended Little Ted’s nursery in Laira in Plymouth and their parents. Most of the children who were abused still do not know about it, but that does not mean they do not carry scars from the assaults. The accounts I have heard from parents of how children lived with the consequences of assaults on their tiny bodies will haunt me for a long time, and I can only imagine the weight of that on the families who deal with it on a daily basis. The system let those children down once. We must not let them down a second time.

The parents have shown so much bravery and courage throughout all this. News of the early release has reopened old wounds and brought back horrors that no parent should experience. I am in awe of their tenacity. Plymouth is very proud of them. I have heard parents explain the emotional torment of deciding whether to tell their child that they may have been abused but they are not sure whether they are a victim. Parents have told me that this early release came out of the blue and they were not told by the Parole Board. That took them back to the horror and shock of hearing about the abuse for the first time back in 2009.

Parents, especially single parents, have told me they feel so alone, but I say this to them: “You are not alone. You are believed. And whatever happens with this release, you have my commitment, and I imagine the commitment of all Members present, to stand with you to demand better for your child and for every child in this country.” I can only consider the news of Vanessa George’s early release to be a kick in the teeth, not just for those babies and toddlers she abused but for their families and friends, for the whole of Plymouth and for all those impacted by the ripple effects of her actions across the country. I hope the Minister will be able to give some hope to the people I am here to represent.

4.15 pm

Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for raising this issue and for the commitment and passion he showed on behalf of his constituents, which does him credit. He made a very powerful speech, and I thank him for graciously allowing me to speak for a couple of moments before, importantly, the Minister responds.

I endorse all the hon. Gentleman’s comments. Although the appalling crimes committed by Vanessa George took place in his constituency, the shockwaves caused by that atrocity impacted the whole of our city and the country as a whole. I remember it only too well; it is probably the worst, most traumatic event in my 27 years in this place. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), who is currently at the Invictus trials in Sheffield supporting injured servicemen, I have supported parents caught up in this scandal for many years. Of course, it is not going to be resolved in just a few years.

I am deeply disappointed by the decision of the Parole Board to release Vanessa George on licence. I have had reasons to doubt its robustness several times during my years as a Member of Parliament. Of course, in the case of John Worboys, which the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport mentioned, the Parole Board misread the public interest and the courts had to intervene. The Parole Board does not always get the balance right between the interests of the perpetrator, and the impact on victims and the public interest. In this case, it has fallen well short. I also agree with the hon. Gentleman that the way some of the victims found out about this early release is appalling.
Nine years is not enough of a punishment for the trauma that this woman inflicted on many lives and families in Plymouth, the true depth of which will not be known for some years yet. It should serve at least another 10 years in custody before being released on licence. I join the hon. Gentleman in asking the Minister to ask the Parole Board to think again.

4.17 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I add my thanks to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for securing the debate. I am grateful to him for his remarks. He has approached this issue very constructively, because he seeks a higher degree of justice for the constituents he represents. That is absolutely right and proper.

I am also grateful to my hon. Friend, the Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter) for his contribution. He rightly reminded us that, although my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) is not with us today, they have worked with people affected by what were heinous and wicked crimes.

I well remember the commission of these offences because my children were of that age at that time. I think there are very few of us, either in the House or outside it, who do not remember our revulsion and shock when we heard about these appalling acts. It was a shocking abuse of trust. It was a series of offences that left us all shocked. The remarks of Mr Justice Royce, the trial judge, summed it up very well. I have read the transcript of his remarks and obtained at least one version of the indictment to understand fully the offences to which this offender pleaded guilty. There were 11 in all: five counts of sexual assault, one count of making 124 indecent images, and five counts of distributing a range of indecent images of children, not alone but with others. That brought home to me the dangers of the internet for the first time and how this level of abuse can be magnified by people who stop at nothing to satisfy either their own dreadful compulsions or the lusts of others. It is a particularly horrible case.

Vanessa George was sentenced in December 2009 and received what was then still available to the court: a sentence of imprisonment for public protection—an IPP, as we call it—with a minimum term of imprisonment at seven years. The judge calculated the seriousness of the offending to mean this: had George contested the trial, she would have received a determinate term of 21 years. The judge, as the law requires, had to give her credit for a guilty plea of one third, so she would have received a determinate term of 14 years if she had pleaded guilty. The calculation of the seven-year term was in accordance with the law as it then stood.

It is important to understand that, because from my reading of the judge’s remarks and my understanding of the indictment, it seems to me that the full extent of the criminality was reflected in the indictment. There do not seem to be any other offences that were left to lie on the file. I have conducted a preliminary investigation, which I will conclude, and if there is any change in that position, I will write to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport.

That is an important distinction between this case and the John Worboys case. Hon. Members will recollect that Worboys had been made subject to a similar IPP sentence and the Parole Board had directed that he was to be released on licence in January 2018, but in March the High Court quashed the decision and ordered the Parole Board to take a fresh one. It did that and concluded that the public could be protected only by keeping Worboys in closed prison conditions. As a result of that important case, the Government introduced a number of new safeguards to ensure that the mistakes made then should not be repeated. We need to view the Parole Board’s decision to direct the release of George in the light of those safeguards and, indeed, the more robust system now in place as a result of the action taken by the Government.

I will answer as best I can the hon. Gentleman’s questions. The new regime came into force on Monday of this week—22 July—just after he and I spoke about the case. That does not have a retrospective effect, but it will affect cases from now on. I also assure him that, from what I am told, there was no attempt by the legal team to try to expedite the hearing to avoid the new rules.

An oral hearing in the George case took place over two days. The first date was 21 May. On 2 July, another day was set aside for the Parole Board to hear statements from the victims who had been identified and to take fully on board their concerns and position. After that two-day hearing, a decision was made. The answer to the hon. Gentleman’s first question about the review is that because it predates the change, the only course of conduct open to me or the Department is a judicial review, and I have to say that on my examination so far of the procedure, I do not see the sort of flaw that would justify a court giving permission for judicial review.

I think the hon. Gentleman knows what I am talking about when it comes to the test that has to be applied for judicial review. In reaching any release decision, the parole board must follow a detailed process. It must comply with the statutory rules in place, which include the panel considering a dossier of evidence sent by Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service. New checks were introduced by the Government on that procedure after it was discovered that, in the case of Worboys, the Parole Board had not considered all the important information to which I referred, because that will tell the Parole Board, as it did in this case, what the judge took into account in terms of the sentence. In the case of Vanessa George, the judge rightly took into account her refusal then to reveal the full identities of the children she had abused. He made specific and important acknowledgement of that. Just as he took into account her guilty pleas, he tempered that with what was obviously an aggravating factor at the time. I confirm that those remarks were very much in the dossier in this case.

There were also deficiencies in the Worboys case to do with the reports themselves, which did not deal in sufficient depth with the considerable evidence of wider offending, even though Worboys had not been prosecuted for all the offences he was alleged to have committed. It was then that HMPPS issued guidance to report writers on how such evidence should be addressed. Indeed, as I have said, it seems that, on my reading of the indictment, there is not evidence of wider offending in this case.

We know that an oral hearing was held, and I confirm that at that hearing a representative of the Secretary of State was present. Unlike in the Worboys case, in the George case all the report writers recommended release.
Transport Links: Nottinghamshire

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered improving transport links in Nottinghamshire.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I thank colleagues who have come to speak in today's debate.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to debate this issue. I am glad to see Members from neighbouring constituencies in Nottinghamshire here for this important discussion, which is perhaps taking place at a helpful time, given that tomorrow we will see a new man in No. 10. There may be an opportunity to make the case fresh for better transport infrastructure in the regions of the United Kingdom and to rebalance our economy.

I will open with the comments and suggestions passed to me by my hon. Friends the Members for Sherwood (Mark Spencer) and for Newark (Robert Jenrick). Because of their Government positions they are unable to speak in debates such as this, but they have been involved in discussions about the issues that I will raise. I plan to cover railways, road junctions, congestion and other issues that all require Government support and funding, as well as various other issues to add to the great list for the Department for Transport to deal with.

Mansfield is the largest town in Nottinghamshire. It requires improved transport links to neighbouring areas if it is to flourish and we are to boost the local economy. Many people see Mansfield as a commuter town for Nottingham or Sheffield, but we do not have suitable transport links to make that possible.

I start by discussing the extension of the Robin Hood line as part of the East Midlands franchise. I am pleased that the new franchise holder will have to make a business case for extending the line; that is a big step forward after a long campaign. Local lines need to be upgraded and extended, rather than there just being a focus on big national projects. Regardless of the value for money argument, I fully recognise the potential positive impact of HS2 on Nottinghamshire, particularly if we can link up the north of the county with the hub at Chesterfield, as well as the city and suburbs with Toton.

Without the east-to-west connections, which we discussed in a debate here just a few weeks ago, we will not make the most of the economic potential of HS2.

If the Robin Hood line were extended to Ollerton, with trains calling at Shirebrook, Warsop and Edwinstowe, there would be huge economic benefits locally. Extending it would mean improved links for my constituents to jobs and tourism across north Nottinghamshire. The ability to attract new employers to old pit sites at Thoresby and Welbeck comes from efficient access to major motorways and railway services. In the longer term, it would end just short of the HS2 hub at Chesterfield and potentially offer huge growth and jobs to all north Nottinghamshire.

While I am talking about rail, I will take the opportunity to highlight the Midlands rail hub to the Minister. It is championed by Midlands Connect, who I met just this afternoon. The Midlands rail hub is a £2 billion package
of smaller improvements that would lead to more passenger and freight trains across the midlands in key areas. It works in a collaborative way with Network Rail, which is unusual and pleasing to see. It needs just £25 million to continue to drive that forward and make the proper business case. I hope the Government will support that as we go forward. The Robin Hood line is the most significant railway project that would help improve links for my constituents.

When it comes to roads and junctions, I am afraid I have many more asks of Government. We all know that many towns across Nottinghamshire, and elsewhere, are gridlocked by a huge growth in housing and traffic, on roads that simply were not meant to take it. There are pinch points that cause chaos. One example is the A60 Sainsbury's junction in Mansfield, where at key times people can sit for literally hours queuing to get out of the retail park. Residents have complained for years about that congestion.

I have been working with Nottinghamshire County Council for over a year to get plans and costings in place to improve that junction. Final proposals have been submitted to the Department for its views. I hope Ministers will look favourably on them when they are submitted to the new funding scheme that I understand opened this weekend. Hopefully, the Minister will touch on that in his closing remarks. A relatively small amount of funding would have a huge impact on that area. There are many bottle necks like it—far away and abstract from Westminster, but important for the local areas that they affect. This particular one is set to get worse if we do not deal with it and do something effective in the short term, with the building of some 2,000 homes nearby.

With new housing developments being built around Mansfield, Warsop and across Nottinghamshire, improving transport infrastructure and links between areas has never been so important. Last month I visited the site of proposed developments at Spion Kop, which lies to the north of Mansfield before Warsop. It was good to see the proposals, including infrastructure and new facilities, but unless there is support there for congestion on the A60, which is already an incredibly busy road, it is going to cause problems.

There needs to be an overall collaborative approach working with Highways England and Government to deliver improved transport infrastructure. The congestion on the A60 is a very similar challenge to that of Newark, which I will touch on shortly on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Newark. Solutions have been put forward to that Newark congestion and the Mansfield challenge is a similar one.

There are economic opportunities from road investment in the region, including the A617, which is known as the Mansfield and Ashfield regeneration route, or the MARR. It has grown steadily to accommodate new housing, and it could expand further to support new jobs and provide a route for the increasingly heavy traffic around Mansfield. We would benefit hugely from dualling the rest of the MARR, particularly in light of the positive announcement of 1,800 new jobs to be created there at Summit Park commercial site. We can unlock more of that economic potential with improved transport links. There is an opportunity to divert some traffic around the town rather than plough through the middle of it. That would also help reduce to reduce air pollution in the town.

I want to take a bit of a whistle-stop tour around some nearby issues. They are not in my constituency but this debate is about Nottinghamshire transport links and I want to touch on a wider range. I am pleased that Nottinghamshire County Council has been working to unlock the economic potential of the A614, upgrading that route and reducing congestion at Ollerton and other junctions on the route. My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood has been campaigning on that for a long time. The Department for Transport announced last October that £18 million of funding would be allocated to the council for those improvements, which cover six junctions along the A614 and A6097 between Ollerton and Lowdham. The scheme aims to support planned housing developments along the route.

In Newark, serious accidents on the A1 and the A46 can cause frequent delays. The interchanges there, including with the A17, are particularly busy at peak times, which has a knock-on effect on the town and the Cattle Market roundabout, especially when the Nottingham to Lincoln train crosses and everything gets stopped, sometimes for prolonged periods. The A46 Newark northern bypass project will see the widening of that route and the creation of a dual carriageway, raising the last section of the A46 between the A1 and M1 to expressway standard. That will make a huge difference to the town and, more broadly, to north Nottinghamshire. Again, it is something that my hon. Friend the Member for Newark has campaigned about for many years, to improve the network and reduce congestion in the town.

The county council has been working on several important improvements, including the introduction of CCTV at 12 sets of traffic signals on the A38 in Ashfield to enable traffic to be actively managed in real time. That is Mansfield's key route to the M1 as well, and can be a bit of a nightmare. Junction 27 is also an issue. One of the features of Mansfield as a town is that, although we are close geographically to the M1, it can sometimes be a struggle to get there, particularly for commuters. I would like to see more funding and support for projects that can review things such as traffic light phasing and tackle localised gridlock.

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a valuable point about the wider road network. He will know that, inexplicably—it was unexplained at the time—a previous Labour Government detrunked many roads in Nottinghamshire, where I was a county councillor, and in Lincolnshire, where I am an MP. It is critical that the roads that remain trunked—Highways England roads—interface with the roads for which our county councils are responsible in as efficient and effective a way as possible. Will my hon. Friend join me in calling on the Government, the Department for Transport, to ensure that that connection is central to their plans?

**Ben Bradley**: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the key challenges, as I mentioned, in getting from Mansfield to the M1 is precisely how the M1 and the junctions there interface with the A38 and those access routes. Bringing together people such as Midlands Connect, which oversees the regional infrastructure, with those proposals in the future will be vital to make sure those things fit together and we can get the best possible efficiency from our local transport system.
As I mentioned, we have new commercial building at the Summit business park and we need to look to make further improvements on the A38. The area around Kings Mill is already struggling and additional traffic could, if not managed properly, cause problems. As my right hon. Friend said, the need for forward planning and collaborative working around such areas is important.

Unlocking the economic potential of not just Mansfield but all of north Nottinghamshire would be of huge benefit and can be done with some fairly simple solutions sometimes, but it requires that forward planning.

I wanted to mention bus services. I have had complaints from constituents about the early finish of bus routes in the Mansfield area. Staff working late shifts—or even after 6 pm, in many cases—are unable to use buses to get home again. Those living in Forest Town, Oak Tree, Bellamy or Rainworth—areas outside the main rail route—cannot use trains as an alternative, so I would like to see more frequent and later bus services in those areas. I hope the council will work with my constituents to deliver.

The council spends £3.6 million to financially support more than 60 contracts on bus routes across Nottinghamshire. Many support services operate on fixed routes at peak times, to get people to work, education and doctors’ surgeries, but we also need to look at other issues, such as social integration, isolation and ensuring that people can get to work at other times.

I was pleased to see that two new routes have been created in Hucknall, to serve new developments. The C1 and C2 Connect services will go across Harrier Park, near Rolls-Royce, and the Vaughan Estate. From Sunday, those buses will join the existing routes to create better local infrastructure in Hucknall, to serve the train station that connects to Nottingham and the east midlands train services. That is a good example of public transport connecting up with good planning and offering residents a good local service. Funding for those routes has been supported by developers of new housing schemes, which shows the importance of those funding arrangements and creating the transport infrastructure to support new developments. I hope the results will be able to increase them in the coming years.

To sum up, Mansfield is well situated to act as a commuter hub for Nottinghamshire and Sheffield. We have relatively affordable housing, some great small businesses and a historic town centre, which I hope will receive funding from the future high streets fund and the stronger towns fund. I have been pleased to see Mansfield’s bid to the future high streets fund taken forward. That is positive news. We could develop locally as a commuter hub, bringing in affluent young professionals who want to get on the housing ladder and enjoy the benefits of having Sherwood forest on their doorstep. With the right infrastructure and support, Mansfield could offer an incredible lifestyle.

We have huge potential to make the most of tourism. The Robin Hood line could connect us closer to Sherwood forest. We are making good progress, with new hotels being built. Improving the road and rail network will encourage more visitors, which will in turn boost our local economy and support our brilliant local shops. We are, after all, at the heart of the old Sherwood forest, with countless attractions scattered across the county.

It is important to aid the economic growth of post-industrial towns more broadly across the UK, to reverse the trend of aspirational young people feeling that they have to leave our towns. I want people who finish school in Mansfield to see the great potential of living and working in such a beautiful part of the world, and improving transport links is an important factor in their future decisions.

Increased funding to improve transport links across Nottinghamshire is a key requirement to drive that change. I hope that the potential for a focus on regional infrastructure will come good under a new Prime Minister. It is unfortunate that this debate coincides with the new Conservative party leader’s speech to the 1922 Committee, which I am sure has distracted many colleagues this afternoon.

I thank all my constituents for their engagement on this debate. Many commented on my Facebook post this week, when I asked them to raise their key transport issues. From the responses, it was clear how important these issues are to people in Mansfield and how incredibly frustrating they find some of the issues that I have raised. I hope that the Government will focus on the benefits of improving transport in our towns and across Nottinghamshire. I look forward to hearing the views of colleagues from other parts of the county about their priorities.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 5.30 pm. I am obliged to call the Opposition spokesperson at around 5.7 pm and he has up to 10 minutes to speak. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond. Ben Bradley will then have three minutes at the end to sum up.

We are blessed with a galaxy of talent from Nottinghamshire and a former Minister of State for Transport from Lincolnshire, who, if we are really lucky, might give us an erudite, literary reference with a well-timed intervention as the debate continues.

4.43 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. If I knew what erudite meant, I would try to do it. I congratulate my colleague from Nottinghamshire, the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), on securing this important debate. He raised many important issues, which, as he pointed out, affect not only his constituency but the whole city and county of Nottinghamshire. The interrelationship between all of our constituencies and the surrounding counties is very important. It is also significant and of benefit to us that my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) chairs the Transport Committee.

I have some general remarks and then I will come on to some specific points for the Minister. I serve on the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, where we have increasingly been discussing climate change and other green issues. We have heard from David Attenborough, Extinction Rebellion and a number of other fascinating witnesses. They have signalled the importance of transport in reducing our carbon emissions. I know that the Minister and the Department are aware of the contribution they have to make, so it is not a political point, but I ask the Minister to continue the
work that he and his Department are doing, and to put that at the forefront of what he says. Clearly, many of our younger constituents, who cannot yet vote, are demanding that we do more in that area. Things that were once regarded as a bit off the wall, such as cycling, are now regarded as mainstream policies. I ask the Minister to reflect on that and continue the Department’s work.

In Nottinghamshire and the midlands as a region, we feel that we miss out. Both Conservative and Labour Members feel that our area of Nottinghamshire does not get its fair share, whatever the amount of public spending. That is why I welcome the contribution from the hon. Member for Mansfield. Whatever the arguments about the size of the cake, there is an agreement to be made for a fairer distribution of funds. I ask the Minister to ensure that those funds are fairly distributed.

There is, quite rightly, a lot of talk about London and the south-east—much of that is the engine of our economy. There is a lot of talk about the northern powerhouse, which is significant. There is a lot of talk about north-south connectivity, which is also important. But there is a bit called the midlands—as the Minister and you, Mr Hollobone, will know. The Minister is responsible for this. All I am asking—all the region is asking—is that people making decisions in London do not always choose those who shout the loudest or those with the most compelling brand, so that we in Nottinghamshire and similar areas get a fair share of the existing cake.

As the hon. Member for Mansfield ably said, the Midlands Connect demand on rail services is a hugely imaginative project, but it will require Government money. If the Government mean anything by devolution, they will see that these are local decisions, which local people want to make for their own benefit. Importantly, as the Minister will know, it talks about not only north-south connectivity, but east-west connectivity. For Nottinghamshire, the ability to get to Sheffield or across to Birmingham—even to get to Leicester and Coventry—is significant. The rail services there demand a huge amount of investment at a regional level, to ensure that that happens. I ask the Minister to ensure that that is contained within the Government’s future investment decisions.

I will also make a plea for local stations—as the hon. Member for Mansfield did regarding the Robin Hood line, which is of benefit to all of us. In my constituency there are three local railway stations. Those stations—Netherfield, Carlton and Burton Joyce—could and must be used as a much more significant way for people to move from the suburbs to the city centre and beyond. Building on the existing framework is very important; again, I ask the Minister to look at that point.

I thank the Department for its work with Gedling Borough Council and Nottinghamshire County Council on the Gedling access road, a very complicated project that will be of benefit to the local community. All partners—including Nottingham City Council, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) knows—have contributed to bringing it to fruition. I ask the Minister to keep an eye on it and ensure that it moves forward as swiftly as possible.

I have a couple of specific asks to benefit Gedling. The city council and others have developed the tram network, which is a brilliant investment in the city and its surroundings in the Nottinghamshire County Council area. The Minister knows the geography and the organisation of local government in Nottinghamshire, where the county council’s area is very close to the city centre. The tram has made a big difference, and people have worked together to deliver it. Discussions are ongoing about the feasibility of extending the tram into Gedling. I ask the Minister to work with the borough, city and county councils to create a feasible project and bring it to fruition.

The hon. Member for Mansfield was right to say that something that often gets missed out, along with cyclists, is buses. Indeed, when I spoke about railways in a debate last week, a couple of people said, “Vernon, don’t forget the buses.” People in my area understand the importance of the investment in HS2 and the rail network to economic growth and prosperity, but the vast majority of them are more interested in whether the buses run properly and conveniently. It must be said that we have a very good bus service in Nottingham, but it is really important that it should run properly and to time and be reasonably priced, which overall I think it is.

To be fair to the Minister, there are challenges with respect to transport. There has been investment in the area, but as with everything, we would like that progress to accelerate. The green aspect of transport will play an ever-increasing role in future—that is certainly something that young people have demanded in my area, where transport is an issue. I know that the Minister understands this, but Nottinghamshire deserves more of a share of the national cake than it gets. So does the whole midlands region, particularly the east midlands. I hope that he will bear that in mind in future investment decisions.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate; I congratulate the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing it and on his powerful and detailed case. It is also, of course, a pleasure to follow the erudite contribution of my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker).

As an east midlander, Mr Hollobone, you know that I am making a brave decision by wading into the age-old debate about whether the city of Nottingham is part of Nottinghamshire. I suspect that it is slightly in the eye of the beholder, but I am challenging my arm by speaking in the debate. We have time, so I hope the hon. Member for Mansfield will be generous in allowing me to make a couple of points.

First, the midlands rail hub is an excellent scheme. I know that Transport Ministers and Treasury Ministers have had the details for a while now, because I secured a debate last month on east-west rail connectivity that focused on it. In the context of infrastructure schemes it is relatively cheap, but in bang for buck it is exceptionally impactful. It would mean 24 extra services an hour east-west, 36 more freight paths and 6 million more rail journeys per year. It would be a very good project not only for business in our community, but for the environment. Its pricing makes it a really good investment case for this country, so I am very interested to hear the Minister’s reflections on it.

Sir John Hayes: Brian Chesky said:

“Travel is a new experience that can transport you out of your everyday routine”. 
[Sir John Hayes]

However, that is only true if people can get to places quickly and conveniently. In respect of rail, the hon. Gentleman is right that further investment is necessary in Nottinghamshire—and in Lincolnshire, by the way. It is vital that our smaller railway stations have regular services into the evenings and at the weekends, to allow people to enjoy those new experiences and be transported beyond the routine. I hope that he will support my call for the Minister to confirm, today, that he will make that extra investment in Lincolnshire, in places such as Spalding, and in Nottinghamshire.

Alex Norris: I have learned a veteran lesson about how to get Spalding into a debate about Nottinghamshire, but I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman’s point. The hon. Member for Mansfield made the case very strongly for the Robin Hood line; I would say the same about Bulwell station, and my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling talked about Netherfield and Carlton stations. Our stations are critical, and we know that our constituents value them. When we talk about nationwide projects, we have to understand that our communities access those services through local stations, so they need to be of high quality. I will say more at the end of my speech about the importance of connecting towns to big cities.

The arguments for the Midlands rail hub are very strong, and I hope to hear the Minister’s reflections on them in due course. I will also be writing to the new Prime Minister, along with other hon. Members—I encourage colleagues present to sign up—about the hub, in the hope that we can give it the best possible airing as soon as possible. A lot of the arguments for it are also strongly true of HS2, which I also wish to mention because I believe that it will have a transformative impact on our community.

There are a lot of similarities between Mansfield and Bulwell, and the north and west of Nottingham in general. We know that successive decades of deindustrialisation have meant deep-rooted social challenges in both our communities, and that work is the way out of those challenges. Projects such as HS2 at Toton, the expansion and support of East Midlands airport—now the biggest pure freight airport in the country—and the development of the power station site when it comes on stream with green energy and green technologies have real potential to add tens of thousands of skilled jobs to our communities. We need to come together to support them.

I hope that the Minister and his civil servants recognise that the east midlands is speaking with one voice. Pretty much everything that the hon. Member for Mansfield said, other than his references to Mansfield, could have been in my speech two weeks ago. We in the east midlands used to be criticised for not getting out of one another’s way; it was said that one of the reasons why other areas got investment, but we in Nottinghamshire did not, was that we could not agree between ourselves so we gave a non-verbal cue that we were not serious. I hope it is recognised that that is not the case now. We have significant plans, we have broad buy-in and we are ready to go.

Vernon Coaker: I emphasise to the Minister, and to his civil servants who are listening, that what my hon. Friend says was demonstrated only last week when the all-party parliamentary group on the east midlands reached cross-party consensus on the importance of the area around Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station and East Midlands airport and the new industrial development there. There was cross-party agreement that it can be a hub and a driver for the whole region, both through transport links and through industrial development.

Alex Norris: That cannot be stated enough. That triumvirate of sites is the future for my community. In the future, my constituents—my neighbours—will look to Toton as much as to Nottingham city centre. The time for these projects is now, and they portend a very exciting future for our region, which I am proud to be part of through the all-party group and beyond.

Let me finish by returning to a central theme of this debate, which all our speeches have mentioned—the idea that we ought to have high ambitions for infrastructure at a national level. We ought to be really robust about those projects, because they are not only good at stimulating the economy in the short term; they are the building blocks of a thriving and productive country.

When we talk about those projects, when we understand them and design them, we have to link them up to the communities that they are there to serve. If it is just about connecting city centres, whether in Derby or Nottingham, to somewhere like Toton we will have missed the point. We will have lost the full financial impact of those projects, and we will have lost the hearts and minds case as well, because people in Bulwell, Bilborough, Aspley or Bestwood will rightly say, “Hang on a minute. What is the value to me if I have to go 20 minutes into town to then go out again?” There is a real challenge there, and we have to be really creative.

That could be through light rail, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling has mentioned; we have a great light rail network in Nottingham, with real scope to develop it further. It could be through buses, which as we have heard are the mode with which the majority of people will engage. It could be on foot or by bike, but we have to link up those big projects with our towns. In that way, people will get the benefits from those projects and support them, and we will all get the growth that we are seeking.

5 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken today, and in particular thank the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) for securing this important debate. I recognise his commitment to his constituency and his interest in the lack of affordable, high-quality transport that his constituents face.

Transport is obviously a central issue in Nottinghamshire, as it is for the country as a whole. Before tackling some of the wider points that have been made, I urge the hon. Gentleman to continue to press the issues that he has identified this afternoon, both on his colleagues in the county council on which he serves and on the Minister. I also commend the effective approach to transport taken by Nottingham City Council, which has an award-winning, council-run bus and tram service, and where investment in public transport has improved the lives of passengers and is creating an attractive environment for businesses to invest in.
A lack of affordable public transport and, indeed, transport as a whole has a huge impact on many people. It makes travelling to work difficult, and potentially limits access to vital services such as doctors or local shops. For young people, a lack of affordable transport can limit access to apprenticeships, college or university. Investment in transport is an important driver of economic growth; we have heard about the effect that regional imbalances in investment can have on growth. Most of all, in our interconnected world, cutting carbon dioxide emissions from transport is central to tackling the threat of climate change, something that is only too evident today.

Labour would take a much more strategic approach than the current Government, based on the public interest and the needs of the economy as a whole, and would take urgent action to avert a climate crisis. That is in contrast with the current state of much of our transport system, part of which the hon. Member for Mansfield has described, as have colleagues on the Labour Benches.

It is important to consider the scale of the crisis. First and foremost, Britain depends far too much on its roads as a mode of transport. The pollution, choked high streets, terrible congestion and carbon dioxide emissions caused by cars and lorries are unsustainable. I am afraid that at the moment the current Government’s policies are making that problem worse with more traffic, a lack of action on congestion and pollution and, on local roads, a huge backlog of potholes. The Government’s priority should be to invest in public transport and deal with that range of issues, taking traffic off our roads and reducing congestion for those who have to drive.

Under this Government, our railways are also expensive, both for the passenger and the taxpayer. The current franchising system is both expensive and ineffective, and has repeatedly failed. Quite simply, there is a need for much greater investment across the whole country, as we have heard today with particular reference to Nottingham and Lincolnshire. Fares have risen dramatically, and the ticketing system is far too complicated. A Labour Government would bring the railways back into public ownership, saving huge sums that are currently wasted on bailing out franchise holders. We would reduce fares and tackle the regional inequality that has so badly affected areas such as Nottinghamshire.

A Labour Government would also tackle the serious issue of local transport, which my colleagues referred to when they mentioned the problems with buses. Our bus services have been cut by 45% since 2010, leaving older and disabled people isolated, younger people unable to get to work or education, and commuters let down and ripped off by increasing fares. There has been a chronic lack of investment in walking and cycling, with just 1.5% of the Department for Transport’s budget spent on those two modes of transport, despite their importance. If Britain had the same levels of cycling as the Netherlands, our carbon dioxide emissions from cars would be cut by a third, because of the large number of journeys of around a mile in length currently made by car. It is also worth noting the importance of the link to public health, which I am sure the Minister is aware of. If we all walked a mile a day, we would be significantly healthier. There would also be a knock-on effect of freeing up valuable road space for those who have to drive, such as the emergency services and some businesses.

We should invest in delivering high-quality local transport, restoring cuts to bus services. An incoming Labour Government would introduce a new young person’s bus pass. All local councils would be allowed to regulate bus services and set up new council-run companies, such as the outstanding one in Nottingham that we have heard about. We would also raise investment in cycling and walking to reduce emissions and improve health.

As we have heard today, we face serious transport problems in this country, including in the east midlands. The Government should be taking much more urgent action to address those serious problems. A Labour Government would tackle the issues of pollution, congestion and poor infrastructure, with a clear strategy and programme of investment for the future.

5.6 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing this debate on improving transport links in Nottinghamshire.

Her Majesty’s Government—this Government—are investing vast sums in cycling, pedestrian access, equestrianism and all forms of active travel, and have invested many billions of pounds in road maintenance. When this Government created the national pothole action fund and invested in it some years ago, I played a part in that. This Government have made significant investments in transport, because good transport links are a key enabler of growth, employment, access to education—all aspects that are doing extremely well in this country—skills training, and seeing our friends and family. Transport is a key link in all those areas.

Nottinghamshire sits within a region that is at the heart of the United Kingdom’s transport network. The east midlands has been alluded to; my constituency of Northampton North is also within that region. We know that investment is not just crucial to regional success but key to national success, which is why we are building HS2, the new backbone of the national rail network. We are improving capacity and connectivity and building on growth, and the midlands will be the first region to benefit from that new railway. Nottinghamshire will be served by a new hub station at Toton.

That is also why we are investing £1.8 billion in the region’s motorways and trunk roads, including in vital improvements to the M1 motorway, which I, along with many millions of others, use regularly. It is why we are investing £1.7 billion from the local growth fund, including through investments in transport schemes across the midlands region.

Vernon Coaker: I thank the Minister for the start that he has made to his remarks. It would be of real interest in Nottinghamshire if the Minister could say a little more about what he expects the Government’s policy to be with respect to HS2, given the commitment of the man who is now to be Prime Minister, who has said that there will be a review of HS2. My constituents and local authorities have asked what that means, so could the Minister elaborate on that for us?

Michael Ellis: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s question, but at this point he will have to wait and see. The Prime Minister at the moment is my right hon.
Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), and we will have to wait and see what happens in the next few hours and days. However, the Government have invested, and continue to invest, in HS2, as I have said. His point about the east midlands is a very good one, which he should continue to pursue.

Today’s debate is very timely because Nottinghamshire stands on the cusp of getting a new train operator. East Midlands Railway, run by Abellio, will take over the franchise on 18 August—only about three weeks from now. Under the new franchise, passengers will benefit from new trains with more peak-time seats, reduced journey times and more than £17 million in station improvements. Abellio will oversee the introduction of brand-new, more comfortable and more reliable trains, including the replacement of the entire existing inter-city fleet, so this is a vast investment.

Passengers will benefit from an 80% increase in the number of morning peak seats into Nottingham, Lincoln and St Pancras. East Midlands Railway will also be at the forefront of the Government’s commitment to deliver a cleaner and greener rail network, which we are very focused on. It will trial hydrogen fuel cell trains on the midland main line and run zero-carbon pilots at six stations along the route. There will also be more car parking spaces, more ticket-buying facilities, more flexible smart ticketing options, free wi-fi, high-quality mobile connectivity, improved Delay Repay compensation and £9.4 million of investment to deliver commercial and customer service improvements at stations—all positives.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield mentioned the Robin Hood line. I know that the start of the new franchise will be of great interest to him and other Members. I recognise his work as a tireless campaigner for improvements to the Robin Hood line between Nottingham and Worksop, on which his constituency sits. Under the new franchise, the Robin Hood line will benefit from a later evening service on weekdays and a new Sunday service. It will also get refurbished, modern trains providing a more reliable and comfortable service with free on-board wi-fi, USB points, at-seat power and increased luggage space. I know I sound a little bit like an advertising guru here, but—[Laughter.] Or maybe less of the guru. The fact of the matter is that those are very positive things that will help vast numbers of passengers.

My hon. Friend and other Members in the region are campaigning for the Robin Hood line to be extended to Ollerton via Shirebrook, Warsop and Edwinstowe. As he will know, the new operator of the east midlands franchise is required to submit a business case for that extension within the first year of the franchise. That business case will be reviewed to decide whether the line should be extended, mitigating the risk of reopening a line that might not be financially and economically beneficial. One of the many ways in which we differ from the Opposition is that we are always focused on ensuring a financial and economic reality to our plans.

Moving from rail to road, I recognise that my hon. Friend is keen to see improvements to the key roads serving his constituency—he has been tireless in this—Members across the House. I know that the key roads serving his constituency include the A60 and the A614. In particular, he highlighted congestion issues at the A60 Sainsbury’s roundabout, as I believe it is referred to colloquially. I note that Nottinghamshire County Council has produced a high-level appraisal of the options for improvements. It is now for the council, as the local highway authority, to develop a more detailed case for investment.

My Department has just announced £348 million to boost the quality of local highways over the next four years. As part of that, the local pinch point fund totals £150 million and will ease congestion on some of our busiest roads. My Department also provides nearly £4 million—to be precise, £3,916,000—to Nottinghamshire County Council each year for small-scale transport schemes, including road safety measures and reducing congestion. However, I emphasise that it is for each local authority to decide how it allocates its resources and which transport improvement projects to support.

I hope that my hon. Friend will welcome the fact that the stretches of the A617, the A60, the A38 and the A614 that serve Mansfield are now classified as part of the major road network. That means that they could in future be eligible for improvements funded through the national roads fund, which is subject to regional prioritisation decisions. The major road network is a new programme that will make substantial amounts of new investment available for road enhancement schemes on a network of the most important local authority roads. It will improve co-ordination and targeting of investment to reduce congestion, unlock housing delivery, support all road users and support economic growth.

As my hon. Friend will know, a package of six junction improvements along the A614 and the A6097 corridor has been chosen for early entry on to the major road network programme, after being identified by Midlands Connect. That is good news for his area because, subject to a satisfactory assessment of an outline business case, including a value-for-money analysis, funding will be available from the national roads fund from 2020 to 2021 for construction of that scheme.

I think my hon. Friend spoke about the Newark bypass and the A46. I know that he understands the clear and uncontroversial importance of the A46, which provides an important regional, and indeed national, link. With Government funding, Midlands Connect, which is the sub-national transport body for the midlands, has been working hard on a route study for the whole of the A46 from the Humber to the Severn. Midlands Connect regards the route as of key strategic importance and believes that targeted improvements to it could really help to unlock growth.

The first road investment strategy—RIS 1, as it is called—said that we would develop the A46 Newark northern bypass scheme during the first road period, which is 2015 to 2020, for delivery in a future RIS period, subject to the work showing that the scheme offered value for money. The scheme would involve widening the A46 north of Newark in Nottinghamshire to a dual carriageway, bringing the last section of the A46 between the A1 and the M1 to expressway standard and improving the A46/A1 junction to allow for better traffic movement to Newark and Lincoln. Work to develop the scheme has been undertaken by Highways England to inform decision making about the second road investment strategy, which will cover the period 2020 to 2025. We expect to announce our decisions on that later this year, so watch this space.
Moving to the issue of local roads as opposed to the A roads and strategic roads, it is not just enhancements to key local roads that are vital to local people and businesses, but proper maintenance so that the local highway network is in good condition. That is why the Government are investing £5.6 billion in local highway authorities in England outside London between 2015 and 2021. That includes £296 million for a pothole action fund, which is being allocated to local highway authorities between 2016 and 2021 to help to repair potholes or preferably stop them forming in the first place.

That funding is not ring-fenced; its use is entirely at the discretion of highway authorities, based on their local needs and priorities. Between 2015-16 and 2019-20, Nottinghamshire, which is a great and beautiful county, which I know from my previous role as tourism Minister has a great deal of attraction for visitors as well as residents, will have received £85 million to help to maintain the local road network and more than £19 million for small-scale transport improvements.

Businesses regard good roads, both strategic and local, as vital to commercial success, and having them in an acceptable and safe condition is hugely important to us all—especially to me as road Minister—whether we are car users, lorry drivers, bus passengers, cyclists, pedestrians or equestrians. Let us face it: most of us are many of those things. That is why investment is so vital.

Let me turn to the measures that the Government are putting in place to improve local bus services, which my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield mentioned. Each year, my Department provides a quarter of a billion pounds in direct revenue support for bus services in England, via the bus service operators grant scheme. Of that £250 million, more than £43 million is paid directly to local councils outside London to support buses. That particularly supports buses that are not commercially viable, but which local authorities in any given area may consider socially necessary. The rest of the money goes to commercial bus operators. Without that support, fares would increase and marginal services would disappear. Nottinghamshire County Council is receiving more than £1 million from that scheme this year alone and has been successful in securing almost £1.5 million to fund six new electric buses and the supporting infrastructure.

Government funding supports the approximately £1 billion spent by local authorities on concessionary bus passes every year.

**Matt Rodda:** Some local authorities have completely cut support for socially important buses—I think of another midlands county, Oxfordshire, where there is no support at all. Has the Minister considered that it might be worth ring-fencing some of that money? He has talked glowingly about what is a very diminished pot, yet some of his colleagues on Conservative-run local councils are taking money away.

**Michael Ellis:** The Government have committed to protecting the national bus travel concession, which is of huge benefit to around 10 million people, allowing free off-peak local travel anywhere in England. Local authorities have a responsibility in this area, and we ask them to exercise their responsibilities and their discretion in this matter, because the concession provides older people and those with disabilities with greater freedom than they might otherwise have, greater independence and a lifeline to their community. I think that local authorities of any political hues would want to look very carefully at these areas.

I might add that the Government recognise that although the deregulated bus market works well across much of the country, in some areas the deregulated market has not always responded effectively to the changing needs of the population, which is why we introduced the Bus Services Act 2017. It contains a range of options for local authorities to improve local bus services and drive up passenger numbers. In addition to franchising, there are new and improved options to allow local transport authorities to enter into partnership with their local bus operators, to improve services for passengers. We want local authorities and bus companies to work together to make bus travel more attractive, and we hope that the new powers in the 2017 Act will make that more feasible.

I have highlighted the work of my Department on many modes of transport. In addition, by integrating housing and transport policy and talking across Government and across Departments, we are accelerating the delivery of homes by improving transport and are creating well-connected and liveable places. I am pleased that we are working jointly with counterparts at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on a broad range of activities, including the housing infrastructure fund and housing deals.

**Vernon Coaker:** The Minister is just about to come to his concluding remarks. As he was speaking, one transport issue did occur to me. We know that it is Government policy to drive towards the end of combustion engines and the provision of more electric cars. In terms of transport in Nottinghamshire and across the country, can the Minister say what the Government are doing to ensure greater provision of electric charging points?

**Michael Ellis:** If I may say so, the hon. Gentleman makes another very good point. That is something that the Government are working on, and my Department are investing in it, including in innovative companies, to assist in developing new ways of creating charging points—for example, contactless charging. My Department and this Government have also been investing in improving the charging infrastructure and are working with companies, including the industry, on how to do that. It is a key priority going forward, because we want to encourage electric vehicle use; in fact, we are leading the way in that area. If I may, I will write to the hon. Gentleman in more detail on the issue of charging points.

In conclusion, I hope I have gone some way towards assuring my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield of our strong commitment to transport in Nottinghamshire. That strong commitment is also one for Northamptonshire, which you, Mr Hollobone, may have an interest in—in fact, I think you do, as do I—and one for all counties throughout this country, because we recognise that transport is fundamental not only to the economy, but to quality and wellbeing of life.

5.26 pm

**Ben Bradley:** I thank the Minister for his remarks. I thank the hon. Members for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) and, of course, the shadow Minister for their contributions. I also thank
[Ben Bradley]

my hon. Friends the Members for Sherwood (Mark Spencer) and for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who, as I said in my speech, cannot contribute to this debate because of their roles, but who have had many a conversation with me in the build-up to this debate about their own priorities, which I mentioned in my speech.

I welcome the discussion about consensus from Opposition Members. It is absolutely correct that every time we debate and discuss these issues—in the House or locally—we all broadly agree, across the parties in Nottinghamshire, on the key priorities that we need to deliver, and agree that Nottinghamshire needs the fair slice of national investment that I hope we will see.

I thank the Minister for his response, especially his comments about initial improvements that we will see on the Robin Hood line, in terms of the quality of the trains and the regularity of service under the new franchise. I also thank him for his comments on the pinch-point funding for congestion. I can assure him that his Department will be receiving the bid for the A60 at Sainsbury’s as soon as humanly possible, to try to get that over the line. I am sure he will not be surprised to know that I will continue pushing not only that cause but many other Mansfield and Nottinghamshire-related transport issues. I look forward to the Government’s support for the foreseeable future.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved,
That this House has considered improving transport links in Nottinghamshire.

5.27 pm
Sitting adjourned.
Local Housing Allowance and Homelessness

9.30 am

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered local housing allowance and homelessness.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I am raising this issue because our constituents are in pain. A series of cuts, including the freeze in local housing allowance rates since 2016, has led to an increasing number of people across the country struggling to keep a roof over their heads. In the worst cases that is leading to homelessness and rough sleeping. The last 10 years of Tory rule have given us rising levels of homelessness in England. Rough sleeping alone has more than doubled in that time and in London in the last year it increased by 18%. The number of people in temporary accommodation has also increased. At the end of last year there were 83,700 individuals and families living in temporary accommodation, which is a 74% increase since 2010. It is unacceptable and we cannot allow it to continue. We must reverse it. We must look at the availability and affordability of housing.

Local housing allowance rates relate to housing benefit, which is now part of universal credit. They were introduced just over 10 years ago and are meant to give support to people on low income who are renting privately, including people who are working, so that they can keep up with their rent. However, in the last 10 years rates have been cut repeatedly and are now frozen, leaving people who need the support struggling to pay their rent. Research by Crisis and the Chartered Institute of Housing found that in 92% of areas in Great Britain, people who need the support struggling to pay their rent. However, in the last 10 years rates have been cut repeatedly and are now frozen, leaving people who need the support struggling to pay their rent. Research by Crisis and the Chartered Institute of Housing found that in 92% of areas in Great Britain, roughly 81% of one-bedroom properties were unaffordable within the shared accommodation rate last year. For a family with one or two children, just 6% of two-bedroom properties were affordable. To give an idea of how far behind the rates now are, that family would have had to find more than £150 extra a month to rent a property in the cheapest third of the private rental market. That is not an amount that can be made up from better budgeting. It is two and a half weeks’ worth of food shopping for the average family in London. No wonder that in too many cases it is almost impossible for people to cover the cost of their rent when they face such shortfalls. The ending of a private tenancy is one of the most common reasons why people become homeless today. What is more, when people lose their tenancy, it is equally impossible for them to find somewhere else to live within local housing allowance rates. They are left facing homelessness.

That is not the experience of a few people. Charities deal with people in that situation far too often. One woman I heard from is long-term sick and unable to work. She has to move out of her home because the landlord is selling the property, but as her local housing allowance rate is only £350 a month she cannot find anywhere else to live and is at risk of becoming homeless. That is having a huge impact on her severe anxiety. I heard from another woman, who has worked almost continuously since she was 16. She is now in her 50s. Four years ago she was made redundant, and she has struggled to get another job since. She is now struggling to find ways to manage a £300 monthly shortfall between her housing benefit and her rent. After years of work, the housing benefit system is failing her when she needs it most. She needs security and to get back on her feet. Another person who faces a huge shortfall between rent and housing benefit after having to stop work last year said, “It just feels like you are being kicked when you are at your lowest.”

Visitors to Ealing soup kitchen have the same stories. Gert was failed by LHA when he was made homeless because he got a tiny increment in wages and his housing benefit help stopped, which effectively made him homeless for over a year while he was still trying to work. LHA also failed a volunteer at Ealing Soup Kitchen, Simone, who has been asked to leave a property and is unable even to bid for band D properties despite having a disabled child and working full time. On her low wage she cannot pay for high-rent properties, and there is a good chance that she will be made homeless by the system in September. She works in a care home and spends her spare time volunteering at homeless shelters—and she may end up having to use them.

Andrew Mcleay, the manager of Ealing Soup Kitchen, says:

“We try to help these people that slip through the cracks—however LHA is making our job almost impossible”.

Ealing Soup Kitchen and other organisations in my constituency do amazing work, and help people move from homeless to hopeful. They save lives. I am confident
that the Members attending this debate, and every Member of Parliament, will have groups doing equally important work in their constituencies, but I particularly want to thank St Mungo’s, Hope for Southall Street Homeless and Ealing Soup Kitchen for their amazing work. No-one should be in that desperate situation, and no one should become homeless or be at risk of it simply because the help they need is not there.

For years, social housing has been ignored and sold off, driving rising rents and falling housing stocks. Social rented housing is key for providing people on low incomes with secure, decent and affordable housing. But the Government are woefully behind in building enough homes to address the scale of need. Just 5,000 social rent units were built last year. Research from Crisis and the National Housing Federation has shown that we need to build 90,000 homes a year in England for the next 15 years to significantly reduce the worst forms of homelessness, such as rough sleeping and living in unsuitable temporary accommodation.

It will take time to build the social rent homes that are needed. That is why we must act now to ensure that people on low incomes can afford their rent in the private rented sector. We simply cannot afford to wait for more than a decade and, in the meantime, watch the numbers of people facing homelessness rise and rise. Right now, more and more people on low incomes are having to turn to the private rented sector to find homes, only to struggle to pay their rent because of cuts to local housing allowance rates. In reality, we need to fund both. We need to invest in increasing the supply of genuinely affordable housing, as the most effective long-term solution and the best way to manage the housing benefit budget, but that must not overshadow the urgent need to invest in an immediate and effective solution to help people to keep their existing home and avoid altogether the trauma of becoming homeless.

Unfreezing the rates and ensuring that they cover at least the cheapest third of local rents will significantly help people at risk of homelessness in the private rented sector. That will also help to reduce the number of individuals and families experiencing homelessness now. It will help those stuck in temporary accommodation or hostels, living on the streets, hidden away on people’s sofas or sleeping at the back of buses to find a home and have the immediate means to keep it.

As I mentioned, we have seen a huge rise in the use of very expensive temporary accommodation. That is a result of fewer and fewer affordable housing options for councils to prevent and resolve homelessness, as per their statutory duty. That not only sustains people in insecure situations, but is a huge waste of ‘taxpayers’ money. As a country, we are spending almost £1 billion on temporary accommodation, rather than helping people to move into safe, stable and affordable homes. That money could be better spent on services to prevent homelessness from happening in the first place and save both the economic and the human costs of homelessness.

That is why I, along with many of my constituents, are supporting the Cover the Cost campaign launched by Crisis. That campaign has the support of thousands of people, several leading organisations in the area of housing and homelessness, councils and landlords. Those organisations include the Local Government Association and the Residential Landlords Association. The campaign calls on the Government to restore local housing allowance rates so that they cover at least the cheapest third of rents.

We are due a spending review, and I am sure the new Prime Minister will at least deliver that. It is a prime opportunity to unfreeze local housing allowance and put sufficient investment into the rates so that they cover at least the cheapest third of rents. That will give an immediate and much-needed lifeline to so many people who right now cannot cover the cost of their rent and so are at severe risk of homelessness. The investment will also have an immediate impact on homelessness, helping people back into the housing market rapidly, and will make a significant difference to many of my constituents and many people across the country. If the Government are serious about ending rough sleeping, as their manifesto says, then we need an immediate investment in local housing allowance rates so that the system is adequately resourced to support people as intended.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. Let me advise hon. Members on how I will manage the debate. I intend to start calling the Front-Bench spokespersons by 10.28 am. That provides roughly six to seven minutes for each of Back-Bench speaker. If they could stick to that sort of timeframe, I would be grateful; if they exceed it, I will start getting very fidgety.

9.44 am

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey, in this really important debate. The hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) is absolutely right: this is a very key issue. Unless we get housing right, it will not be possible to deal with so many of the other issues that concern us, in the context of eradicating poverty, improving life chances, improving education and dealing with poor health. Housing is the absolute foundation of the decent, civilised society that all of us in the Chamber want to see.

What have we seen over the last few years? We are starting to see a rise in home ownership in the younger generation—35 to 44-year-olds; that is starting to inch up. Last year, we managed to build more homes than were built in all but one of the last 31 years. As my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing says, we need to build more and better-quality homes and we need to do that much more quickly than we have managed so far.

We also want to see longer-term tenancies. I am pleased with the moves that the Government are making in that direction. It is absolutely right that we also crack down on rogue landlords, because they should have no place in a decent society.

It is very welcome that the Government accepted the calls from the Local Government Association and others to scrap the housing borrowing cap. The Local Government Association advises that that will lead to the building of up to 10,000 new homes a year. That is a significant contribution towards the estimated 100,000 new social homes a year that are desperately needed.

I support councils in wanting to encourage home ownership, but we must do that without a corresponding decline in the number of social rented homes. That is
why it is so important that councils be able to keep 100% of the receipts from right-to-buy sales to invest in new affordable housing.

I am sure that all of us in the Chamber have frustrations about the planning system and the way in which we build houses in this country. I understand that in April the Local Government Association advised that there were 423,000 homes for which permission had been given to build but which still had not been built. The issue of slow build-out rates has gone on far too long.

In my own constituency, up to about 13,000 homes in total are being built to the north of Houghton Regis and part of Luton. The end date for that development—for the final houses—will not be until some point in the early 2030s. That is simply too long—and unacceptable, given that there is desperate housing need now.

I wonder whether we need to be more imaginative about what we do on the big sites for which planning permission has been given, to which houses have been allocated—the houses are going to come—but which are left empty for years and years, even though there is desperate housing need. When I have taken my family away on summer holidays, we have stayed in a luxury-type chalet caravan park on various weeks away. Would it be possible to look at having that type of housing, on a temporary basis, on those huge sites where there are no houses but houses are planned? As the permanent houses were built, we could move those units off to other sites where we were waiting to build. That is not a long-term solution, but this is a really urgent issue—it is an “Action this day” issue. We need new, fresh, more imaginative thinking about how we meet the very urgent housing need that the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall set out very clearly and vividly for all of us in his speech.

If we build zero-energy-bill homes, the people who need these new homes will have more money for food, clothes and the household budget in general. It is possible to build houses that have no net gas and electricity bills; they are no more expensive to build than conventional homes. British architects such as Bill Dunster are building such homes now. I hope to have some in my constituency shortly. We are all asking why all new homes are not zero-energy-bill homes. That would help us to meet our net zero target and help poorer people to live within their means: if they do not have to pay gas and electricity bills, they will have more money for food and clothes, and to take their children on a family holiday.

We can do this; we just need to get on with it. To see how we can do it, hon. Members can visit the Building Research Establishment in Watford. We pay £23.5 billion a year in local housing allowance. The real answer is to build more. If we build more, we can solve a whole range of problems that concern us all.

9.51 am

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

Central London, which includes my constituency, is the largest private rental market in the country. There is no net zero property for rent in the entire borough available to people on the local housing allowance rate. That includes not only some of the high-value property in Knightsbridge and Belgravia, which I would not expect to be accessible to those on local housing allowance, but some of the poorest wards in the country, such as Paddington. It includes hundreds—probably thousands—of properties that were council flats, have been sold under the right to buy and are now rented back to private tenants. Flat 3, say, which is socially rented, costs £150 a week, yet the property next door, which is privately rented, costs £500 a week.

What does it mean that not a single person in my constituency can afford to rent in the private rented sector? It results in cases, such as one I received the day before yesterday, of a mother who has been privately renting for many years and whose landlord has evicted her through a no-fault procedure—no doubt, they will get more money from another tenant. The local authority has put her in emergency accommodation on the other side of London, as is often the case. That rent for emergency accommodation, incidentally, will be around £500 a week.

That woman has a child with a statement of special educational needs in the borough. The borough has now said that the care plan cannot be moved to another borough, so her child cannot get the 20 hours of educational support that they need in the borough where she is currently in emergency accommodation. She has to go through the whole statementing process again, but she will not be able to do that before September. Her child is clearly in need. I would say the local authority is in breach of its statutory duties. The mother is totally desperate.

Another mother has two children who are blind. She has been in the private rented sector a long time. She wanted to stay in the same area, because her two blind children know their routes to their school and college. However, the shortfall in her benefit payments is now so severe that she has to use all her children’s disability allowance to meet the shortfall. That is probably legal, but it is clearly not what that benefit is intended for.

The situation is even worse for young people: under-25s can only get a single room and under-35s are also constrained. I am currently dealing with the challenge of trying to get a number of young people away from serious gang violence. One young man was sleeping with a machete under his pillow, because he was so terrified. For seven months, we have been trying to find somewhere he could afford to rent in London—in London, not just in the borough. There was not one property available in my constituency that was affordable, and only 0% to 15% of properties in the whole of London are affordable.

I am sure the Minister will refer to the targeted affordability fund, which has, thankfully, stood between us and total meltdown, but those complicated additional top-ups into schemes are not the answer. They are bureaucratic and complex, and they do not last. Similarly, discretionary housing payment is cited, as if it could plug the gap. Arithmetically, we know that it does not. DHPs are intrusive and complex. One woman was absolutely howling with grief to me because when she was filling out the form for a DHP, to fill the gap on her private rented property, she was told by the officer that in her budget breakdown she could not include taking her disabled child to the cinema—that expenditure was considered to be unacceptable if she was going to make a discretionary housing payment. I am sure we all have many examples of such untenable situations.
We know that for the foreseeable future we have to place in the private rented sector people whose incomes are too low to pay the rents and who will not be able to get into the social rented sector because there is such a catastrophic shortfall of socially rented properties, given that the right-to-buy scheme was not replaced and new building has not happened. It is all very well talking about meeting new targets, but we know that there has been a 90% fall in construction of social housing in the last nine years.

If people will be in the private rented sector, we have to act on quality and security. The Government are making some noises on that, which is good. We also have to act on affordability. I have been working with Sadiq Khan; I am pleased that the Mayor is bringing forward proposals to look at rent control. For the foreseeable future, we cannot just pour public money into supporting rents, which are rising again after a short levelling off. We cannot just expect public money to fill that gap, so we do need that. In the meantime, while we are trying to build and while we are waiting for the Government to act on control of rents, we urgently have to close that gap.

That means ending the freeze and restoring the housing allowance, so that at least the 30th percentile of renters in every single rental market, not just a few, can afford housing—and we need to keep it there. Without that, we will find more and more people, such as my constituents, swelling the ranks of the homeless—we already have 58,000 homeless families in London alone. They will be driven deeper and deeper into poverty, which will scar their lives forever and from which it will take them many years to recover.

9.57 am

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. It is also a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), of whom I am quite a fan, because the Act she introduced—the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018—is an essential piece of legislation. I am delighted that the Government supported it. I frequently agree with her.

I felt the need to speak in this debate because I was concerned that too many Opposition Members would make it seem like a world of doom and gloom, as if the Conservative party was doing nothing to support homeless people—I understand it to be the opposite. Immediately before coming to Parliament, I had been with YMCA Birmingham for three years. Just before I left to become an MP, I was the assistant chief executive. Those were three of the most fulfilling years of my life, working for an organisation that provided accommodation to previously homeless young people. During my tenure, how did things look when it came to what the Government were doing?

When I joined, the YMCA had funding for £500,000 through the empty homes programme, which offers the opportunity to find buildings that are vacant—it is not just a question of building new things—and use them for accommodation, and in this case for previously homeless young people. Harry Watton House was previously used by Birmingham City Council to provide social care, but it had not used it for some time and we converted it into 34 flats.

Also during my tenure the Government, through the HCA, gave us a £1 million contribution towards a building in Erdington, where we were providing 34 extra units of accommodation. We had accommodation of different types, because someone’s journey from street homelessness to sustaining a tenancy of their own goes through many stages. We had a 72-bed direct access hostel, where people were provided with just a room with a sink, plus shared shower and kitchen facilities. That property is currently undergoing a £3.6 million renovation with money from this Government. It will mean that people can come in straight off the street, straight out of prison or, sadly, from military service—they are frequently former members of the armed forces who just find life too chaotic when they leave.

“Chaotic” is how we could describe those people’s lives. When we were servicing their rooms or doing repairs, we would frequently find machetes or other items under their mattress—that was the type of world that they had been involved in before coming to us, and they felt safe and secure only when they had such weapons with them. Our job was to stabilise their lifestyle and get them ready for the next stage: supported accommodation. In 2015, I was terrified when the then Chancellor announced that he would cap housing benefit at local housing rates, and that that might apply to supported housing. However, YMCA campaigned vigorously against that proposal and made a powerful argument to the Government, and fortunately it was not imposed on us.

As I say, we had direct access accommodation, we had Harry Watton House, which offered supported accommodation, and finally we had our building in Erdington, thanks to £1 million from the Government; it must have been a fine building, because Princess Anne turned up to open it. All YMCA’s work—offering support and counselling, bringing in third parties and third sector organisations to help people who were on drugs or had other lifestyle problems—was supported by the Government through supported housing funding or capital funding.

The hon. Member for Westminster North mentioned the Mayor of London. Well, in the West Midlands Combined Authority we have a Mayor of our own, Andy Street. His first priority on becoming Mayor was to tackle homelessness across the region. It is far from being the case that Conservatives or this Government are not aware of the homelessness problem, not doing everything they can to address it, not taking the matter seriously or not working hard to support those in most need.

Richard Burden: I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the work of YMCA. However, given that 12,000 households are on Birmingham’s housing waiting list and 2,500 households are in temporary accommodation, does he feel that the first priority that the Mayor set for himself is being achieved?

Eddie Hughes: The Mayor has not been in post for very long.

Richard Burden: But it’s getting worse.

Eddie Hughes: It would not have been the Mayor’s first priority if it were not a substantial problem, as the hon. Gentleman rightly sets out. We all recognise that it is a substantial problem in the west midlands, but the Mayor is certainly putting all he can into tackling it. He
is one man with limited powers, but often a Mayor's power is a subtle one—the power to convene. One of the great things that he did was get a lot of housing associations across the region to work together to decide where they would be best placed to develop land, build new houses and so on, and engage them with the idea of tackling homelessness.

**Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab) rose—**

**Eddie Hughes:** I give way, but I am running out of time.

**Liam Byrne:** I am grateful; I will be very brief. When the Mayor came to office, Her Majesty's Government promised £211 million to build new homes. Parliamentary questions show that £209 million has not been paid out. Why has the Mayor not secured that cash in hand?

**Eddie Hughes:** I am disappointed to say that I cannot speak on behalf of the Mayor, but I will keep my eye on my phone today, just in case I become the Housing Minister—in which case I will be in a position to answer the right hon. Gentleman's question.

**Liam Byrne:** Good answer.

**Eddie Hughes:** I completely accept the right hon. Gentleman's case about the money that has been promised. He and I spoke at a recent event in Parliament with Midland Heart, and I completely back his case for ensuring that we secure that funding.

10.4 am

**Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op):** I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) on leading the debate so thoroughly. I shall be brief.

The Minister will not be surprised to hear my usual plea for a redesign of the local housing areas. Stroud was put in the same local housing area as Gloucester. That had nothing to do with this Government—a previous Government did it—but because Gloucester’s rents are traditionally much lower than Stroud’s, it has affected us particularly badly. I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us some good things, because it has had two effects.

First, people on lower incomes in my constituency are now being forced towards Gloucester, because it is the only place where they can pick up private renting. Secondly and more particularly, there is a huge shortfall. Private landlords are increasingly refusing to take anyone on benefits in the Stroud area, because they know that there is a shortfall. It has undoubtedly pushed rents up—it is difficult to prove, but that is the word on the street—which has put my local authority, Stroud District Council, under even more pressure as a result of homelessness, even though it is trying to build more houses and bring more social housing into play.

The best illustration is the horrifying figures that I and other hon. Members received from Shelter when preparing for our debate. In the Gloucester-Stroud local housing area—I suspect the figures for Stroud alone are much worse—only 9% of four-bedroom properties are within the local housing allowance.

10.9 am

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate. I thank the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) for setting the scene so well, and all hon. Members for their substantial contributions. As always, I will give a Northern Ireland perspective on the matter and give an idea of what is happening there.

It is good to see the Minister in his place. He has not been in post long, but hopefully he will continue in it long after today. I know that he has a deep interest in this subject, and we look forward to hearing his response to the genuine questions that we have, because I know that he will do his best.

Despite targeted affordability funding, less than 10% of the local housing allowance rates now cover the rent of the cheapest 30% of private homes. That is a chasm of difference, which is very hard to equate, as other Members have said. Many people who cannot get on the social housing ladder and who have no family to take them in realistically have to resort to sleeping on the streets. It is not by choice; it is almost by design that they are unable to find accommodation.

I have had a number of such cases in my constituency. Entering the private housing system is not an option for many benefit claimants, given how high the cost of rental is in the private housing sector. People without a partner who are benefit claimants cannot realistically get a one-bedroom flat through social housing and cannot afford to get one through private rental under the current allowances, because the two figures just do not equate, as I have said.
The hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) mentioned a mother with two children who are visually handicapped, who has to use the money that should be purposely set aside for their disability to pay the rent, so that they have accommodation and the children can get to school. That is a supreme example of the problems that people have, and I am sure that the Minister will respond to it specifically if he can.

Given the issues, why should we expect people to try and get suitable accommodation? I know the difficulties in my area. My staff and I were working with a young man who was literally sleeping in a garage. He was 40, so not entitled to homeless points, despite our efforts on his behalf. We all tried to get him into accommodation in the area, but he could not get a one-bedroom flat in his price range. His elderly mother—very often, family members step in—ended up paying the difference, but when she passes away, hopefully not for a long, long time, I do not know where this troubled young man will be. He will certainly not be in a private rental.

Nobody should have to sleep on the streets in this day and age, as I think all of us—the Minister, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), and all right hon. and hon. Members here today—realise. I believe that we must try to bring more people into employment, so that they do not have to rely on benefits to provide them with a stable home. I will make some comments and ask some questions about that shortly, because this issue is not just the Minister’s responsibility; other Departments have a role to play as well.

The local housing allowance should be a safety net for people, so that they can find a job to provide them with a bit more stability. Yes, some people may undoubtedly seek to take advantage of the benefits system as an excuse not to find a job, but I have to say that, from my evidential basis, I do not see that. I am not saying that it does not happen, but I do not see it in my constituency.

There is a genuine lack of housing at these prices, and private rental landlords are sometimes loth to take universal credit or housing benefit tenants, and especially not at a discounted rate. There is a very difficult balance to strike between a rental that is correct and a housing benefit or universal credit system that helps people to stay in the accommodation they are in.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an extremely powerful and important speech. He seems to be making the case for much-needed and industrial-scale social rented housing, which would provide people with basic security of tenure for their home, so that they can then get a job and enter the workplace with that assuredness. I think he is also saying that there is such a big gap between housing costs and local housing allowance provision, particularly for one-bedroom accommodation.

Jim Shannon: I have been a great believer in social housing. I have supported it all my life, and I regularly have people coming to me trying to access it. It is incredibly important for those who cannot afford to buy their own home—even more so today. Alongside that, when it comes to social housing, we must provide a benefit system, and the LHA enables people to stay in their accommodation, so the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I totally agree with what he said.

I have sympathy for those experiencing difficulties and recognise that people may be experiencing difficult times that prevent them from finding a job. I believe that help should be available to them, but there is another aspect of this issue, and that is getting the right qualifications to find a stable job—a reality that some people fail to face up to in school. In 2017, 16.6% of Northern Ireland residents aged between 16 and 64 had no qualifications. I believe that these problems are intrinsically linked, which is the point I made earlier. It is not just the Minister’s Department; the Department for Education, the Department of Health, the Department for Work and Pensions and others all have a role to play. To tackle homelessness, we must tackle the problem of people having no qualifications, as low-skilled jobs are becoming harder and harder to come by nowadays.

Unfortunately, homelessness and deaths are linked, and I will give hon. Members some statistics—I cannot say that they are exactly linked together, but the stats may just tell us something. In Northern Ireland from October 2017 to the end of August 2018, an average of 13 homeless people per month had their housing applications closed due to death. Of the deceased, 63% were aged 60 or younger and the youngest was only 18. The majority, 93, were male. Their cause of death is unknown; I make that comment clearly. This is a problem, and I believe that these people should be helped. These figures are distressing, and it is horrendous that people cannot get a helping hand to lift them out of the difficult situation they are in.

A new strategy is required if we seek to solve the homelessness problem across the UK. Getting more people into work and getting people with the right qualifications would be steps in the right direction.

To conclude, support should be available to those in need, and certainly used as a springboard to get them into employment and keep this fine nation going forward, but in the short term we need affordable housing—the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) referred to social housing. That housing simply is not there at present. We need funding to build affordable housing, and for rent control as well. We simply should not have people on the streets in this nation, and we need to do all we can to ensure fit-for-purpose allowances in areas with a lack of one or two-bedroom accommodation, as compared with those on the housing stress list.

10.16 am

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Bailey.

A stone’s throw from St Philip’s Cathedral, on the steps of the House of Fraser, in the heart of Birmingham’s business district, there is a shrine. It is marked with flowers, photos and expressions of feelings. Here, in the wealthiest quarter of the second city of the fifth richest country on Earth is the latest memorial to a man who died homeless on the streets. “You are unforgettable, Miguel”, reads one dedication. That is right. It is right that we remember this man in our city. It is right that we hear and remember his name in the House of Commons. And it is right that we remember the names of the 90 people,
along with him, who have died homeless in our city since 2013, many on the streets of the second city in this country.

Those people are the citizens who we collectively have failed, so I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma). I personally believe that we should be debating every day the deadly doctrine behind this death toll, because under no illusion: this is now a moral emergency and it requires from the new Prime Minister today an emergency response.

In Birmingham, rough sleeping has now risen by almost 1,000% since 2010, yet that is just the visible crisis that we can see. The invisible crisis is just as bad. In total, 20,000 people—the size of a small town—along with 5,000 children are now lodged in temporary accommodation. They are cursed to move every couple of weeks, when it is time to rebook. Be under no illusion: these are futures that are now being sacrificed, as every single one of us who has had to support children taking their GCSEs from a Travelodge will now know.

Andrew Selous: The right hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful and moving speech. Of the 90 people who died, is he aware how many had drug issues at the same time? I absolutely accept that decent housing helps people to get over drug problems, but does he know the proportion that were involved with drugs?

Liam Byrne: We do not know, because obviously there is not a safeguarding adult review for everyone who dies. There should be a safeguarding adult review for everyone who dies, because my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall made a sensible but crucial point: that local housing allowance is absolutely part of this crisis. He is absolutely right. The average LHA in Birmingham, which is £132 a week, covers only two thirds of the cost of a median home in our city. However, it would be delusional to pretend, as our current Mayor has tried to do, that local housing allowance is somehow the nub of the changes we need to make.

The truth is that to fund tax cuts for the lucky, this Government have reduced social insurance for the unlucky to a clutch of shreds and patches. This Government have now cut back so hard that social insurance in this country is now in systems failure. I know the Minister will say that it was a hard choice, but the truth is that it was the wrong choice. The tax cuts that have been handed out to British corporates now total £110 billion. Overwhelmingly, that money has either gone back to shareholders or is lodged in those corporates’ bank accounts. It was the wrong choice, because rather than strengthen the hand that helps, this Government chose to feather the nests of those who already had plenty.

I will illustrate the systems failure that we now face. From all my interviews with homeless citizens in Birmingham through the long nights, what has become clear is that three systems are needed: a benefits system, a health system and a housing system. All three are now in crisis. Mental health caseloads in our region have been cut back by between 12% and 20%. The University of Birmingham has concluded that the health services provided to homeless people are now so bad that those people are actually being denied access to basic health services. Housing benefit hands cash to the landlords of houses in multiple occupation in a way that is completely unregulated, with no obligation on them to provide much-needed counselling or support.

There is no regulation of private landlords worthy of its name, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) said, the conditions that we now contend with are absolutely disgraceful.

We are building affordable homes in our region so slowly that it will take us until the 2050s to clear the council waiting lists across the region, which now number well over 50,000. Just to add insult to injury, although the Government promised £211 million to build new homes, according to parliamentary questions they have handed out only £2 million. That means that £209 million is left in the Treasury when we have people dying on the streets of our city.

Matt Western: My right hon. Friend is making a powerful and important speech. Does he agree that there are two issues: that the Government are hiding behind statistics about housebuilding that are inflated through permitted development rights and in other ways, and that we are seeing an increase in HMOs? The provision is completely inappropriate for the housing and social needs in our communities.

Liam Byrne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are hiding behind definitions of “affordable housing” that are frankly meaningless in the real world. What we need to do is building houses for social rent—what used to be called council houses. Let us again build council houses that communities can be proud of.

This systems failure is now killing people, as should be obvious to all of us in this House. I pay tribute to the incredible coalition of kindness in my city that is trying to turn the tide, particularly Councillor Sharon Thompson, who knows a thing or two about homelessness, Jean Templeton, who is chairing the Mayor’s taskforce, and the 14 or 15 different outreach groups that make sure that the homeless people in our city are not actually starving on the streets. However, what those people need is a Government who are on their side, and are prepared to make sure that the Mayor does not spend £1 million on secret consultants, but puts that money into ensuring that there are more emergency shelter places than there are rough sleepers.

We need a hard duty on all public services to act together and collaborate to prevent homelessness from happening in the first place. We need a region-wide private landlord licensing scheme. We need to expand accommodation in refuges. We need a universal offer on all public services for vulnerable people. We need to double the pace of council house building. We need to end the Vagrancy Act 1824 and reintroduce housing benefit for the under-25s. We need to end the Vagrancy Act 1824 and reintroduce housing benefit for the under-25s. We need to end the Vagrancy Act 1824 and reintroduce housing benefit for the under-25s. We need to end the Vagrancy Act 1824 and reintroduce housing benefit for the under-25s. We need to end the Vagrancy Act 1824 and reintroduce housing benefit for the under-25s. We need to end the Vagrancy Act 1824 and reintroduce housing benefit for the under-25s. We need to end the Vagrancy Act 1824 and reintroduce housing benefit for the under-25s. We need to end the Vagrancy Act 1824 and reintroduce housing benefit for the under-25s. We need to end the Vagrancy Act 1824 and reintroduce housing benefit for the under-25s. We need to end the Vagrancy Act 1824 and reintroduce housing benefit for the under-25s.
Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): We now come to the Front Bench spokespersons, who normally get 10 minutes. There is a little in excess of that, but given the number of questions that have been asked of the Minister, could the Opposition Front Bench spokespersons be disciplined and give him adequate time to respond to them?

10.24 am

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As always, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) on securing this hugely important debate and thank everyone who has contributed to it, including the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) who, with his hands-on experience from the YMCA, shone an interesting light on this issue based on his own background.

As we have heard so often this morning, there is an inescapable and undeniable link between the paucity of affordable rented property in the private rented sector and the increased risk of people becoming homeless simply because they cannot afford to meet the cost of living in private rented accommodation. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was absolutely right when he described the “chasm of difference” between what those people are expected to pay and what they can afford to pay. To back up what the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall said, local housing allowance should be there to help those on low incomes meet the cost of renting a home, and provide stability and security in their housing situation and prevent the risk of falling into homelessness.

The hon. Members for Westminster North (Ms Buck) and for Stroud (Dr Drew) were also right in what they said. They gave all-too-real examples of what happens to people, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable in our society, who are told that they can no longer afford to live in the areas where they have grown up and in which they have roots and families. It is little wonder that social problems follow as people are moved further and further away from the areas in which they have those roots.

However, let us be absolutely clear: this housing crisis, particularly in England, as well as the rising levels of homelessness and rough sleeping, did not happen by accident. There has not been some unforeseen set of circumstances that has led to the number of households living in temporary accommodation in England rising by 60% between 2012 and 2018. There has been no unexpected or unforeseen quirk that has led to the number of rough sleepers in England nearly doubling over the past five years—far from it. This housing crisis was all too predictable, because just about every stakeholder warned the Government right from the start about the inevitable consequences of pursuing their austerity agenda. When they froze local housing allowance and failed to meet their targets for building social housing, what did they expect to happen, other than a rise in homelessness and the number of people sleeping rough on our streets?

That is exactly what has happened, so let us call this what it is: a crisis entirely of the UK Government’s own making.

It is incontestable that the UK Government’s austerity agenda has had a hugely negative impact on people’s ability to rent private sector accommodation. Research from the Chartered Institute of Housing shows that many LHA rates now fail to cover even the cheapest third of rents as they were designed to do, and a survey carried out by the National Housing Federation and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations found that tenants on universal credit were more than twice as likely to be in debt than other tenants.

This year alone, the Scottish Government will spend in excess of £125 million to mitigate the worst impacts of those cuts and seek to protect those on low incomes. That will include £50 million to mitigate the bedroom tax and £63 million in discretionary housing payments, of which £1.3 million will be used to directly offset the impact of the LHA freeze. However, it is not the responsibility of the Scottish Government to foot the bill for the Tories’ austerity programme; that is the UK Government’s responsibility, and theirs alone. By lifting the benefits freeze, the Scottish Government will no longer have to plug those gaps caused by austerity, and those funds can be spent on other vital services that benefit the people of Scotland.

The freeze to local housing allowance has had a devastating impact on the poorest people in our society. Removing the freeze and reinstating its true value would be an enormous help, but that is only part of the answer. Only by increasing the supply of affordable housing will long-term, sustainable solutions to the crisis be found. Last month the Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), admitted exactly that in reply to an urgent question, saying that a lack of new housing was a major factor in the rise of homelessness, and that, “successive...Governments...have...not built enough affordable...social...housing.”—[Official Report, 13 June 2019; Vol. 661, c. 833.]

We have heard from others this morning, including the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), that the shortage of housing, particularly for social rent in England, is a major contributory factor to the rise of homelessness. The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) was absolutely spot on when he said that it was fuelling both the invisible and the visible housing crisis.

The Centre for Policy Studies reckons that England is on course for its worst decade of house building since the second world war. It has calculated that the total number of completions between 2010 and 2019 will average out at 130,000 a year, which is down 20,000 from the figure of the 1990s and 2000s, and is at only half the level seen in the ’60s and ’70s—a successive pattern that has continued for almost half a century. As I said at the start, the issue is about political choices and Governments deciding what their priorities are and what they deem to be important. That is why I fully commend the work of the SNP Scottish Government, who have delivered 76,500 affordable homes since 2007 and are investing more than £3 billion to deliver another 50,000 affordable homes by the end of the current parliamentary Session in 2021. That figure will include 60,000 homes for social rent, 7,000 homes for affordable rent and just over 20,000 homes designed for affordable home ownership.

In addition, the Scottish Government continue to support the empty homes partnership, which has brought 3,200 empty homes back into use since 2010.

To put the figures into perspective, between 2007 and 2018, the supply of affordable housing per head of population in Scotland has been a third higher than in...
England. In the four years to 2018, the Scottish Government have delivered 50% more affordable housing units per head of population than the UK Government have for the people of England. In those four years, the Scottish Government have delivered a remarkable five times more social rented properties per head of population—84 units per 100,000 compared with only 13 for the people of England. That is not because the Scottish Government have a magic wand and are able to do things that this Parliament cannot do. It is simply that the Scottish Government have prioritised housing as a fundamental of any decent society and, despite a shrinking budget, have invested accordingly. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the Scottish Government have stopped the right to buy in Scotland. We have protected social rented homes and prevented them from entering into the private sector to the tune of up to 15,500 houses in the past 10 years.

In conclusion, as I said earlier, what we are witnessing, particularly in England, is a crisis entirely of the UK Government’s own making. Knowing full well the consequences of their actions, the Government steamed ahead, creating a perfect storm where punitive, arbitrary and deeply damaging cuts to welfare, coupled to a devastating under-investment in building social housing, have led to soaring rents in the private sector and caused a spike in homelessness and rough sleeping. It is the UK Government’s own mess. When will they wake up to the crisis that they are creating?

Let us look at what the Conservatives have done—the decimation of social housing up and down the country over recent years, a failure to build the social housing needed, and the erosion of the welfare state. Such failures have been major factors in generating a worrying rise in homelessness, and it is across the piece. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is always in his place speaking up for the people of Northern Ireland. He made it very clear that the crisis here in the UK is reflected in Northern Ireland, too, and it is families that suffer as a result.

There is ultimately one root cause that must be tackled if we are serious about ending homelessness. We need to increase the availability and affordability of housing. Stable and secure homes will give people the best chance of moving on from homelessness, or preventing it altogether. Unfortunately, we are in a position where having housing for every person is seen as an ambitious goal when it should be the standard and the bare minimum. The Government have moved the goalposts of what is seen as reasonable and turned adequate housing for all into the unachievable.

We know that many people live on low incomes. A person could work 40 hours a week on the minimum wage and not be able to afford the cost of renting privately in some places in this country, especially if they have children. We should not have a race to the bottom where only those with higher incomes can afford adequate housing. Those on lower incomes deserve secure, decent living conditions with affordable rents, but that is not the situation in Westminster North, as my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) said. Not a single home is available for low-income families and we have the lamentable situation where former council homes are now out of reach of the poorest people because of rents of as much as £500 a week.

On the need for social housing, the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) spoke of the need to build more homes more quickly. He talked about energy-efficient and bill-free homes, and he is entirely correct about that—no doubt about that—but the Government have built fewer than 7,000 new homes provided at social rent in England in 2017-2018, when what we need is 90,000 each year for the next 15 years just to tackle the backlog of housing need. People are being forced to turn to private rented housing. Although some positive moves have been made regarding tenant fees, affordability is still a major problem, even if people can find a property in the first place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) spoke of private landlords refusing to take people on benefits. What does the Minister have to say about that? Is he surprised that private landlords are not always accommodating and understanding when their tenants are late with their rent payments? The reality is that families are being evicted because they cannot keep up with rent payments, and they enter undesirable living arrangements—sleeping on the floors of other family members, at best, and sleeping in cars and on the streets. We have heard other examples as well. Often it means that families are split up, leading to more pain and suffering.

Research from Crisis— we have heard much about its research—and the Chartered Institute of Housing has shown that cuts to local housing allowance rates mean
that in 92% of areas in Great Britain, single people and couples or small families who need local housing allowance to pay their rent will struggle to find somewhere to live that they can actually afford. Until social housing can meet demand, people on low incomes must be able to find secure and stable housing in the private rented sector. Shelter has said that targeted affordability funding is not alleviating the problem. The top-up grant for areas most affected by the freeze in local housing allowance—just a 3% increase—has not worked.

Ms Buck: Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating London Councils, which has been doing some excellent research? It found that, even over the period of targeted affordability funding, single rooms had declined in affordability by more than 10% since 2015.

Alex Cunningham: Yes, and what is happening in response? Very little. So much more needs to be done. The housing allowance is not allocated or based on how many areas are in need, just distributed to areas in a ranked order until there is no more money. In Shelter’s words, the affordability funding is “not even close to plugging the gap.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall proved that the housing crisis is very real with a series of case studies of real people and families in crisis. They are not just numbers in a table of statistics. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) told us that we need to remember the names of some of the people who never found a home, and spoke of the memorial to Miguel in his constituency. He also spoke of children in his area who are taking their GCSEs while accommodated in the local Travelodge. I understand why he is asking the new Prime Minister to take action on that systematic failure.

I hope that the Minister remains in post, and can do something. As I mentioned, we will get a new Prime Minister today, and there will be a lot of shuffling around, but whether the Minister remains or provides a handover to his successor, I urge him to work to restore local housing allowance rates back to the 30th percentile of the market, as others have called for. We need to address homelessness with immediate effect, and provide a lifeline to people on a low income. We simply cannot afford not to.

I know that it can be easy to sit in opposition and criticise those making the decisions, but Labour has made some bold pledges that we will deliver when we win a general election. We will define affordable housing as linked to local income, and scrap the Conservatives’ so-called affordable rent home price, at up to 80% of market rates. We will stop the sell-off of 50,000 social rented homes a year by suspending the right to buy—I am pleased that the Scottish Government have done that already—ending all conversions to affordable rent, and scrapping the Government’s plans to force councils to sell their best homes.

We will back councils and housing associations with new funding, powers and flexibilities to build at scale. While we work to provide 8,000 homes for rough sleepers, we will provide local authorities with £100 million to deal with winter pressures and ensure that no one sleeps rough. We will also tackle the scandal of empty homes, many of which need upgrading to be habitable, and many more of which investors simply buy and leave empty, believing that the value will go up and they will make a financial killing.

The crisis is leaving families homeless because of the Government’s failure to act. Successive Conservative, and Lib Dem coalition, Governments have failed on housing and failed to end homelessness—no wonder people have no confidence in their housing policies. There is no doubt in my mind that it is time to act on house building and, in the meantime, on the local housing allowance, before even more families are shown the door and thrown out on to the streets.

I have been in post for only three months. It will come as no surprise to Members that both housing and, in particular, tackling homelessness and rough sleeping are passions of mine, as I have co-chaired the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness. I will start by saying that I get it, and I share Members’ passion for fixing it and getting it right. I work very closely with stakeholders in the field, including Crisis, St Mungo’s, Shelter and many others. Even in just the past three months, I have met with most of them and have been on several visits to see and experience the lived experience of some of those they support.

I recognise the issue, which, although I accept it is largely now nationwide, is particularly acute in certain parts of the country where there is very high demand and limited supply. I am also aware that too many people have to top up their housing from their benefits, which are designed for the cost of living. We have to put that right. I am determined to address it, and I am working very closely with the Secretary of State, who has been hugely supportive of the moves that I have made in this area.

Currently, there are no plans to extend or maintain the benefits freeze after March 2020, but specific decisions on how to uprate local housing allowance from April 2020 will form part of the discussions in support of fiscal events later this year. I will address as many points raised as possible, but I am conscious that we have a relatively limited amount of time, and that a number of them are more appropriate for a Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government colleague. I will certainly raise those points with my counterparts, subject to my still being in post tomorrow or the day after.

Reform to housing support was a central part of the Government’s plan to create a welfare system that supports the most vulnerable and is fair to taxpayers. To help to ensure a balance between those two elements, LHA rates are not intended to meet rents in all areas. The intention behind the welfare reform programme is that the same considerations and choices faced by people not in receipt of benefits should also be faced by those claiming benefits. The LHA policy is designed to achieve that.
Liam Byrne: It was not so long ago that, at about 2 am or 3 am, I met a man who goes by the name of “Ginge”. He sleeps in the Barclays bank lobby at Colmore Row, and has schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Is he supposed to find the money to cover the entire rent of a home that he could move into?

Will Quince: The right hon. Gentleman refers to rough sleeping. Often people lump homelessness and rough sleeping together, but there is a huge difference between them. The Government are taking considerable action on rough sleeping. I will happily meet him, or arrange for the Housing and Homelessness Minister to do so, in order to discuss it in more detail. I know that he cares hugely about this issue, and contributes to debates on it. I share his passion. The Government are taking significant action, but he is right that we must look at LHA rates. I hope I made it clear at the outset that I am doing that with the Secretary of State, and ahead of the next fiscal event we are looking very closely at what more we can do.

Between 2000 and 2010, housing benefit expenditure rose by more than half in real terms, reaching £25 billion in today’s prices. Left unreformed, by 2014-15 housing benefit would have reached £29 billion. That was clearly not sustainable. The measure to freeze local housing allowance rates for four years from April 2016 built on reforms introduced in the previous Parliament, which saved £6 billion in total by 2015-16. Savings from freezing LHA are estimated to be around £655 million for Great Britain over the four-year period of the measure. Our reforms are part of our wider goal to move people from welfare and into work.

We recognise that some places have seen higher increases in rents than others, and have made provision to help people further in those areas, as the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) mentioned. We have used a proportion of the savings from the freeze to reduce the gap between frozen LHA rates and the 30th percentile reference rent in the areas of greatest rental growth. Initially, 30% of the savings from the freeze were used for targeted affordability funding, but we invested a further £125 million in that funding for the final two years of the freeze. That was based on 50% of the savings rather than 30%.

Anneliese Dodds: Has the Department conducted any kind of cost-benefit analysis of the measure’s overall impact? In practice, it is leading to additional health and education costs, and to huge impacts on families such as the hon. Gentleman has described. Has there been any kind of 360° review of the measure’s overall impact across Government, including local government, and not just on the benefits bill?

Will Quince: I have been a Minister for only three months and I keep all the policies in my remit at the Department under very close review. I regularly meet and have conversations with key stakeholders in policy areas such as this, to ensure that we are aware where policies are and are not working, and that we are alive to the issues. It will not come as a surprise to the hon. Lady that stakeholders in this area have flagged LHA rates as an issue. That is why we are looking at it very closely indeed.

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

In addition to that targeted affordability funding, the Government have provided more than £1 billion in discretionary housing payments to local authorities since 2011, which the hon. Member for Westminster North referred to. Discretionary housing payments allow local authorities to protect the most vulnerable claimants and support households affected by different welfare reforms, including the freeze to the LHA.

Ms Buck: The whole point of discretionary housing payments is that they are temporary, so they do not provide a solution to any of these problems.

Will Quince: Discretionary housing payments are a tool that is available—

Ms Buck: A temporary one.

Will Quince: Not necessarily. They have been available since 2011, and more than £1 billion has been made available to local authorities. Quite intentionally, we allow local authorities discretion on how it is used, and they use that money and use it well. There is an underspend in a number of local authorities, but it is a tool used by many local authorities to prevent homelessness. Where individuals or families are at risk of homelessness, local authorities will use DHPs to protect tenancies.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) has raised the point about broad rental market areas a few times; I note his concerns about the broad rental market area boundaries in Stroud and the wider area. As with all policies, we keep that under review, and I am looking at this very closely. I hope the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that any reform of the policy would be a significant and complex undertaking, given that there are 192 broad market rental areas across England, Scotland and Wales.

We should be aware that any changes to the BMRAs and their boundaries are likely to create both winners and losers, so I have to give very careful consideration to the potential impact.

The hon. Gentleman also raised a point about “No DSS”—landlords not renting to those in receipt of benefits. The Prime Minister and No. 10 have taken that issue very seriously. I attended a recent roundtable with a number of stakeholders and we are working very closely with the Residential Landlords Association. Part of the issue is mortgage lenders and insurers. More and more mortgage lenders are now reducing or removing their restrictions on renting to those in receipt of benefits—Metro Bank is the most recent addition to that list. There are a few still to go, and we still have to tackle the insurance market, as some insurance policies still do not allow people who buy to let to rent to those in receipt of benefits. We are looking at that area closely and are working with key stakeholders, because we very much want to fix this—to break the myth and challenge...
the ignorant belief that those in receipt of benefits are riskier tenants than those who are not, because it is absolutely untrue.

The hon. Member for Ealing, Southall also raised temporary accommodation. With other Government Departments, we are working to assess what more can be done to address the number of people in temporary accommodation. Time spent in temporary accommodation means that people are getting help and ensures that no family is without a roof over their heads. The Government have targeted funding streams focused on reducing the number of households in temporary accommodation as part of our £1.2 billion spending plan.

**Liam Byrne:** While the Minister is being constructive and generous, and before he finishes, could he undertake to try to secure an explanation as to why the £211 million promised to the West Midlands Combined Authority when it was set up has not yet been paid over? Could he do that before the reshuffle?

**Will Quince:** The right hon. Gentleman tempts me down a road that is wholly outside my remit. That is a question for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and my counterpart or the Housing Minister in that Department. The right hon. Gentleman knows that he has tools in his arsenal—he can write to that Minister or secure an Adjournment debate, or he could catch the Minister around the Estate later on to ask that question. If I see him, I will raise it, but I think the right hon. Gentleman might be able to find his own salvation by raising it personally with the relevant Minister.

**Andrew Selous:** Can I take the Minister back to the point about mortgage lenders and difficulties in lending to people on benefits? Will his officials have a look at what has happened in France recently? My understanding is that, certainly in previous years, the French Government set up a system for people on benefits and low incomes to get on the housing ladder in association with a number of French banks. We should study that to see if there are any lessons for us in the UK. Would he undertake to ask his officials to have a look at that system?

**Will Quince:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention; I was not aware of that scheme and will certainly look at it—it sounds very interesting. Subject to being in post in 24 or 48 hours, I will certainly commit to looking at that and to coming back to him with my thoughts.

Numerous Members, including the hon. Members for Ealing, Southall, and for Westminster North, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), all raised the issue of housing for social rent. This is an area that I am hugely passionate about. Local housing allowance rates and debates such as this are only half of the story. We must look at how we can increase the supply of housing that is affordable to people on low incomes to create a more sustainable system over the longer term.

I am keen to continue my work with colleagues in MHCLG to support them in looking at how we can increase the supply of housing for social and affordable rent and what more my Department might be able to do to achieve that. I urge my hon. Friends and hon. Members—not that I am supposed to—to address the issue of housing supply with my counterparts in MHCLG and to lobby accordingly. It is a hugely important issue. I share the thoughts of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire when he says that at the heart of the route for tackling poverty, improving health outcomes and improving educational attainment and employability is a secure and stable home, and that is something that we should prioritise.

**Alex Cunningham:** It is going to take some time to build the houses required. In the meantime, we need the local housing allowance to be properly addressed. The evidence has shown that it is inadequate, yet in some areas there is an underspend. What is the Minister going to do to review that and to transfer the money to where there is a greater need?

**Will Quince:** I made it clear at the beginning that this is an area that I am looking at very closely. We are committed to providing a strong safety net for those who need it and that is why we continue to spend more than £95 billion a year on welfare benefits for people of working age. There are no current plans to extend or maintain the benefits freeze after March 2020. As I said at the beginning, specific decisions on how to uprate the local housing allowance rates from April 2020 will form part of the discussions in support of fiscal events later this year.

**Mr Virendra Sharma:** Looking at the time, I do not think I will be able to respond to each and every point, so I thank collectively all right hon. and hon. Members who contributed to the debate. I am glad to see the passion and commitment that the Minister has shown for the subject, and I hope that he will retain his position tomorrow and carry on. Otherwise, there are other routes he can follow to make sure that we carry on fighting for the rights of those who are vulnerable in our society. I thank you, Mr Bailey, for your chairmanship.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved,**

That this House has considered local housing allowance and homelessness.
Flitwick Station: Step-free Access

11 am

Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered step-free access at Flitwick station.

Nineteenth-century engineers thought very little of laying a railway line in a cutting through the centre of an old market town; that was no obstacle. Sadly, they thought even less about how disabled people could access the platforms in that cutting. I thought that our modern attitudes had changed and moved on, and that we were more considerate of the less able in society, but I am afraid that there is no evidence of that at Flitwick station.

My constituent Darren, who is a severely disabled man and a wheelchair user, is one of the worst affected. He cannot hope to get on a train from a station that is only a few hundred yards away from his home. I will explain a bit about Darren, who I think might be watching. Darren was a very able professional man who used Flitwick station every day to commute to work. In an act of generosity, he once helped somebody to move house, and an obstacle fell off the back of the flatbed lorry they were using while Darren was tying his shoelaces. He broke his spine and has been a paraplegic ever since, but he would still like to use Flitwick station.

I felt incredibly humbled when Darren turned up one day here at Westminster. In his mobility wheelchair, with his suction and everything else, he had decided to bring himself to Parliament to see me. The effort it took him to get here is possibly the reason why I will never give up fighting for people such as Darren to have the disabled access that they need in order to live as normal and able a commuter life as possible, so that they can get to shops and do the things that they used to do before they were unable to access Flitwick station.

I am also talking about older people, young mums with prams and people with suitcases visiting the Centre Parcs in my constituency. The local campaign to get step-free access at Flitwick station has been determined to move, and the purchase of new trains. In fact, it is very rare for a train that does not have 12 carriages to pass through Flitwick station. However, nothing has been done to enable the disabled and elderly to use the station, despite the upgrading of platforms and train carriages.

In addition to the number of passengers, Flitwick’s case for step-free access is strengthened by the lack of alternative means of travel. Disabled people who wish to travel from Flitwick must call 24 hours in advance, which is exactly what Darren did. A taxi will be booked to take them to the nearest step-free station—at least, that is how it should work. More often than not, there will be no taxi waiting when my disabled constituents arrive at Flitwick station, despite their having telephoned 24 hours in advance. There is occasionally a taxi waiting, but it is unable to take wheelchairs. There are unfortunately few buses from Flitwick, and most of them are not wheelchair-accessible either. For a large number of people, transport options are either strictly limited or absolutely non-existent.

For all those reasons and more, Flitwick station was the top priority for Govia Thameslink Railway, the relevant train operating company, in the last round of Access for All funding—or so it said. However, the funding was not enough. Govia Thameslink Railway said Flitwick was its priority station, but apparently it is not. By comparison with Flitwick, Cricklewood station has lower footfall, lower growth and better alternatives for less-able passengers, but it was awarded money from the Access for All funding. I do not know anybody who understands the rationale for that, other than it costs less money to adapt Cricklewood station. The train operating companies and the Department for Transport decided to go for the lower hanging fruit. For them, it is a numbers game: how many stations can we adapt for how little money?

We all know that Flitwick is a geographical challenge because of where it is situated—the elevations and the number of steps that one needs to go down to reach the platforms at the station. It is obviously an engineering challenge and would therefore be slightly more expensive. However, it would not be an obstacle to the Victorian engineers who built the station—they would think nothing of being asked to make the station accessible for wheelchair users or disabled people. It would not be a challenge to Victorian engineers, who would just get on and do it, but it is apparently too much for us to adapt a station that is slightly challenging in terms of its elevation, geography and current accessibility. We all know the reasons why.

The train operating company directs all inquiries to the Department for Transport. The Access for All administrators have refused to answer any questions put to them by my constituents and other people—I believe me, there have been a lot—who have inquired about why Flitwick was missed out of the programme. The fragmentation, lack of information and lack of communication between the Department of Transport, the train operating companies and the relevant interested bodies in my constituency, including Flitwick Town Council, have led to bad feelings. There was absolute frustration in my constituency, because the one station that everyone—not just in Bedfordshire, but in the entire eastern region—thought required funding and adaptation was Flitwick, due to the house building and established growth. That is not growth that we are predicting: 4.5% growth is happening right now.

The train operating company directs all inquiries to the Department for Transport. The Access for All administrators have refused to answer any questions put to them by my constituents and other people—I believe me, there have been a lot—who have inquired about why Flitwick was missed out of the programme. The fragmentation, lack of information and lack of communication between the Department of Transport, the train operating companies and the relevant interested bodies in my constituency, including Flitwick Town Council, have led to bad feelings. There was absolute frustration in my constituency, because the one station that everyone—not just in Bedfordshire, but in the entire eastern region—thought required funding and adaptation was Flitwick, due to the house building and established growth. That is not growth that we are predicting: 4.5% growth is happening right now.
[Ms Nadine Dorries]

Look at our local plan and the aspirations of Central Bedfordshire Council for inward investment already deciding to come to the area, close to Flitwick station. A great deal of house building will take place close to Flitwick station. A number of new commuters are about to come and live close to it. A number of businesses are about to relocate to areas such as Henlow and others, close to Flitwick station. It is not imaginary growth. Central Bedfordshire Council was able to confirm the level of growth that we will have going forward, but the one station in the entire region that requires funding was left off.

I have spoken to the Minister about this issue in the past, and there is some confusion. The Department for Transport blames the train operating companies, and the train operating companies blame the Department for Transport. The Department says, “We adapted the stations that the train operating companies told us to adapt,” and the train operating companies say, “You were top of our list, but the Department for Transport decided not to do it.” That is the problem facing us at the moment.

I would like a clear response that my councillors, who are sitting in the Public Gallery, can take back to Flitwick, saying, “This is the situation with regard to Flitwick station. This is why it didn’t happen. This is why it is going to happen in the future, and this is when it is going to happen.”

We all understand the logistical challenge of adapting Flitwick. We all understand that we would have to go through a period when the station might even have to close for a while, and I have been told that the civil engineering problem there might even mean that the centre of Flitwick would close for a while. I do not think that we regard that as a problem, because the eventual outcome would be worth it. It is something that we could explain easily to my constituents, our residents, because the equality of access has to be there for people such as Darren.

Everyone has a right to be able to travel, in particular in an area with poor transport links—bus links and the whole transport structure are poor. Flitwick station and that Bedford-to-St Pancras line—known as “the Bedpan line”—offer a life-giving artery for people to access work, pleasure and travel in all its aspects. It is such a well used line, but an entire group of my constituents is denied those ordinary daily rights of employment, pleasure and travel that people such as me and my councillors have access to and enjoy.

At the start, I said that I would always see access for disabled people through the eyes of Darren—the eyes of a man who worked and lived the commuter life, a professional life, that is now denied him because he is unable to travel. This is not a man who wants to sit at home; this is a man who wants to get out, to go to the train station, to travel to London and to enjoy things that every able-bodied person is able to enjoy. But that is all denied him because of lack of access at Flitwick station. That is the truth of the matter. I have also seen women struggling up and down the steps with babies in prams. Despite the bus, sometimes I see people struggling up with suitcases to get taxis or on to the main street. This cannot go on for much longer.

Flitwick station is 50 miles outside London, most of my constituents are commuters and most of my disabled constituents want to work, so I now ask the Minister for some specific answers. When will it happen? Why did it not happen before? That is the question everyone is asking—why did it not happen? We need to have communicated to us today a clear trajectory towards a situation in which those people can access the travel rights that the rest of us have. At the moment, all we have is a lack of communication, as well as confusion, frustration—and, from some people, a certain amount of anger.

11.13 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) on securing this important debate, which gives us the opportunity for us to discuss accessibility. I want to acknowledge on the record her passionate and ongoing campaigning not only on behalf of her constituency but for accessibility across our rail network. I was moved to hear her talk about her constituent Darren, and I hope that my hon. Friend will never give up campaigning on behalf of her disabled passengers. As I continue, I hope that she will believe the evidence that we are committed to assuring accessibility across our transport system. I am committed as she is, and I will try to explain what happened in her particular case and what we are doing throughout the country.

My hon. Friend is aware of the Department for Transport’s inclusive transport strategy, and she has campaigned incredibly hard to ensure that her constituency gets as many resources as possible. The strategy is incredibly ambitious, and I believe it to be the first national strategy determined to deliver accessibility by 2030, which is the United Nations goal. She is right that we are dealing with very old infrastructure, which remains a barrier to disabled people accessing our rail network. We need to work with them, Network Rail and the train operating companies to ensure that accessibility is a priority.

We are discussing Flitwick station, which was nominated for the Access for All programme, but was not successful. My hon. Friend found that decision difficult to accept because she had worked incredibly hard on the best bid possible, but the funding was heavily oversubscribed. We had well over 300 nominations for the programme, and significantly more stations required our support—I will go through the reasons. The Flitwick nomination was good, and I hope for another round of funding in which she can secure a new bid, but it was not successful in the previous round.

We could compare Flitwick with lots of other stations, but I do not want to confuse my hon. Friend or her councillors, who are listening to the debate. They must put the best bid together in future. It is a competitive process, with criteria. Train operating companies also have the opportunity to nominate their top priorities—for example, Biggleswade was a top priority for Great Northern—although that is not the only criterion.

We also have to look at the broad spectrum of accessibility in a region. Twenty-one stations were nominated by Thameslink with a priority rating. The
train operating company’s second priority was Mill Hill Broadway, with two other stations nominated, Catford and Cricklewood, which were more successful in the bidding despite being lower ranked than Flitwick by the company. There were, however, other factors, which I will explain. My hon. Friend will want to work as closely as she can with the train operating company and the local authority to ensure that the next bid is successful.

At present, I am told that six of the eight stations in my hon. Friend’s constituency are step-free, which is no doubt a great deal down to her campaigning. As we have discussed, a lot of that infrastructure is Victorian, but 75% of journeys are already step-free. We want to increase that figure, which is why the inclusive transport strategy had funding of £300 million available to help stations improve. A lot of those stations were deferred from the 2016 Hendy review to the Network Rail delivery programme, and new stations were accepted as well. In total, therefore, 73 stations will receive funding to ensure that they are step-free.

Nominated stations were selected on the basis of annual footfall, weighted by the incidence of disability in the area. We considered other local factors such as proximity to a hospital and, fundamentally, the availability of third-party funding for the project. It was also important to ensure a fair geographical spread of projects across the country. All those points are noted when a grid is put together.

Third-party funding is especially important in weighting a business case. Many of the selected stations had bids that included significant match-funding contributions, which often came from the local authority but also from the train operating company. I hope that my hon. Friend will take on board the fact that we have released a new tier of funding—£20 million now available for the Access for All mid-tier programme—which was launched on 8 July and is open to nominations right now. I urge her to put in another bid, ensuring that she works with the train operating company and the local authority. I cannot emphasise this enough: significant third-party funding for the project would help.

A few weeks ago, I wrote to all right hon. and hon. Members, encouraging them to contact their train operating companies if they wanted their stations to be included in that programme of work. I can only apologise if my hon. Friend is getting mixed messages from my Department, and I am disappointed that the train operating company has not made it clear how the whole package has to be presented, not just nominations. However, we—my hon. Friend—I look forward to the train operating company nominating Flitwick station, and I hope that she can go back to her constituency and put together a package of support from the local authority, to ensure that the station gets a higher rating than it did previously.

I will now reflect on some of the points made by my hon. Friend on behalf of her constituent Darren. Within the inclusive transport strategy, we have ambitious plans to ensure that disabled passengers are dealt with with the care and dignity that they deserve. My hon. Friend mentioned taxis being called, which is part of the disabled person’s protection policy. It is absolutely right that a person should be able to carry on their journey. It is illegal for taxis not to take disabled passengers on board, to take umbrage at taking wheelchairs or to charge any extra for taking on disabled passengers. I urge my hon. Friend or her constituent Darren to write to me—immediately, considering where we are right now—so I can keep an eye on the taxi firm and how that could have occurred. She closely follows the issues of her disabled constituents.

Ms Dorries: May I add some nuance? Some constituents such as Darren are not just in wheelchairs but in huge, motorised, supportive wheelchairs that enable people to sit up and move. It is not a case of just a wheelchair but much more, making it more difficult.

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend makes an important point, but the facts remain the same: all operators have a disabled people’s protection policy, and it is their duty to ensure that disabled passengers can continue their journey and to provide the right sort of taxi for them to continue that journey. But who wants to complain religiously when they are being let down by a service? That is why we are working with the Rail Delivery Group to ensure that Passenger Assist becomes a far more interactive, real-time application and to make it easier to make complaints, so that we can hold train operating companies to account.

Passenger Assist is a service that does good work, but it is not as real-time as my hon. Friend and I would like it to be. Hopefully, that will be delivered by the end of the year. We are working to make sure that the rail network is more accessible, and I have supported the industry’s establishment of an independent rail ombudsman with powers to deal with unresolved passenger complaints.

I have made it clear to the Office of Rail and Road that it needs to ensure that disabled passengers’ complaints are heard and their expectation of services is met. Through the inclusive transport strategy, we will have a grading system to look at the train operating companies that do well and those that fail to deliver a standard that the rest of us enjoy.

I hope that my hon. Friend can take on board all the advice that I have given and will take it back to her councillors, to ensure an even stronger bid. She has worked incredibly hard, even before I was the Minister for rail accessibility; her reputation is very strong in the Department for Transport, thanks to her campaigning on behalf of her constituents. We will look forward to the bid coming in, but my hon. Friend must not forget to ensure that it is nominated strongly by the train operating company and the bid has some matched funding.

I hope that my hon. Friend will agree with me that even though the infrastructure is not perfect, and even though we have a long way to go, with the inclusive transport strategy and the £300 million that we have made available recently, we are doing everything we can to ensure that accessibility is not a barrier to people with disability accessing our rail network. I could talk about many other commitments that we have made through the inclusive transport strategy, but they will not necessarily affect the rail network.

Ms Dorries: Can the Minister give some further clarification? Obviously, we will reapply for the fund—I think that is already underway. We are having discussions with Central Bedfordshire Council about third-party matched funding. I am aware that we need increased matched funding in place, and I am sure that Flitwick Town Council will make that case, too.
Female Offender Strategy: One Year On

[Joan Ryan in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the female offender strategy one year on.

It is a pleasure to open this debate under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I start by thanking the charity Women in Prison, which visited Parliament earlier this month to lobby MPs and to speak about its #OPENUP campaign, along with my own women’s centre, WomenMATTA, the Howard League for Penal Reform, the Prison Reform Trust, the Magistrates Association, of which I am a life member, and women who have told me stories of their experience of criminal justice over the years. I also thank National Prison Radio, which is carrying a report of this debate because it knows that women in our prisons take great interest in the policy decisions we make here that affect them.

The House has long taken an interest in female offenders, especially since the seminal report by my noble Friend Baroness Corston in 2007. That report highlighted the special circumstances surrounding women’s offending behaviour and the fact that many women who offend have a history of trauma and are vulnerable. The Government’s female offender strategy, published last year, recognised that these important factors underpinned women’s offending and that custody should be a last resort. It was welcome, if late in coming. The strategy included a number of positive measures to encourage the use of alternatives to custody and to help to address the causes of women’s offending, with a focus on early intervention.

Thanks to the Corston report, we already know a lot about the characteristics of women offenders. We know that their needs are often highly complex. Issues include substance misuse and poor levels of education and employment, and many have been victims of abuse themselves. Some 60% of women offenders have experienced domestic abuse, according to the Prison Reform Trust. Many have a history of self-harm and 49% of women prisoners report mental health needs, including anxiety, depression and psychosis. Crucially, many women in our penal system are mothers; over half the women in prison have dependent children. The Prison Reform Trust says that that means around 17,000 children a year will be affected by having a mother spending time in prison.

How do these women come into the criminal justice system? The obvious route is that they will be arrested by the police and taken through the process. Indeed, 103,000 women were arrested by the police in 2017-18. Strikingly, black women were twice as likely as others to be arrested. The most common offences include theft and fraud; shoplifting accounts for 43% of those sentenced for indictable or either-way offences.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and on the speech she is making. On that point, women are disproportionately represented in the prosecution of
offences such as non-payment of council tax or TV licences and truancy. Does she agree that we need to end the punishment and prosecution of poverty?

Kate Green: I do agree, and indeed my hon. Friend makes the important point that not all cases that come into the criminal justice system come via the police. They might come via other prosecution routes. Women are disproportionately likely to be represented in those routes. For example, 70% of those sentenced for TV licence offences are women. That disproportionality is also seen in relation to offences such as council tax fraud and truancy.

Most important of all, in terms of the characteristics of women offenders, is the fact that the vast majority are not violent. Crest Advisory has shown that 83% of women in prison are imprisoned for non-violent offences.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way, but that is clearly not true. According to the Ministry of Justice figures, of the 3,294 women in prison, 943 were imprisoned for violence against the person. That is almost a third, and over a third of that number were in prison for homicide. Quite clearly, the figures she cites are invented and they are not actually true, are they? Can she stick to the official figures, please?

Kate Green: It is important to recognise the circumstances in which women commit offences, the nature of the violence and offences against the person for which they may be convicted, and the level of violence and threat that these women present to society. I will certainly look again at the figures that I have been given, because clearly they are widely different from the figures the hon. Gentleman quotes. I am not disputing his figures; I will check my source. In my experience, the women I have met in prison are more of a danger to themselves than to anybody outside custody.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Has my hon. Friend seen another set of statistics, which are taken from work done at Drake Hall women’s prison in Staffordshire? Some 64% of women prisoners who had been screened for brain injury showed up as having had a brain injury before their first offence. Their brain injury was likely to have been part of what led to their offending behaviour in the first place. Some 62% of those brain injuries had been caused by domestic violence. Is there not a real danger that the original victim of the crime is ending up in the criminal justice system quite unfairly?

Kate Green: My hon. Friend makes a good point; we know that traumatic brain injury is one of the routes by which women come into custody, and we see disproportionate representation of women with brain injury inside our prisons.

What sentences do women receive? Fines are most common and their use has been increasing. They are often seen by criminal justice practitioners as an effective and swift means of justice. But as the Magistrates Association points out, many women cannot afford to pay the fines that are imposed, which leads them into debt or pressures them into reoffending.

By contrast, the use of community penalties has been falling since 2015, with community penalties representing only 5% of sentences received by women, which is half the rate we saw a decade ago. While there has been a welcome fall in the number of women sentenced to custody, three quarters of those who received custodial sentences were imprisoned for a period of less than 12 months. I believe that short custodial sentences have been shown not to be effective and not a good use of money. Some 70.6% of women receiving a custodial sentence of under 12 months in the period from April to June 2016 went on to reoffend. Such sentences are not achieving a reduction in reoffending.

Many women are in custody now as a result of being recalled to prison following release and during a period of post-release supervision. That has been exacerbated by transforming rehabilitation changes, which introduced post-release supervision for those who had served short custodial sentences. In practice, the failure of such supervision arrangements to recognise women’s caring responsibilities, their lack of access to transport and their anxiety about leaving the house is leading many women to miss appointments. They are therefore in breach of the terms of their release and find themselves going back in through the revolving door of recall.

I contend that our system is clearly not working for women or for wider society. That was understood by the Government too, because the 2018 female offender strategy sought to address a number of those concerns and issues. What specifically did the strategy introduce? It introduced some £5 million over two years for investment in community provision, including £2 million for programmes to address domestic abuse, and a pilot to introduce five residential women’s centres. The strategy was explicit in its ambition to reduce the number of short custodial sentences served by women. It introduced new guidance for the police on dealing with vulnerability, and guidance on whole-system approaches, such as we have had for a number of years in my home city of Manchester. It also sought to introduce a national concordat on women offenders.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the £5 million is wholly inadequate? I have heard from Nottingham Women’s Centre, which provides the CHANGES—Creating Hope, Achieving New Goals, Experiencing Success—programme for women who are leaving prison, or to help women to avoid prison. It says that “we had a total of 12 days to bid for the money with a partner. We ended up being funded for a six week pilot project.”

The total amount that it received was just over £11,000. The representative of the women’s centre said: “The evaluation was so huge for a tiny piece of work...we are being asked to track the women after the end of the project for the next 6 months too. I would say if anything it detracted from our work rather than increased our offer and certainly hasn’t helped to shore up what we already have.”

It simply is not fit for purpose.

Kate Green: WomenMAATT, which is my local women’s centre, has also spoken of the inadequacy of funding, which I will come on to, and of the complexity of the application procedures. As my hon. Friend rightly suggests, spending time on preparing the applications detracts from the good work that the centres could be doing in working directly with women offenders.

On 27 June, in a written ministerial statement, the Government set out progress to date. I am grateful to the Prison Reform Trust, which has produced a helpful
and comprehensive matrix to track progress against the strategy. It is fair to say that both documents show a mixed picture, although I acknowledge that there has been some good progress. For example, we have recently had the Farmer report on maintaining family links, which makes many welcome suggestions. We have had changes in housing policy so that a tenancy can be maintained for up to six months while a mother is in prison. More police forces are developing and using trauma-informed approaches. Liaison and diversion schemes now cover 90% of forces in the country, and the ambition is to achieve 100% coverage next year.

I was very pleased to hear the right hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke), the last Lord Chancellor—and, if I may say so, a much-missed Lord Chancellor—speaking positively about his intention or wish to see a presumption against the imposition of short custodial sentences, as already applies in Scotland. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) said, women’s centres still lack sustainable funding. Will the Minister say what has happened to the proceeds from the sale of Holloway Prison? That delivered some £80 million into the Treasury’s coffers, but only £5 million appears to have been released to go towards services for women.

It is welcome that the Government, in their strategy, called a halt to the building of new women’s prisons. Many of us had spent much time urging them to take exactly that step. But what evidence can the Minister show for the efficacy of residential women’s centres? Surely priority should be given to funding core women’s centre provision in the community. No prison has to wonder whether it will have the funding to exist after 2021, but that is the case for most women’s centres, with Lord Farmer himself describing their funding as “desperately precarious”.

Kate Green: I do agree. If there is no women’s centre in Wales, that is shocking and there needs to be. Indeed, I would say that for any part of the country that does not have a women’s centre.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): May I build on what my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) said? For Eastwood Park Prison—it is just outside my constituency, but I visit regularly—the problem now is that because there are a number of women’s centres growing up in the west, there is a disparity with those places that do not have women’s centres, particularly south Wales. It should be remembered that that prison covers the whole of the south-west as well as south Wales. There is such a difference in the ways in which women being released are now treated. We have to get some continuity in the way in which they are looked after, but more particularly some certainty that women’s centres will develop all over the country. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Kate Green: I agree both that we need women’s centres to develop all over the country and that they need certainty of funding so that they are sustainable.

We have seen other problems with delivery of the strategy. I hope that the Minister will forgive me if I describe the transforming rehabilitation programme as a total failure. It has not been able to deliver, for example, specialist provision for women through community rehabilitation companies, and at the moment we do not know what the new probation model will look like for women. Through the Gate simply has not happened as envisaged.

There are even basic things such as women not being able to apply for universal credit in advance of their release date, or to apply for housing. They will not get a house because they do not have their children living with them, which means that they cannot have their children living with them because they do not have a house when they are released. It is the case that 13% of women are released to no fixed abode—a truly terrifying prospect—and only 22% to secure permanent accommodation, according to Her Majesty’s inspectors of prison and probation. As a result of the lack of a safe destination to release women to, many will be forced to return to the abuser, who may be the root cause of their offending, and will turn to alcohol, drug or other substance misuse and to reoffending.

Pre-sentence reports are still being prepared without full information and without being informed by gender considerations. Sentencers are not always taking account of the interests of children when sentencing a mother to or remanding her in custody, yet the impact on children of a mum going to prison is absolutely dire. Fewer than 10% of children remain in their family home when a mother is imprisoned.

What do we want to happen, and will the Minister offer us assurances that some of these suggestions will happen? First, will he look at what can be done systematically to ensure that the police, wherever possible, divert women away from arrest? That is being considered now by the all-party parliamentary group for women in the penal system, which I have the honour to co-chair with Baroness Corston and the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), whom I am very pleased to see present at this debate.

Will the Minister say what the Government intend to do to spread retail diversion schemes such as we have in Bury, in Greater Manchester, across the country? Will he say how the Government are working with non-police prosecutors, so that we can end the use of custody for TV licence offences, truancy offences and so on?

Crucially, what will the Government do to secure sustainable, adequate funding for community provision and particularly for both women’s centres and the range of partners that work with them? Can the Minister say what role he envisages for the new probation service?
How will it develop women-specific programmes, or will women’s centres become the default model for provision? What can be done to build sentence confidence in community provision? I would argue that one step that the Government must take is to ensure proper information for sentence and proper training for them on the outcomes from community and custodial sentences. Will the Minister ensure that gender-sensitive, gender-informed, pre-sentence reports are made mandatory and that there is suitable training for report writers? Will he say what the Government can do to put more emphasis on, as part of community sentences, treatment orders, including, as the Magistrates Association has suggested, financial planning support?

All stages of the process must take account of the best interests of children, so will the Minister ensure that sentence do follow the guidance, which exists, that they should consider the impact on children in sentencing a mother and that they should ensure that arrangements are made for them prior to sending any mother into custody? Better still, in my view, would be ensuring that alternatives to custody are considered in all cases for primary carers.

Will the Government now move forward to legislate for a presumption against short sentences as a matter of urgency? Will they also adopt the suggestion, from the Committee that scrutinised what is now the Domestic Abuse Bill, to introduce a statutory defence in that legislation?

When transforming rehabilitation was first proposed, I thought that post-release supervision was a good idea, but having seen it in practice, I have changed my mind. In 2017, about 1,000 women were recalled to prison while on supervision following a custodial sentence of under 12 months. In the context of the female prison population as a whole, that is a lot of women. Its use appears to be ill judged, disproportionate and harmful.

Will the Minister consider ending post-release supervision and replacing it with holistic support, including housing, education, mental health and employment? No woman should ever be released into homelessness—can the Minister guarantee that that will not happen? Can he guarantee that no woman—or man—will ever be released on a Friday, when services are not available on the weekend to receive them? Will he once again press the Department for Work and Pensions to expedite the ability to start the universal credit application process before a woman is released from prison? Finally on my shopping list, will he ensure that a women’s centre link worker is placed in every single women’s prison?

I urge the Minister to continue the roll-out of the full-system approach across the country, because it works. In Cleveland, where they do not have it, 67% in every 100,000 women offenders are imprisoned, in Greater Manchester it is only 25 per 100,000. A whole-system approach should not be criminal justice driven. We need place-based, gender-informed, holistic preventative services in every local authority accessible to every vulnerable woman. That is the women’s strategy I would like to see; I urge the Government to embrace it.

2.51 pm

Dr Philip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who has long had a passionate interest in the area of women’s justice. I lost count of the number of times that I sat in the Minister’s position listening to her make as good a contribution as she has just made.

For those who do not know, I was the Minister responsible for commissioning the women’s justice strategy. I held on to that position as long as I could, to see the strategy published before resigning over Brexit. In the end, I could not hold on any longer and it was published two weeks after I resigned. It had been ready for a few months. I was fighting hard—I lost the fight internally for the funding that the hon. Lady alluded to. I do not blame anyone in particular for that; I blame the broader political scene and its short-termism, in which it is believed to be better to fix a few toilets in a prison than to invest long term to try to reduce the number of women in prison.

In response to likely challenges from my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), I viewed the women’s justice strategy as a Trojan horse. The principles underpinning it are applicable to men, but the political reality is that doing it for men is much more difficult, because there are more prisoners in the male estate, and given the types of crimes that men are committing, with a few obvious notable exceptions, managing the media and public opinion is more of a challenge, so I thought it was sensible to concentrate on women first.

In the main Chamber there is currently an urgent question on a youth institution for which I was responsible for two years. The youth justice system is also crying out for a revolution in the way it manages people in custody. I tried to do that, too. I have a deep understanding and respect for the Minister, who faces challenges of trying to reform this area. It is difficult, because it only takes one headline in the newspaper for everyone to get the jitters. As a consequence, it is a tough Department to work in and in which to bring about reform.

This strategy went quite some way towards achieving reform. I would like to put on record my huge admiration for the civil servants involved in the process. We worked extremely hard on this. I view this as the biggest piece of work that I achieved in two years. It involved a hell of a lot of evidence gathering, and I had to visit every women’s prison and a number of women’s centres across the country. The strategy, which was published last year, was the culmination of a sizeable piece of work and everyone involved in writing it should be congratulated.

When I became a Minister in 2016, the first thing I read was the Corston report. I had already booked a summer holiday when I was appointed Justice Minister. I did not expect to be a Justice Minister, although I am glad that I was, because I think a doctor in the Ministry of Justice was exactly what was required. I took away a lot of things to read that summer. Most people are currently looking at their phones waiting for news of ministerial appointments; I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley is doing so. Those who are appointed should go away and think, and spend two to three weeks reading before immersing themselves in the Department. The problem for Ministers is that they are never given the greatest respect to the civil servants present—that the Department sucks them in and they cannot think, and work out what they want to do and what should be a priority.

When I came back after that summer recess, I decided on three priorities, including women’s justice. I inherited a challenged relationship with the women’s justice lobby.
[Dr Phillip Lee]

It took time to work on that. Everyone in that group, which used to meet quarterly, worked extremely hard, because we could see that this was the right thing to do on a number of levels. Anyone who visits a women’s prison and speaks to prisoners—whatever they have done—is immediately struck by how often they are vulnerable. They often have tell-tale signs of self-harm on their wrists, poor eye contact and a history of coercive relationships, domestic abuse and drug use. Often, as has been alluded to, they tend to be those who are charged for not paying utility bills because they are the homemaker, so their name is on the account and they are disproportionately affected when those bills are not paid.

Visiting those institutions, one thinks, “If they have done things wrong, there needs to be a punitive element.” In fact, I have never met a female prisoner who has not admitted that they have done something wrong and accepted that there should be a punitive element to their sentence. However, prison and custody must be a road back to not offending, and that is quite clearly where we fell down, not just in the women’s system but in the men’s and, particularly, the youth system. Every time I came away from visits to those institutions, I thought to myself, “Continuing to do the same thing is the definition of madness.” We have to try to find a way of making these women law-abiding citizens, supporting them in that process and breaking the cycle that means their children are disproportionately likely to become offenders too.

The idea that came about was residential women’s centres, which is within the strategy; suffice it to say that it was going to have a more prominent place there. The original plan was to build 10 women’s centres, including one in Wales—I say that for all the Welsh Members of Parliament who are present. We recognised that there were some regional disparities in the provision of services for women offenders, which the strategy sought to address.

We also wanted to explore a different way of funding public services, and we got some way with that idea, but it never made it into the strategy. I think private finance initiatives are a disgrace. I was responsible for one particular PFI contract as a Minister—there is a former Minister present who knows which contract I am referring to—which was signed under the Labour Government 12 or 13 years ago. I did not want to go down that path of a quick fix and building some new buildings. Rather, I wanted to put in place something that was sustainable. I had some pretty detailed conversations with charities and philanthropic donors about them covering the capital investment, while the Government would have been responsible for the revenue costs. The idea was that if I could persuade various institutions to build or to extend existing institutions that are often charitable, the Government could step in and guarantee the maintenance costs. I think the idea has merit across Government and I was frustrated at how difficult it was to get people in the room to discuss the concept. The original plan was to do some match funding across the country and to commit revenue. We thought we could create a virtuous circle—starting with 10, moving on to 15 buildings—and, at the same time, selling off prisons that would have been released, as the number of people in prison was going to fall away.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. May I remind the hon. Gentleman that six other Members have applied to speak in this debate? If he speaks for much longer, they will have less than four minutes each to speak.

Dr Lee: Okay. Forgive me; I was not aware of that fact. My point is that a hell of a lot of thought went into the strategy, most of which made it to publication.

If we could make progress in this space with women— reducing the prison population by half by 2030 was my internal private target—and if we could make a success of it, we could move into the male estate and apply exactly the same approach and principles and reduce our prison population across the board. That requires some thought on sentencing, tagging and various other punitive in-the-community options. It is difficult because of an uptick in violent and sexual crimes among men and women in recent years, which we obviously must address, but if we were to do this, we would get to a situation where our prison system, for men, women and young people, would be functioning, and doing what it should be doing—rehabilitating. Then we would get to a society with reduced crime and, more broadly, a society that we could all be proud of.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Hon. Members have roughly four minutes each to speak. I call Chris Ruane.

3.2 pm

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): I welcome this debate, which has been sponsored by my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green). There is a cross-party dynamic here today and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), who progressed this issue during the two years that he was in post. I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke), who I am reliably informed has just resigned. Their approach got buy-in from across the political divide.

I had the fortune, although perhaps “misfortune” is the word, to visit a women’s prison, at Eastwood in Gloucestershire, with the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs about 10 or 12 years ago. It was a depressing experience. The women in the prison freely gave evidence through their dinner time; they were rewarded by getting leftovers for their meal. We sent them a box of House of Commons chocolates as a reward, and they were not even allowed to receive that present. We need to treat all those who are in the criminal justice system with respect.

There is compelling evidence to indicate that custodial sentences of six months or less do not work. The Government have, at last, recognised that and have proposed to do something about it.

All women in prison are disadvantaged, but women in Wales are doubly so. Throughout 2016, 62% of sentenced women entering prison across England and Wales were serving sentences of six months or less. The comparable figure for men was 45%. In Wales, a massive 74% of women prisoners are serving sentences of six months or less. The cost of keeping a person in jail is a massive £50,000 a year. Some of those women are in jail for not paying their TV licence. It is £154 for TV licence; it costs £150 a day to keep that woman in jail. Women are put in jail for not paying their council tax. I am really pleased that the Welsh Government took the initiative earlier this year not to pursue people who have not paid their council tax for a custodial sentence.
I pay tribute to the women’s centre in Rhyl, run by the wonderful Gemma Fox: it does fantastic work on a shoestring budget. She only has about nine volunteers at the moment, and they look after 300 women a year. One hundred of those women have gone through the penal system. The women’s centre is not given the resources it should be, and more women are ending up in custody; in fact, North Wales is the worst police authority of the 43 in the country for sending women to prison.

Some 80% of austerity cuts have ended up on the shoulders of women. That has a consequential effect on their world view and on their ability to provide for their families. As a last resort, many of them have committed crimes, such as shoplifting or not paying their bills, and they have ended up in prison because of that.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that one of the reasons why women end up in such positions is that they are not receiving the benefits that they are entitled to? Nottingham Women’s Centre told me that, in the last 12 months, its welfare rights adviser recovered £463,000 in benefits that had been lost to women. Would it not help if we sorted that problem out?

Chris Ruane: Absolutely, and I will finish on this note. The women’s centre in Rhyl is not just for female prisoners or women going into or coming out of the criminal justice system. It has a holistic approach to giving advice to women on parenting, domestic and sexual abuse, housing issues, finance and employment. Women go there to recover their confidence. There is a social mix there, with middle-class women as well as working-class women and those who have no job. These centres should be funded by central Government, not least with the £80 million that was saved from Holloway.

It says in the Bible that people should “beat their swords into ploughshares”.

We should be turning our women’s prisons into women’s community centres.

3.6 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I will be brief. I want to urge the Minister to preside over a system where the courts are blind to the gender of a defendant and blind to their race or their sexuality. I was brought up with the belief that everybody was equal before the law, and that is the system that I want the Minister to preside over. It quite clearly is not the case at the moment. For every single category of offence—every single one, according to the Ministry of Justice’s own figures—a woman is less likely to be sent to prison than a man, is likely to be sent to prison for a shorter period and will spend less of their sentence in prison.

We have today a “belief in equality only when it suits” brigade. They do not want equality in sentencing or how the courts deal with people. They want to plead for special circumstances. All the things that the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) said at the outset about women in prison with trauma, mental health problems, domestic abuse or self-harm issues apply to many male prisoners in exactly the same way. This is not unique to female prisoners. Many male prisoners have exactly the same troubled backgrounds.

She also talked about children—when sentencing, the impact on children should be considered when sentencing mothers. What about considering the impact of sentencing fathers on those children? Men have children too. Many women, it has to be said, have already had their kids taken off them before they are sent to prison because they are unfit to be mothers, according to the Ministry of Justice.

Chris Ruane: Have some compassion!

Philip Davies: Well, they have already had their kids taken off them, so why on earth is that a factor in whether they are sent to prison? They are deemed to be unfit mothers. We cannot have a get-out-of-jail card for people to say, “Oh, I’m a mother; I can commit any crime I like, but because I am a mother I shouldn’t be sent to prison.”

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Philip Davies: No. I was in Bradford Crown Court recently, where a woman was convicted of a serious offence. Between being charged and her appearance in court, she had deliberately got pregnant in the hope that that would stop her from getting a custodial sentence. [ Interruption. ] The judge, who pointed out to her that she had deliberately got pregnant in order to avoid a custodial sentence, was not taken in, thankfully. [ Interruption. ] I want the Minister to make sure that we have equality in sentencing.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. Whatever hon. Members’ views, the hon. Gentleman has a right to be heard.

Philip Davies: I recently made a complaint about Judge Buckingham, who, when sentencing a woman, said that if Miss Parry was a man, he would have been “straight down the stairs”, serving a custodial sentence. The judge decided not to send that woman to prison, even though she made it clear that if it was a man he would have gone to prison.

I will end with a check on the females in prison at the moment. This is a snapshot from the Ministry of Justice of 3,300 prisoners: 943 are in prison for violence against the person, including 338 homicides. Should those people not be in prison? There are 480 in prison for violent offences; 284 women are in for robbery; and 229 for theft. But 87 are in prison for other sexual offences; 21 are in for rape, the victims in all cases other women; 21 are in for rape, the victims in all cases other women; 87 are in prison for other sexual offences; 284 women are in for robbery; and 229 for burglary. Which of those should not be in prison? Who will say to their local communities that they want those people out of prison, free to commit crimes? It is an absolute disgrace.

Why can we not have the principle that whether someone is a man or a woman, the court will treat them exactly the same? That is what British justice should be about, and I hope the Minister will preside over that system.

3.11 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) for securing this debate and
I add my tribute to hers. Mine go to the women’s centre, Eden House, in the neighbouring constituency of Bristol East, and to the women who generously told me about their experiences. I will try to concentrate my remarks on my reactions to the written statement and will cut out the bits that hon. Friends have already mentioned.

The vision, established a year ago, stated that the Government wanted to see “fewer women coming into the criminal justice system, fewer women in custody, especially on short-term sentences, and a greater proportion of women managed in the community successfully;” and “better conditions for those in custody.”

However, a recent response to my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston shows that the total number of women in custody has increased slightly over the past year. It also shows that the number of women coming into prison for the first time has decreased slightly. A report by the Prison Reform Trust last December showed that the number of women recalled to prison has more than doubled in the past year, and that has happened since the introduction of the Government measures supposedly designed to support people on release. The report reveals that more than 1,700 women were recalled to prison in England and Wales in the past year and that reforms are making things worse, trapping women in the justice system.

I will group bundles of questions together for the Minister; I am also happy to report to him in writing because I understand that he is covering for a colleague. First, what comments does the Minister have on the numbers? Why has the number of women increased in the past year, contrary to the aim of the strategy? What are the numbers of women coming into the criminal justice system as a whole? That is also important if we are to evaluate success. How is the Minister learning from the lessons of the very welcome decrease in numbers of women entering prison for the first time? How is he using that information to inform the ways of reducing the numbers of women coming into the criminal justice system in the first place?

We all want to prevent more crime. That also means we would prevent more women coming into the criminal justice system. What is the Minister doing to reduce the numbers of women returning to prison owing to lack of support? What progress can the Minister report on in providing them with better conditions while they are in prison?

The statement also mentions the new policy framework. I was glad to read that that was to include duties, rules and guidance and so on, particularly on issues such as caring for perinatal women in prison. I am pleased about that, but I want the Minister or a colleague to tell us how many babies have been born in custody since the policy framework was published and the extent to which their care followed the policy framework and guidance. What was the impact and what lessons can we learn? I apologise to the Minister, but I still have a lot of questions.

Another action is Lord Farmer’s review for women, a welcome development commissioned by the strategy and published recently. It looked at how supporting female offenders in custody and the community to engage with their families lowers recidivism. Whatever anyone says about why we might treat offenders in a particular way, if it lowers recidivism and crime, why would we not want to do it?

Our noble Friend in the other place, Jean Corston, already made those arguments 10 years ago. The Women in Prison report reiterated the case recently in “Corston + 10.” The recently published research evidence briefing, “Why Women’s Centres Work” by DMSS Research, also summarised the research evidence on the benefits of women’s centres to female offending, which is surely something we all want to promote. Why did that review take so long, and why are we not able to see a clear timetable for when the Government will consider the recommendations and the findings? Perhaps it is because we are between Governments.

The statement goes on to say that there should be a women’s residential centre pilot in at least five sites across England and Wales. It also mentions partnerships with other agencies, multi-agencies and whole-system approaches. But why only a pilot? Why all the scoping and consultation? The implementation of the Corston report and the evaluation of Corston projects has provided us with all the piloting we could possibly need, especially in a time of low funding. The cuts and the privatisation imposed by the Liberal Democrat-Tory coalition Government really undermined the sustainability of the Corston project in Bristol, Eden House, which was once a great example of a holistic service.

I know I need to close, Ms Ryan, because I have had my four minutes, but I want to urge the Minister and his successors, whoever they may be—perhaps the Minister will be among them—to work with the women’s centres, because what we really want to see is the gender and trauma-informed work across the country, with a proper national network of women’s centres. They do such great work. We want engagement with the members who have experience of such work so that we can do it as well as possible for all of our sakes, but particularly for the women and children.

Several hon. Members rose—

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I should say that I am sure everybody has noticed that four Members—from the Labour Benches, sadly—have made interventions in the debate and have now left the Chamber. That is not acceptable. I hope that the Whips in the room will take up the matter.

3.16 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate, Ms Ryan. In the short time that I have, I want to place on the record my support for the female offender strategy. It builds strongly on the work of the Corston report, which I had the honour of receiving as Minister in the then Labour Government in 2007-08.

We accepted 40 of the 43 recommendations. We appointed my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) as the champion to see the issue through, but then we ran into the blockade of democracy; the Government were removed from office in 2010. I fully support the efforts of the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) to bring together a strategy to
reduce the number of women in custody where possible. I take on board the comments of the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies)—that some crimes demand custody—but, where possible, we should reduce the number of women in custody, look at early interventions to support women in avoiding custody in the first place, and tackle some of the causes of offending with drug and alcohol services.

Only last week, I mentioned that the number of drug and alcohol treatment orders in the community has been halved in the past four years by the Government.

Ellie Reeves: Some 62% of women in prison are serving short sentences. My right hon. Friend talks about drug and alcohol programmes and early interventions. Does he agree with me that it would be better to invest in early intervention and community sentencing, and introduce a presumption against short sentences to make sure that women get the support that they need, rather than custodial sentences?

David Hanson: It is very important that we try to support women who have committed offences. Sometimes they have committed them because forces have driven them to it. We need to find an appropriate way to remove them from prison because prison has an impact on family life as well as on them. I welcome the efforts of the right hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke) on short prison sentences, and I hope the policy will continue with any new Minister in due course.

If I may focus on my own area of north Wales, there were 37 women on any given day last year in Styal Prison—40 miles from the border, and perhaps 100 miles from the north-west of Wales. I was asked last year by the Welsh Assembly Government to do an inquiry into the treatment of prisoners with regard to education and other services. It is important to note that in the female offender strategy, only four of the 179 paragraphs deal with Wales. It establishes a need for a blueprint. A female offender blueprint is being published by the Welsh Government, and it has very good aspirations. I would welcome an update on progress from the Minister, either in writing or when he responds at the end of the debate.

For example, in the work that I did last year in Wales, I found that there was limited access to Welsh language education for women whose first language was Welsh. There was limited understanding in the Welsh Government of how many female offenders would return to Wales, how many were linked into the labour market of Wales, and how many dependents people had. There was limited understanding of how much would be needed in the way of ongoing support requirements, to reintegrate women back from custody into the community in due course.

My hon. Friends have demanded a women’s centre, and my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) will reiterate that. Wales is one country, but north and south Wales are two regions, where there are different demands on people. We need, as my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) said, to look at what provision there is for a women’s centre in Wales. Those 37 women need to return to the community in due course.

I welcome the document overall, but I hope that the Minister can provide some clarity about a one-year update to the female offending blueprint, and a six-month update to the implementation plan being worked on by the Welsh Assembly Government in conjunction with his Department.

3.20 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) for setting the scene, and for her contribution. We live in a world where “equality” is a buzzword. We should strive for equal pay for equal labour, for the right person to get the job regardless of their gender and for all jobs to be open to any gender. However, being equal does not mean being the same. That is why we need a dedicated strategy for female offenders. That is what I want. The pressures and outcomes are vastly different and need specialised attention.

The issue is complex and I can see where difficulties arise in a family scenario. Whether we like it or not—we probably do—there is a need for compassion and understanding in the process. There is the option of a curfew. That causes difficulties if an offender’s child gets sick and needs to go to hospital. Another issue is the burden of fines and the effect that they can have on the child. It is difficult to find alternatives to prison, but we must look for them. However, I firmly believe that if dependent children are a factor, we must strive to do what we can for the family unit while still ensuring that the duty to justice is met. We do not say it should not be met; we are saying it needs to be looked at differently. We must ensure that any punishment dished out to female offenders affects their children as little as possible.

Figures show that 54% of female offenders have children under the age of 18. Having their mother in prison can be a difficult experience for children. Those are complex issues, but some families have to face them; that is what the debate is about. However, we can and should explore alternatives to prison to ensure that children are affected as little as possible. I agree with Lord Farmer’s report citing the importance of maintaining family ties for female offenders to ensure that they do not reoffend. He says that prisoners who receive family visits are 39% less likely to reoffend and that that is even more important for women than men. Women make up just under 5% of the prison population in England and Wales, yet they are more likely than men to reoffend. For that reason it is paramount that we focus, in the time they are in prison, on trying to prevent female offenders from reoffending.

There is a problem that needs attention. Serving short sentences could cause women to lose their jobs and could have other big effects on their lives. Reports indicate that in that situation inmates are more likely to be exposed to mental health issues and to self-harm. Those issues are specific to the female population. I do not say those things do not happen to men, but the numbers I am aware of through the stats and information we have indicate to me that we have to do something for them. If we want to stop them reoffending, we must ensure that prison does not seriously damage female offenders to the point where they do reoffend. Damaged people are more likely to break the law, owing to a sense of hopelessness. That is a fact.
It is, however, striking to read the stories of women finding prison an experience of being treated better inside than outside. According to the Prison Reform Trust, 57% of women prisoners have experienced domestic abuse. Prison can therefore be both a positive and a negative experience. It is important that the Government work to stamp out domestic abuse in the UK and help women escape from their abusive partners and find an alternative to resorting to prison to escape the abusive partnerships they are trapped in.

I concur with the Magistrates Association, which has highlighted the importance of making appropriate community sentences available for all. It has said that the justice system must be part of the process of early intervention, by supporting proper signposting or diversion where appropriate—not simply for women, but for all of those for whom it is suitable.

Time has beaten me, so I shall say only this. We have to do better at intervention, especially when statistics tell us that there is less chance of reoffending and more stability for children with the approach in question. I sincerely believe that the punishment must fit the crime regardless of gender, but there must be a red-line standard that is not crossed for female offenders.

3.24 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I thank you for your chairmanship, Ms Ryan, and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on securing the debate.

It is 12 years since Baroness Corston published her review, which looked at the vulnerabilities of women in the judicial system. In that review she highlighted the disproportionate and inappropriate sentences that women face for minor, non-violent offences and the chaos and disruption experienced by their families. She spoke about the many women who were, and still are, victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse, addiction and childhood neglect and who end up in prison because of a lack of support. In 2017, 10 years after the Corston review, 74% of Welsh women in prison were serving sentences of less than six months—double the number serving such short sentences when the report was published. With no female prison in Wales—and we do not want one—those women serve their sentences an average of 101 miles from their family. What help is that to a woman who is in turmoil, or to a child who desperately misses their mother? In April, the Welsh Labour Government scrapped outdated and disproportionate prison sentences for those getting into council tax debt, who more often than not are women. It was clear that sending those women to prison for perhaps 12 weeks because they could not afford to pay the money they owed was going to be of no benefit to anyone.

One of the key necessities is an increase in the number of women’s centres as an alternative to prisons; it is essential. Earlier this month, I visited the Nelson Trust in Gloucester. It was like a breath of fresh air for me. Women offenders were being supported, educated and counselled in a suitable environment, enabling them to remain with their families and preparing them for a future away from the criminal justice system.

The Government have committed in the strategy to developing five more women’s centres as a pilot across England and Wales. I ask them please not to forget Wales. Women’s centres are central to the success of the female offender strategy. They make financial sense and will benefit society as a whole. Not only will female offenders be supported in a trauma-informed environment, but when they complete their sentence they will be in a position to move on with their lives with a positive outlook for their future. At the moment, too many women leave prison in dire straits after serving short sentences. They are often homeless, unemployable and desperate, which is why reconviction and recall rates are so high for female offenders.

The key to all that I am describing and to the strategy as a whole is, as with most things, funding. None of the recommendations or promises in the strategy can happen if the Ministry of Justice does not commit to them financially. We know that there will be money available from the sale of HM Prison Holloway. That should unquestionably be used to improve specialist services for women across the criminal justice system, such as the Treasures Foundation, founded by Mandy Ogunmokun to provide a safe female-only recovery environment to support women to overcome their issues and equip them with the tools needed to live a healthy and happy life. We need further settings like that, across the UK, to transform women’s lives. We urgently need the Government to make a commitment showing that they are serious enough about the strategy to make the funds available. We have to get it right. We owe it to society and to the women we should be supporting.

3.28 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan, and to follow the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). I want to compliment the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on securing the debate and on all the work she has done in the area for many years.

The Scottish Prison Service is of course devolved. This afternoon I will say a little about the female offenders strategy in Scotland, but in response to the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), I want talk about the good international evidence base for treating women offenders differently.

I am glad to say that Scotland has come a long way in its approach to female offenders in recent years. Until the mid-2000s, women found guilty of failure to pay fines for non-payment of television licences could face a custodial sentence to be served alongside women who had committed far more serious crimes. We do not do that in Scotland any longer. There are far more options for dealing with female offenders, and the procurator fiscal, the prosecutor, has the option of a fixed penalty.

More generally, in 2011 the former First Minister of Scotland, Alex Salmond, recognised that Scotland needed a new female offender strategy, and he commissioned my former boss, then Lord Advocate for Scotland, Elish Angiolini, to look into the position of women offenders and the prison estate in Scotland. Her commission reported in 2012, and recommended major changes to the way we deal with women offenders in Scotland.
Dr Lee: Scotland is down the road on this. Can the hon. and learned Lady assure me that the Government in Scotland are auditing everything and building an evidence base for doing this? If one thing might move the dial south of the border, it is if the Ministry of Justice reads the evidence. I looked at this issue in Scotland when I was a Minister, and I was deeply impressed. Is it possible to guarantee that we collect the right evidence so that we can change things in England and Wales?

Joanna Cherry: I have no doubt that my colleagues in the Scottish Government are doing that, and I know that in his former role the Minister visited the prison service in Scotland. We have done some things well in Scotland. I do not say it is perfect or that we have got everything right, but it is internationally recognised that the presumption against short sentences in Scotland is changing patterns of reoffending.

I have dealt briefly with the profile of women offenders, but the predictors of reoffending for women are different. For example, research shows that certain factors are much stronger predictors of reoffending for women than for men, such as dysfunctional family relationships—especially family or marital conflict—and poor parent-child attachment, especially for young people. Poverty, deprivation and debt are also bigger reoffending predictors for women than they are for men.

The Angiolini commission found that to improve outcomes for women offenders it is crucial to understand what works to reduce reoffending. Although at the time, due to methodological constraints and the small numbers of subjects, there were few rigorous outcome evaluations of interventions in Scotland, international evidence showed that a number of factors were critical to reducing reoffending by women. One of those was effective intervention, including the thinking skills that need to be in place to challenge antisocial attitudes among women. Another was empathetic practitioners who develop good relationships with women offenders and provide practical and emotional support. The evidence base also supported holistic, rather than stand-alone interventions, and basic services to address women’s needs while in prison. That is just a taste of the international evidence base. It is not discrimination to treat women offenders differently; it is a recognition of the different factors that contribute to women ending up in prison, and that is my answer to what the hon. Member for Shipley had to say.

I look forward to the position in Scotland developing and improving. It is good to know that the Government for England and Wales and the Scottish Government are on a similar track and recognise the clear evidential basis for a different approach to dealing with women offenders.
I suspect that my neighbour, the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), will disagree with a lot of my speech, but as the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) pointed out, numerous reports and studies recognise that female offenders face several additional complex challenges that are separate to those faced by men and that act as drivers of offending and reoffending. Those drivers are key to understanding how we can deliver a criminal justice system that is fair and just and that acts in the best interests of society.

As Members have said, both today and in the past, a woman in prison is more likely to have experienced domestic abuse or to be homeless before entering custody and after leaving. She is more likely to suffer from substance misuse and to experience mental health issues. She is also more likely to have committed a non-violent offence—most probably an offence due to poverty, where meeting a need rather than material gain was the objective—and to be serving a short sentence. The vast majority of those women are not dangerous. They are deeply troubled, and it is clear that, for many, prison is not the best place to address their needs and challenges or the drivers of offending. That is particularly clear considering the high level of reoffending by women released from prison compared with those serving sentences in the community.

Philip Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Imran Hussain: I have some stuff to put on the record, so on this occasion I will not.

The Corston report and others have stated that prison is rarely a necessary, appropriate or proportionate response to women who offend, and I completely agree. There is no reason why we should be locking up so many vulnerable women who have committed non-violent offences that are, in many cases, crimes of poverty.

Prison, regardless of the length of sentence, even if it is just a matter of weeks, takes away a woman’s job, home and family—everything that has been proven time and time again to reduce the likelihood of reoffending. For those who have committed dangerous offences that leave them a danger to the public, of course, custody is still necessary, but for many, many women, that is simply not the case. Indeed, the Government themselves have recognised the complex challenges that women face and acknowledged the need for change, setting out in their much-delayed female offender strategy that criminalising vulnerable individuals has broader negative social impacts, that short custodial sentences do not deliver the best results for female offenders and that good community management works.

To address those issues, the Government set out three main objectives in the strategy: fewer women coming into the criminal justice system; fewer women in custody, especially women serving short-term sentences; and a greater proportion of women managed in the community successfully; and better conditions for those in custody. However, despite their warm words in the female offender strategy, we have seen little from the Government about turning vision into reality.

At the end of June, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), who is not here today, issued a written statement on the progress that the Government had made. While he stated that he wishes to celebrate what he calls “improvements”, he should be doing anything but celebrating. What the Ministry of Justice has achieved is simply unacceptable for a year’s worth of work. It just is not good enough.

The first problem that the strategy encounters is woeful underfunding, setting out just £5 million over two years in community provision for women, including an initial £3.5 million grant. Not only is that money already earmarked and allocated elsewhere as part of the violence against women and girls funding, but it is well short of what experts have said is needed.

The Government’s own Advisory Board on Female Offenders told the Justice Secretary that the strategy requires at least £20 million, a view shared by the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), himself a former Minister, who has confirmed that the strategy is £15 million short. We often disagreed on things when he was my opposite number, but on this issue he had passion and vision, and I thank him for that.

Nor have we seen any progress on the development of the promised residential women’s centres, despite their forming a core part of the female offender strategy. The hon. Member for Charnwood told the House in his written statement that the Ministry of Justice has “recently concluded our first phase of consultation with local voluntary and statutory agencies”;

but added:

“We will continue to consult with partners as we refine...the pilot.”—[Official Report, 27 June 2019; Vol. 662, cols 54-55WS.]

That is far from good enough.

The Corston report of 2007 made the recommendation to deliver the first network of women’s centres, and the Labour Government delivered it. We acted. We helped to develop and nurture that network, which has proven itself time and time again as a real, productive alternative to custody and has been met with praise by all those working with it.

Yet despite this body of evidence and the fact that their proposals are just a revision of the last Labour Government’s policy, the Government still feel that there is a need for an extended trial. They do not need to conduct a trial. We know that women’s centres work. Instead, they should either be getting on with their residential centres, or investing back into existing women’s centres and those who operate them to expand the network. Over recent years, it has been devastation following a series of cuts imposed by the Government’s reforms to probation, which led private probation providers to see their obligation to women as a requirement not to provide holistic support, but just to provide the option of a female supervisor.

Despite their stated desire to see fewer women in custody and on short-term sentences, the Government have also made little progress on reforming sentencing for female offenders. Women are still being sent to prison for non-violent offences where they are absolutely no danger to the public. They are still being sent to prison for poverty-related offences such as shoplifting or quite distastefully, for petty offences such as licence evasion—a point made earlier. The hon. Member for Shipley wants to know that women are sent to prison for that at a greater rate than men are.
Is that the society we want, where vulnerable women are sent to prison for petty offences such as TV licences? The Government are also still locking up vulnerable women whose needs and challenges cannot be addressed in prison. In particular, they are still locking up women who are homeless, and at a greater rate, with the number of homeless women sent to prison rising 71% from the 2015 figure.

In conclusion, last year we were promised a strategy that we were told would change the way women are treated in the criminal justice system, building on the highly influential Corston report. But a year on—a year in which the MOJ could have radically transformed the criminal justice landscape for female offenders—we have seen nothing of the sort. The Government should be ashamed of the lack of progress that they have made in the past 12 months. There is an overwhelming consensus among those who work with women and among hon. Members here today that we should be doing more to help female offenders. If this Government will not do it, a Labour Government will.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Minister, could you wind up your speech a few minutes before 4 pm, to allow the mover to wind up?

3.46 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): Of course, Mrs Ryan. I am grateful for the reminder, because the mover of the debate, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and I served on the Justice Committee together for some years. I pay tribute to her for this debate and for her work.

I will just address the remarks by the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), for whom I have very high regard. I think he is a little unfair when he suggests that all the work that needs to be done under this strategy, or the progress that he envisages, could have been achieved in just one year. Those of us who have worked closely with the criminal justice system for many years know that the best and most sustainable reforms take time. We are dealing with a developing cohort of prisoners—men, women and children—who have differing needs and who need to be managed sensitively. It is not an easy task.

In saying that it is not easy, I am not shying away at all from the nature of the responsibility that I and the Ministry of Justice have to get this right. That is why, in the strategy, there was a refreshing frankness about the need to acknowledge the issue and to get not only the language but the approach right.

[Mrs Karen Buck in the Chair]

Today’s debate has been, in great measure, mature, sensible and evidence-based, and I welcome the contributions from all right hon. and hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) is right, by the way, in his figures when it comes to sentenced women offenders; about one third of them are in custody because of offences of violence against a person. He is correct about that. He is also right to remind us that justice must be equal, and that there will be plenty of occasions when, regardless of the gender of the individual before a judge, that person will have to go to prison for serious offences. I think the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), a former Prisons and Home Office Minister, acknowledged that.

We should not shy away from the reality facing judges and magistrates: there will be times when custody has to be the option, bearing in mind the seriousness of the offence. What I want to see from the criminal justice system—I speak at a time of change; we have an interregnum in my Department—is a system that is smart, not just in the use of resources, but in the administration of justice and our penal system, in a way that means that, when people have served their punishment and are released from custody, we end up with fewer victims of crime, not more. That is what reducing reoffending is all about.

There have been a lot of important pieces of information today; I agree with hon. Members who made the point that most custodial sentences for women are short. In 2018, 77% of custodial sentences for women were less than 12 months, compared with 62% for men. Over the same period, 55% of female offenders were sentenced to a custodial sentence length of up to and including three months, compared with only 35% of male offenders. To balance out the correct statistics that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley cited, last year just over one third of immediate custodial sentences for women were for shoplifting offences, compared with only 11% for men, and the average custodial sentence served was just under two months.

I went to Eastwood Park women’s prison a few weeks ago, and the average sentence length there is about 10 weeks, which is not enough time to do much with a convicted prisoner or to do meaningful work, other than to provide as much support and help as possible for women who are often in a very difficult position. We must all understand the point about vulnerability and the evidence base about the female cohort in order to get this strategy right.

Female prisoners are more than twice as likely as male prisoners to report needing help for mental health problems. The figures are stark: it is 49% of women and 18% of men. About 60% of female offenders have experienced domestic abuse. Female prisoners are more likely to have been taken into care, experienced abuse or witnessed violence in the home as a child. Clear evidential facts rightly underpin our strategy.

The figures relating to custody for non-payment of television licences are, I am glad to say, low. Four women were admitted to custody for non-payment of television licences in 2018, and in the same year three women were admitted to custody for non-payment of council tax. It is important that I put that on the record for balance. Sadly, too many people in our country are living in very straitened circumstances, and plenty of people in those circumstances do not end up in the criminal justice system. We must be very careful when we talk about the cycle of poverty and what it means for offending. Having represented many women in very difficult circumstances as counsel, I know the challenges that many of them face. The lives that they have led are not lives that anybody here would choose to lead. I have seen it for myself. Eastwood Park was familiar to me because some of my clients served sentences there. That is why I was particularly interested in seeing its excellent mother and baby unit and talking to the women, some
of whom were in for longer periods. Their experiences and what they had to say were profoundly interesting. Some of the younger women I met were in for only a very short period, but even to my unclinical eye some were clearly vulnerable.

The strategy recognises those facts. It recognises the range of women’s need. In setting out the three-pronged aims, it reinforces and embeds what Baroness Corston found in her groundbreaking report of 2007. The aims are that fewer women should come into the criminal justice system in the first place, that fewer women should serve short custodial sentences, and that we should create a positive environment that supports the rehabilitation of women who need to be in custody.

Hon. Members have spent much time rightly examining the work that has been done. Some criticism has been made of the £5 million multi-year funding. Of course, that is not the only part of our response to support women who are themselves victims or in a cycle of offending. I am sorry that an hon. Member who intervened in the debate but is no longer present found the system to be unduly bureaucratic. We must ensure that the way the funding is spent is based on sound evidence, and that it has a positive effect. That funding is being rolled out effectively, sustaining and enhancing 26 services to develop new women’s centres and to pilot innovative specialist services across England and Wales.

I make no apology for piloting initiatives. We have to get this right. The Government were rightly criticised for jumping the gun when it came to transforming rehabilitation and making assumptions that sadly could not be sustained. The Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar)—who sadly could not be with us today because he is addressing the House on an urgent question—and I feel very strongly about that. This is also about the work that is being done more widely.

Chris Ruane: Many hon. Members mentioned the £80 million that was raised through the sale of Holloway. That huge sum of money could transform the number of women going into prisons across the United Kingdom. That would save the Government money in the end, too, so it would be a win-win situation. Will the Minister say something about that before he concludes?

Robert Buckland: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding me about that. As the Prison Minister, I am responsible for a very large estate, and it would be difficult to hypothecate that money in the way that hon. Members desire. Having said that, some of the funds that were raised have provided a women’s centre there, and the money is being ploughed back into the estate anyway. It is being used to make our prison estate safer, more decent and much better. It is difficult to hypothecate that money purely for these particular purposes.

Hon. Members asked many questions, and sadly I do not have all the time in the world to deal with them. I want to talk briefly about the important work of Lord Farmer’s review and the vital issue of family ties. Women are more likely to be primary carers than men when entering the system. Of course, the innocent children of those relationships are the ones who suffer. We are very grateful to Lord Farmer for his review, and we will take his work forward.

I will try to deal with the questions asked by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston. I feel very strongly about pre-sentence reports, and I have asked questions of my civil servants. There is an improved new checklist to make sure that the probation officer is asking the right question about women offenders, and we will roll it out nationally. Part of my aim is to see PSRs used more widely throughout the criminal justice system. I will write to the hon. Lady on all her other questions, because I appreciate that she needs time to respond.

Kate Green: I am grateful to all colleagues who have participated in this very good debate. There was widespread, if not entirely unanimous, recognition that the experiences of women offenders are different. Their motivation to offend, their vulnerabilities, and the impact of sentences on them and their families are different. The risk that women present is lower than that of men. Although I accept the figures that the Minister and the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) cited, I am happy, now that I have found my figures, to share the analysis carried out by the Prison Reform Trust, which led me to the 83% figure. I am afraid that I wrongly suggested that it was a figure from Crest Advisory. It was, in fact, analysis by the Prison Reform Trust. I will write to them, and indeed all Members who participated in the debate, to share that information.

The real lesson that we should take from this debate is that holistic, community-based provision is the most effective way to deal with the vast majority of women offenders, through dedicated, specialist provision. The one message that I want the Minister to take away from the debate is that we must have certain, sustained and adequate funding for a network of women’s centres right across the country. I hope that if he continues as the Minister, he will pursue that agenda. I hope he remains in his role, but if he sadly does not I hope he will pass that message on to his successors.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the female offender strategy one year on.

Workplace Deaths: Scotland

4 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered workplace deaths in Scotland.

I know there are helicopters above us waiting for this speech, so I will just get started. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck, in this important debate. I thank the Scottish Trades Union Congress, Unite the union, Scottish Hazards and Families Against Corporate Killers for their time and assistance ahead of the debate.

There was a nearly 5% increase in workplace deaths in the UK last year, and a staggering 70% increase in Scotland. The Health and Safety Executive suggests that the increase was not “significant”, but as a trade unionist I firmly disagree. The death of any worker is significant for their family, friends and workmates, and the increase in workplace deaths across Scotland is significant for us in this House. It highlights that something is going wrong in sectors of the Scottish economy when it comes to the health and safety of workers. Working people look to us, their representatives, to raise and address their concerns. That is why I sought the debate.

According to the Health and Safety Executive, Scotland has the highest rate of workplace deaths per 100,000 workers in the UK. It also had the most recorded workplace deaths in the UK last year, at 29—higher than the annual average for Scotland of 19. I know the HSE will highlight that Scotland has fewer workers in low-risk industries than the other regions and nations of the UK, but surely that highlights why we must get workplace health and safety right in Scotland. Scotland has more workers in high-risk industries, who are more likely to be exposed to greater dangers in their workplace.

Both across the UK and in Scotland, the highest number of workplace deaths occur in the agriculture, construction and manufacturing sectors, but differences start to emerge between Scotland and the UK when we look at deaths by employment status. Across the UK, the self-employed are more than twice as likely as employees to suffer a fatal workplace injury, but in Scotland, the rate of fatal injury per 100,000 workers is higher among employees than among the self-employed. That greatly worries me, because it means that an increasing number of employees are being failed by their employers when it comes to health and safety in workplaces across Scotland.

The causes of those workplace deaths in Scotland also alarm me. Most of them were preventable if employers had properly enforced health and safety in the workplace. Workers should not operate machinery without appropriate protection, they should not fall from heights and they should not be struck by vehicles in the workplace. All those issues could be dealt with through proper enforcement and oversight of current health and safety regulations.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the increasing casualisation of the workforce—in particular the decline in trade union membership, which enforces appropriate standards in the workplace—is a contributory factor? I recall from my experience of working in a shipyard that the close relationship between management and trade unions was critical to ensuring a rapid and major reduction in lost work day incidents and accidents in the workplace.

Hugh Gaffney: Yes. I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. Trade unions have a vital role in health and safety in the workplace. We have health and safety reps, and any worker joining any place of work should join a trade union. Trade unions are not just there for pay; they are there for the protection of workers.

That brings me to enforcement and oversight. The TUC estimates that the HSE’s budget has reduced by more than 40% since 2010. That means it has £100 million less in its budget this year, which undoubtedly impacts its ability to enforce and oversee health and safety in workplaces across the UK. Concerns have been raised by groups such as Families Against Corporate Killers that those cuts to the HSE have already hampered its ability to undertake health and safety inspections.

Ahead of today’s debate I spoke to Scottish Hazards, which has researched staffing levels in the HSE. It estimates that the HSE lost more than 1,000 staff between 2010 and 2018. That means we have lost inspectors and other specialists capable of enforcing and overseeing health and safety in the workplace.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman share the concerns expressed by National Farmers Union Scotland that the number of deaths in the agriculture sector increased by five to 13 in 2018-19? That happened despite the best efforts of the Farm Safety Foundation, the Health and Safety Executive and the NFU itself. In the UK as a whole, agriculture, forestry and fishing have the worst fatality figures of the main industrial sectors. Does he agree that the UK and Scottish Governments need to assist?

Ms Karen Buck (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be short.

Hugh Gaffney: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who makes the point very clearly. A lot of migrant workers come over to work in the agriculture business. One death is too many, never mind five.

There has not been a single prosecution in Scotland under the UK Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007. It is clear that it is not fit for purpose. It has failed to make our workplaces safer, as highlighted by the increase in workplace deaths in Scotland last year. My colleague Claire Baker MSP presented a Bill in the Scottish Parliament that seeks to strengthen the law. It would create two kinds of statutory culpable homicide—where death is caused “recklessly” or by “gross negligence” on the part of an employer. That is the kind of change in the law we must seriously consider if we are to deter employers from action that may jeopardise the lives of their workers.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree with Unite the union and the Scottish Trades Union Congress that the failure to devolve health and safety law to the Scottish Parliament after the Smith commission was a missed opportunity?

Hugh Gaffney: Yes, I will always see it as a missed opportunity. I will always support the STUC, which I have known for 30 years and does a fantastic job. I urge the Minister to review the effectiveness of the existing
UK corporate homicide law and to reflect on whether there must be changes such as those proposed by Claire Baker in Scotland.

I heard one consistent theme in my discussions with organisations ahead of the debate. There is a feeling that HSE figures do not accurately reflect the number of deaths caused by work-related injuries and diseases. The Hazards campaign believes that the HSE’s figures for work-related deaths do not include workers killed in road traffic incidents or deaths from work-related diseases such as cancer, or those who took their own life because of work-related pressures. It also highlights that the HSE fails to account for work-related ill health such as heart disease and mental health issues. That certainly raises questions about whether the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 2013 and other reporting tools are fit for purpose.

There are clearly issues with under-reporting if the labour force survey estimates that work-related injuries are at least 2.5 times higher than those reported through RIDDOR. The Hazards campaign has also raised concerns that recent changes to RIDDOR have led to a nearly 30% reduction in incidents being reported. There are clearly issues with RIDDOR failing to account fully for work-related deaths and ill health. I urge the Government to review the effectiveness of RIDDOR and other reporting tools currently used by the HSE so that we can ensure that the full scale of work-related deaths and ill health is being accurately reported.

A 70% rise in workplace deaths in Scotland is staggering. There is clearly an issue with health and safety enforcement in some sectors of the Scottish economy. I urge the Government to reflect on the issues I have raised today and to look again at the cuts made to the HSE since 2010. I call on them to review the law around corporate homicide to see whether it can be strengthened, and ask them to re-examine the effectiveness of RIDDOR and other reporting tools currently used by the HSE.

International Workers’ Memorial Day is held on 28 April every year. I thank North Lanarkshire Trade Union Council for the work it does at the memorial at Summerlee Industrial Museum in Coatbridge in my constituency every year. The gates at Summerlee are marked with the motto of the North Lanarkshire Trade Union Council:

“The past we inherit, the future we build”.

That makes us remember all those workers who have lost their lives and motivates us to campaign for better health and safety in our workplaces.

The loss of 29 lives last year in workplaces across Scotland should make all of us in this House reflect on the purpose of International Workers’ Memorial Day, which has the slogan:

“To remember the dead and fight for the living.”

On 3 July, the annual workplace fatality figures for 2018-19 were published. Sadly, they showed an increase in workplace deaths in Scotland—particularly in agriculture—which is a tragedy for everyone involved, including family members and friends left behind. My sympathies and thoughts are with them. As the release of the statistics each year shows, we must continue to strive to do better. I welcome many of the constructive suggestions that the hon. Gentleman made.

Great Britain consistently has one of the lowest rates of fatal injuries in Europe and is recognised as among the best performers for occupational safety and health worldwide. Our health and safety system combines goal-setting legislation and a risk-based approach to health and safety management, to enable businesses to assess and control the risks relevant to them. That allows health and safety controls to adapt as work processes and practices change, and it enables risk management to keep pace with technological change.

Businesses know that effective health and safety management allows for innovation, enhances productivity and enables growth. That, combined with Great Britain’s long-established tripartite approach of businesses, workers and Government working together, has established our world-class health and safety record. However, we must not become complacent. We must continue to work with all involved to secure lasting improvements.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): The Minister talks about Britain’s record on workplace safety. Given that, does he agree that when contracts go out to procurement, particularly in the green jobs sector, we must look at what we can do to support jobs staying locally, so that such jobs are good, local and unionised, and we can ensure that workers are protected?

Justin Tomlinson: It is absolutely clear that we must have that three-way approach through the Health and Safety Executive, workers and businesses to ensure that we are in the best place to maintain our proud record in this area.

In Scotland, there was an increase of 12 deaths compared with the previous year, mostly due to an increase in fatalities in the agricultural sector from three to 13. The figures for 2017-18 were particularly low, so care must be taken in drawing conclusions from those annual figures as numbers from one year to the next are subject to fluctuation. The increase is within the bounds of natural variation because of the low numbers involved.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Three of the five deaths that related to the use of all-terrain vehicles were in Scotland. Has the Minister had an opportunity to consider what might be done to better reinforce the message that people using such vehicles for farm business should be wearing helmets? What more can be done to get that message across?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend makes a typically constructive suggestion. As these terrible incidents happen, lessons are learned and shared and best practice is promoted. That is exactly the sort of lesson that we can push, and I know he will be a strong advocate on that.

Any death is unacceptable, so we must emphasise the importance of continuing to focus on working with businesses, workers, trade associations and others to prevent deaths by improving risk control. The primary
responsibility for managing risks to people’s health and safety from work activities lies with the business or the person who creates the risk. HSE evidence shows that the key drivers of health and safety risk are industry sector, occupation and duty-holder attitude, rather than geographical location.

The regulator also plays an important part in improving standards. In cases of workplace deaths, investigation is a priority for the HSE. Through investigation, inspection and enforcement, the HSE can ensure individual businesses are managing risks properly; hold to account those who have failed in their statutory duties; and learn the lessons that play into industry to ensure that health and safety management continues to improve across the country. In practice, that means that during an investigation the regulator may take enforcement action to address conditions found on site. Following an investigation, there may be prosecution action in England and Wales, and in Scotland a recommendation to prosecute may be presented to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service.

Outcomes of investigations and prosecutions form the base of communications activity to highlight our expectations and have an educational and deterrent effect across businesses. Finally, lessons learned are discussed with industry stakeholders and, as necessary, fed into new or existing guidance to drive future improvement.

Analysis of incidents shows us that the main causes of fatal injuries to workers by industry sector are the same whether in Scotland, England or Wales. In agriculture, they include workplace transport, falls from a height and being killed by cattle. In construction, over half of all fatal injuries to workers over the last five years across Great Britain resulted from falls from a height. Factors contributing to fatal accidents across all industries include a lack of planning, training, maintenance and understanding of risk as well as poor risk management. The sad thing is that, as the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill mentioned, those causes are well known, as are the steps that can be taken to prevent them. There is much good guidance available from the HSE and industry that cover them.

In February 2016, the “Helping Great Britain Work Well” strategy, aimed at improving health and safety across Great Britain, was launched. I was pleased to write the foreword, which highlighted that we need to act together and help businesses to manage their risks well. The regulators cannot do it all, but the HSE will continue to work with businesses, workers and stakeholders to promote better working practices to protect workers.

Stephen Kerr: The Minister is being generous in giving way. In agricultural deaths, there has been a demographic shift towards people aged over 60. Is that true generally of reported workplace deaths? What does he believe might be a root cause of that startling statistic?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I will have to write to him to give more details. As I said earlier, we cannot stand still. Industry innovation, technology and workplace demographics are changing and we must always be on the front foot. The improvement of working practices has included the development of specific sector plans to drive improvements across agriculture, construction and other industries.

I turn to the key work taking place in Scotland to improve health and safety at work outcomes, particularly in agriculture. Industry-wide, the HSE chairs the Partnership on Health and Safety in Scotland, which brings together Scottish business and trade union representatives with the Scottish Government to work to improve businesses’ management of health and safety. The HSE’s agriculture sector plan recognises the challenges in changing attitudes and behaviours in the industry. A reduction in fatal injury rates is one of the three outcomes identified, through securing effective management of risk.

As part of Farm Safety Partnership Scotland, the HSE is working with the National Farmers Union Scotland, NFU Mutual and the Scottish Government to ensure that partners focus their activities on driving improvements in the management of risk. The HSE will continue to work with stakeholders to find opportunities to reduce fatal accidents in Scottish agriculture. I urge all parties involved in Farm Safety Partnership Scotland to really step up to the plate and deliver the further cultural change required to improve health and safety on Scottish farms.

Hugh Gaffney: The Minister talks about the Health and Safety Executive. Will he ask the new Prime Minister to put more money into it?

Justin Tomlinson: We are already world-leading, and the new Prime Minister will continue everything that is great about this country. I am sure that he will take particular interest in how we are recognised for our achievement in the area, and rightly so.

The HSE has commissioned research to gain a better understanding of farmers’ attitudes to risk and risk-taking behaviour. From that research, a programme of interventions has been developed, including HSE-funded training known as agricultural compliance events. The training includes management of the risks of the most common causes of fatal injury on farms. The events are followed up by inspections to ensure compliance. To date, approximately 500 Scottish farmers have attended the events.

The HSE has also developed new guidance targeted at influencing those farmers who are unclear about how to manage risk and are most likely to have an incident at work. From that work, the key actions that the HSE is taking with the agriculture sector to improve standards are challenging the industry to take ownership of issues, developing shared solutions to known problems, and delivering consistent actions and messages.

In the construction sector, performance has improved over the past decade, and the number and rate of fatal incidents shows a long-term downward trend. An important vehicle for driving continuing construction improvements is Site Safe Scotland, a well-established tripartite partnership that works on improving health and safety on Scottish construction projects. Trade unions, major construction employers, training providers and the HSE support campaigns and initiatives across the country, such as the Scottish Working Well Together group.

The HSE wants to see a continuation of the downward trend in fatal accidents in construction, which will be tackled by embedding the principles of the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2015; supporting small businesses to achieve improved risk management and control; reducing the likelihood of low-frequency,
high-impact catastrophic incidents such as fires or structural collapse by making early and strategic interventions in major projects; and developing clear standards of construction risk leadership and leading performance indicators.

The HSE works with Police Scotland, the Scottish Occupational Road Safety Alliance and others as part of a national campaign on the causes of fatalities in the transport sector, such as during loading and unloading, when workplace fatalities and injuries may occur as a result of poorly loaded and poorly secured goods.

I am pleased that we have been able to debate this important issue and highlight some of the common causes of workplace fatal injuries. The HSE will continue to engage with businesses and stakeholders in Scotland, as it will in England and Wales. It uses a range of regulatory actions, from influencing behaviours across whole industry sectors to making targeted interventions in particular sectors and activities. It will continue to hold to account those businesses that fail in their responsibilities to protect workers. While the increase this year in workers’ deaths in agriculture is troubling, it is time not to change direction, but rather to continue to work together to reinforce the changes needed to safeguard workers’ lives.

Once again, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill for securing the debate, and to other hon. Members for their excellent contributions. On any points that I have not been able to address during my speech, I will write with further details. I remind all colleagues that the HSE takes the issue incredibly seriously. Speaking in a personal capacity, I am pleased that we have been able to debate this important issue and highlight some of the common causes of workplace fatal injuries. The HSE will continue to engage with businesses and stakeholders in Scotland, as it will in England and Wales. It uses a range of regulatory actions, from influencing behaviours across whole industry sectors to making targeted interventions in particular sectors and activities. It will continue to hold to account those businesses that fail in their responsibilities to protect workers. While the increase this year in workers’ deaths in agriculture is troubling, it is time not to change direction, but rather to continue to work together to reinforce the changes needed to safeguard workers’ lives.

The figures are disappointing, and I genuinely feel for all the families, but there is a real cross-party commitment to continue to do everything we can in this important area. I thank the hon. Gentleman again for his very constructive speech.

Question put and agreed to.
protect pensioner benefits has, rightly, caused hon. Members across the country to shine a light on the low uptake of pension credit across the UK.

Under the new BBC licence fee rules, as hon. Members will be aware, only households with someone over the age of 75 who is in receipt of pension credit will be eligible to continue having their licence fee waived.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): In Scotland, £300 million goes unclaimed in pension credits, including £7 million in my constituency. Surely that £7 million would help with those TV licence fees.

Chris Elmore: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. My point is that if all our constituents claimed the pension credit they are entitled to, it would cost more than providing free TV licences, so surely a good option would be to get better take-up of pension credit and to continue with free TV licences.

The new approach, when packaged in a Government press release, might at first look to some like a logical step to take, but when we unpack it and look at how many people are not accessing the financial support to which they are entitled, we see how utterly disgraceful the policy is and how much of a backward step it is. Put simply, the Government need to stop outsourcing their welfare policy to the BBC.

Of course, the Government provide a range of measures to protect the most hard-pressed pensioners, many of which are welcome and needed, yet their flagship policy to lift pensioners out of poverty—pension credit—is failing.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does he agree that the Government need to launch a major awareness-raising campaign about pension credit? There are more than 2,000 households in Blaenau Gwent that could be missing out on a total of £5.6 million every year. They have the right to this money, so let us make sure that they get it.

Chris Elmore: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I completely agree with him that the Government need to do a lot more to encourage pensioners to claim pension credit and make them understand that there is no stigma in their gaining pension credit. However, even in my constituency of Ogmore there is more than £5.1 million that is not being claimed by pensioners, so I completely agree with him, and I hope that the Minister will respond to some of these points at the end of the debate.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Further to that point, does my hon. Friend agree that it is quite concerning that the figure nationally for those entitled to pension credit but not claiming it is 40%? Meanwhile, in my own constituency of Barnsley East, more than 4,000 pensioners are due to lose their free TV licences. The combination of these two factors is really concerning. Does he agree?

Chris Elmore: I do agree with my hon. Friend. Her intervention re-emphasises the point that this issue affects pensioners right across the United Kingdom, and the Government need to deal with it, starting by better advertising what is available and making sure that pensioners are able to access the money that they need and that is rightly theirs.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman share my shock and disbelief that pensioners tell me that when they phone up the helpline or claim-line for pension credit, they find that it is not properly staffed? Indeed, some of my constituents have been left on hold on the phone for up to an hour, even though there is no option to apply for pension credit using an application form. Barriers are being put in the way of pensioners claiming this money, which might explain the lack of take-up.

Chris Elmore: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention. As I will set out later in my speech, the parliamentary service here has been able to have some interaction with constituents from across the UK, and I have some examples that will almost confirm her view that the Department for Work and Pensions is being deliberately unhelpful when it comes to allowing pensioners to claim pension credit. I will refer to those examples later.

The Government’s flagship policy to lift pensioners out of poverty—pension credit—is failing, and it has been for some time. Pension credit is not working for up to 1.3 million pensioner households that are eligible for this vital support, which could be the catalyst they need to lift them out of poverty, but they do not receive it. In my constituency, I find it completely staggering that there is £5.1 million of pension credit going unclaimed each year, and I know that there are many, many constituencies across the UK where the situation is even bleaker.

By the time the new TV licence rules come into force in 2020, pensioners across the UK will have endured 10 long years of Tory austerity—10 long years of austerity that none of them caused; 10 long years of austerity that many of these pensioners did not vote for. Indeed, 10 long years of austerity have had a devastating impact on the living standards and quality of life of hundreds of thousands of pensioners across the United Kingdom.

In 2003, pension credit was introduced under the new Labour Government. It was created to ensure that all older people received a minimum amount of income and has played a major role in previous reductions in poverty. Indeed, the last Labour Government lifted 2 million pensioners out of poverty as a result of policies such as pension credit.

What have we seen since? Over 400,000 more pensioners have been plunged into poverty, and two in five of the pensioner households that are entitled to pension credit currently do not claim it. That shows that it is not that the policy itself is not working; instead, it is that people who might need this money are not accessing it. The Government have to change that.

Parliament’s brilliant digital engagement team asked people on social media and on the MoneySavingExpert.com forum over the weekend about their experiences with pension credit. It was clear from that research that although many respondents were aware of pension credit, there was much more confusion about what the benefit actually was, who is eligible to it and how it can
be accessed. Several of the respondents criticised the way that the DWP promotes pension credit to those who are eligible for it. For example, Joanne Stannard said that “there are some over-75s who don’t even own a computer...make their lives easier”.

Susan Brady said:
“I worked for the DWP for over 30 years in operational delivery, so I am well aware how unfair our welfare system is. We seem to despise our older people in the UK. It’s wrong, totally wrong.”

I could go on, but what was clear from the responses is that the system is not fit for purpose. People do not know whether they are eligible for pension credit and many are struggling to get by, despite working hard throughout their lives.

I thank everyone who responded to the questions posted online or shared their views about them, and I pay tribute to the digital engagement team for again helping us to have as informed a debate as possible.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a great speech, with lots of very salient points. Recently, when it was announced that over-75s would get their TV licence free only if they are on pension credit, I wrote to all the over-75s in my constituency, so I will just add a response that I received to those that he has cited. One constituent said that he not only received his pension credit but now also gets “council tax credit, help with...glasses and dental, and a premium on...carer’s allowance.”

He was forced into poverty because of a lack of information that only I, as his representative, could correct. Is that not something that the Government should do?

Chris Elmore: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The point that I will make later in my speech is that there seems to be this assumption that increasing publicity does not necessarily work or that trying to get cross-benefits, for example around housing benefit, would not solve the problem. However, his intervention shows that where Members of Parliament are proactive—arguably, the Government could be proactive instead—they can gain more support for their constituents. I pay tribute to him for doing that already; perhaps the Government could follow his lead.

Over the last few weeks, I have been working closely with the older people’s charity Independent Age, which has put forward some sensible recommendations that could help us to improve this situation. Indeed, its “Credit Where It’s Due” campaign has already made waves across the country, and I am proud to support it in its entirety.

Working with sector stakeholders and with all levels of Government, it is essential that the Government act to ensure that everyone who is entitled to pension credit receives it. To achieve this, I impress upon the Minister the need for him to make three clear commitments today. The first is to ensure that at least 75% of eligible people receive pension credit by the end of 2020. The second is to ensure that that figure is at least 95% by the end of 2022. The third is to ensure that it is 100% by 2025.

Independent Age estimates that if measures are put in place to achieve a 75% take-up target by 2020, half a million pensioners could be lifted out of poverty by putting an additional £1.25 billion into the pockets of our poorest pensioners. To reach those targets, the Government must put in place a comprehensive action plan that is ambitious about the full range of improvements that can be—and, indeed, need to be—made. Simply continuing previous approaches, such as focusing merely on new awareness-raising campaigns, will not allow us to make the progress on this issue that is desperately needed.

Of course, the voluntary sector plays a vital role in supporting older people to access pension credit, but such support cannot be relied upon to improve uptake across the country if used in isolation.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech with some excellent points. In Cardiff North, nearly 1,400 older people are missing out on a combined total of £4 million of pension credits. That has a huge impact on my constituency. I am reaching out to those older people. He has secured this important debate to reach out to the Government to do more, and his points are very salient. Does he agree that the Government need to be far more proactive in this area?

Chris Elmore: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. She makes a strong case as to why the Government should do more, because, as I have already said, this issue is clearly affecting every constituency right across the UK.

Previous Government attempts to work with older people’s groups and charities to raise awareness of pension credit have made a positive difference in the short term, but they have not been enough to achieve the longer-term change that we need. For the record, I have no problem at all with the Government engaging with and working with the voluntary sector to support pensioners. There are many reasons why voluntary groups do extraordinary work in supporting pensioners’ groups and older people’s groups to tackle loneliness or offer support. I take nothing away from any of that work, but the Government need to take responsibility for the fact that there are millions of pensioners who are not receiving the pension credit that they should rightly receive.

The four stages of Independent Age’s action plan are a clear and decisive way to turn this around. First, the Government must take responsibility for getting pension credit to older people. Previous research has generally focused on the failure of older people to respond in the way that the system demands. Barriers to claiming pension credit can include confusion about the application process and the stigma associated with claiming benefits. Many people do not apply because they think they are ineligible. At times, there has been more ambitious thinking. In 2012, the Department for Work and Pensions ran a small trial in which pension credit was paid to people without them having to apply. However, that approach has not been fully explored or rolled out. The Government need to use the information and techniques they have at their fingertips to significantly simplify, or even remove altogether, the application process for pension credit.

Secondly, the Government should consider the trigger points affecting pensioners on low incomes and explore cross-referral across agencies. They should look beyond...
retirement age and explore the role of other services at those trigger points, such as the role of GPs, or ensuring that applicants for disability or carer benefits are notified about pension credit at the point of award. The DWP should explore its role in notifying such individuals about pension credit; for example, Tell Us Once is a service that lets a person report a death to most Government organisations in one go. That could be a route to notifying the bereaved about the support they may be entitled to.

Thirdly, the Government must explore the role of housing benefit. Some 80% of households take up housing benefit, compared with as few as 58% for pension credit. We know that over half of the 330,000 pensioners who have moved into poverty since 2013 are renting. Some of those people will be entitled to, but missing out on, pension credit. Currently, the Department for Work and Pensions passes on the information received for a pension credit assessment to the relevant local authority, so that the applicant is able to claim housing benefit. However, the reverse does not happen. There is therefore an opportunity to ensure that when housing benefit has been awarded, the information used in that assessment is passported from the local authority to the DWP for a pension credit assessment.

Lastly, the Government should explore options for using behavioural insight. The Government should ensure that every element of the action plan is developed in partnership with older people. For example, they should explore co-producing communications with older people to maximise the likelihood of getting a response. This is about focusing less on assumptions and more on actually understanding the needs of older people.

I will briefly highlight some of the fantastic work being done to support pensioners in my constituency of Ogmore, including by the various older people’s groups that I meet with on a regular basis in Cefn Cribwr, Llanharan, Brynna and Maesteg, as well as the men’s sheds in Tondu, Ogmore Vale and the Garw Valley. Those organisations do an extraordinary amount of excellent peer-to-peer work to support older people by trying to tackle issues such as loneliness and secure the support that pensioners are entitled to. Nothing makes me prouder to be the MP for Ogmore than seeing the money that they are legally entitled to. Surely that is not too much to ask.

If austerity really is set to come to an end, it is time that this Government give back to the communities that have felt the brunt of the pain their policies have caused over the past 10 years. The first big but important step towards doing that is to ensure that older people receive the money that they are legally entitled to. Surely that is not too much to ask.

4.44 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) on securing this afternoon’s debate, and thank him for the case that he has outlined.

As we have heard, pension credit is not working. Over £200 million of pension credit is not reaching older people in Wales each year, including almost £6 million that is not reaching people in my constituency. As many as 80,000 people in Wales, and over 1 million in total across the UK, are currently missing out. The financial support that pension credit provides would be a life-changing event to a great number of those people, who are finding it harder and harder to get by due to years of Tory austerity. That is certainly the case in constituencies such as mine in the south Wales valleys, where it can often be easy for geographic isolation to cause older people to suffer from loneliness and poor mental health. Pension credit can enable people suffering from loneliness or isolation to take part in a range of social activities they would not otherwise be able to, not to mention make shopping and other bills affordable.

I also want to mention free TV licences for the over-75s. Following the Government’s cruel decision to offload responsibility for that concession to the BBC, there is a policy to means-test pensioners’ eligibility for free TV licences through pension credit. That is not a suitable test, since the current take-up of that benefit is so low. Not only will about 3,220 pensioner households in my constituency and many thousands more across the UK continue to miss out on that essential benefit, but they will now be hit by a bill of over £150 for a TV licence.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore said, almost 2 million older people in the UK are living in poverty. It is shocking that more than two in five pensioner households are not receiving the pension credit to which they are entitled, an average of £49 per week. That money would make a huge difference to some of the poorest people in my constituency, across Wales and across the UK. Those pensioners have paid into the system their entire working life, but that very system is now letting them down.

The Government must now act to improve the take-up of pension credit and launch a campaign to create wider awareness of it, in order to lift pensioners out of poverty and give them the quality of life that they deserve. I plead with the Minister to consider the real and grave concerns that have been raised during today’s debate, and come forward with answers, not words, to address an injustice that is causing hardship to those who can least afford it.

4.47 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I will speak briefly, because I know a lot of Members want to speak. I thank the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) for having secured this important debate.
It is a disgrace that pension credit—the support in place to help our poorest pensioners—has been under-claimed by £7 billion since June 2017 across the UK. In my constituency, that figure stands at £7.4 million. While many pensioners often have to choose between eating and heating, they are unaware that other support has been set aside for them. I have raised this issue on the Floor of the House, and asked what the Government were going to do to publicise that support and ensure that our poorest older people were aware of it. Predictably and disappointingly, the answer I received was rather dismissive.

It seems to me that unacceptable obstacles have been placed in the path of those who might claim and benefit from this support. In my constituency, as I said earlier, I have been told by old people that when they call the pension credit claim line, it is not properly staffed. After being kept on hold, sometimes for up to a full hour, the would-be claimant gives up and hangs up. On hearing that, I advised my constituents to apply for pension credit via post, but guess what? Only those living in Northern Ireland can do so. I wonder why that is; perhaps the Minister can explain why there is more concern for constituents in Northern Ireland than for those in North Ayrshire and Arran.

Why does this matter? It seems to me that by not informing older people that pension credit exists, and then making it as hard as possible for them to claim, the less it costs and the more can be clawed back by the Treasury. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of pensioners in my constituency and across the UK are robbed of vital support that could make a material difference to their circumstances. That is before we talk about those who may miss out on pension credit and, as a further blow, will lose their right to a free TV licence when it costs and the more can be clawed back by the Treasury. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of pensioners in my constituency and across the UK are robbed of vital support that could make a material difference to their circumstances. That is before we talk about those who may miss out on pension credit and, as a further blow, will lose their right to a free TV licence when they call the pension credit claim line, it is not properly staffed. After being kept on hold, sometimes for up to a full hour, the would-be claimant gives up and hangs up. On hearing that, I advised my constituents to apply for pension credit via post, but guess what? Only those living in Northern Ireland can do so. I wonder why that is; perhaps the Minister can explain why there is more concern for constituents in Northern Ireland than for those in North Ayrshire and Arran.

The cuts in pension credit for mixed-age couples were sneaked out under the cover of the Brexit chaos. Add to that the betrayal of women born in the 1950s, who have been robbed of their state pension, and we have a UK Treasury. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of pensioners in my constituency and across the UK are robbed of vital support that could make a material difference to their circumstances. That is before we talk about those who may miss out on pension credit and, as a further blow, will lose their right to a free TV licence when those are cut by the Government, not to mention the fact that pension credit is often a gateway benefit to other support.

The cuts in pension credit for mixed-age couples were sneaked out under the cover of the Brexit chaos. Add to that the betrayal of women born in the 1950s, who have been robbed of their state pension, and we have a UK Government breaking their manifesto pledge to protect pensioner benefits.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The hon. Lady is not the first representative from her party to complain on behalf of the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign. However, there is devolution in Scotland. If she really cared about the issue, should the Scottish National party Government not put their money where their mouth is?

Patricia Gibson: The WASPI women are not stupid, and they have heard that myth peddled repeatedly. There is a particular section in the Scotland Act 2016, which I recommend the hon. Gentleman reads, that forbids the Scottish Government from providing benefits “by reason of old age.”

If he were to read the Act, he might learn a thing or two before peddling that myth. I also remind him that the Scottish Parliament does not exist to clear up a Tory mess.

It is clear that the Government are no friend, supporter or protector of our older people. It is time for the Government to get a grip, stop punishing our older people, stop punishing people for being poor, get on with the day job and properly address pensioner poverty.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak briefly in this debate under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), and congratulate him and his new wife on their wedding last weekend. I wish them many happy years together; hopefully they can draw their pensions together in years to come. I will say a word about the level of pension credit take-up in Wales, and I commend my hon. Friend for raising the issue. I know that a couple of other things are happening in this city today, but although minds will be focused on the new resident in Downing Street, I hope the debate gets the focus and attention that it deserves.

As all colleagues will know, and as my hon. Friend indicated, pension credit is the main means-tested benefit for pensioners. For those people reaching state pension age before April 2016, pension credit has two parts—guarantee credit and savings credit. Guarantee credit provides financial help for people aged over the qualifying age for pension credit whose income is below a set amount. Savings credit is an extra amount for people aged 65 or over, who have made some provision for their retirement.

As we have heard, in 2016-17 up to 1.3 million families who were entitled to receive pension credit did not claim the benefit. That equates to about £3.5 billion of available pension credit going unclaimed. On average, that amounted to about £2,500 per year for each family, and in Wales in 2016-17 more than £170 million went unclaimed by some of the poorest older people in our part of the United Kingdom.

I have been an MP for only a few months, but before my election to this House I worked in the NHS for more than 30 years. It was clear to me then, as it is clear to me now in my new role as the Member for Newport West, that food poverty and fuel poverty are on the rise, and that there is a homelessness crisis. In this House, and in all four parts of the UK, we need to do more to assist those eligible to apply and we need to ensure that people know that they are eligible.

There is a communication issue here. We need to do more, go further and be clearer about the fact that pension credit is there to help those who need it. The Government’s welfare policies leave a lot to be desired. Frankly, the Government should be ashamed of much of the last nine years. However, for all that shame there is support and we should encourage our constituents to seek it. I will use my role as the Member for Newport West to champion the issue, and will continue to work with and support my hon. Friend to raise these issues.

I do not know whether the Minister has been notified, but I would like him to address two questions. First, the take-up of pension credit by couples continues to be lower than that of single people. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that the rate at which couples claim pension credit increases? Secondly, according to the Older People’s Commissioner for Wales, £1.7 billion of pension credit went unclaimed in 2016-17. What steps are the Government, alongside other Departments, taking to increase pension credit take-up rates in Wales?
Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) on an excellent introduction, in a comprehensive speech about a great injustice.

Recently, I visited the Alive and Kicking project in my constituency, which was a great organisation to discover. It was set up in the year I was born, so it is 30 years old. It has been an amazing charity—a stalwart in the Springburn area in helping to involve older people in the community in social activity when otherwise they might be isolated on the fringes of our communities.

Such organisations, the length and breadth of Britain, are the backbone of ensuring that social isolation and alienation are not a more common occurrence. We often underestimate the capacity of those organisations. Yet, sadly, they face significant financial pressures due to local government cuts. It is an onslaught on every front that many such organisations—the infrastructure that supports older people—face.

The people at the Alive and Kicking project were very hospitable. They gave me my lunch and we had a game of bingo. I had a great time with them, but we also had a Q and A session. There was so much anger from the older people about the TV licence being taken away. I could not believe the anguish that it was causing a lot of people—the feeling that they had done so much for their country over the years, working all the hours that God sends, as one lady said, to be greeted with that. She was recently widowed and the television is a critical part of her social existence. When she is not at the social club she is just alone at home and she communicates with the world through that television.

That is an insight into the hardship that the change is causing. It is not good enough to pass the buck to the BBC. We know the true reason why it has made the cutback; there is no point in trying to sugar-coat it. In my constituency, 1,400 people who currently qualify for the TV licence will be denied that opportunity. That adds extra impetus to the issue of pension credit underclaiming. We have to focus on the barriers to access, which have been referred to.

Many people spoke to me at the club about issues that they have had in accessing the benefits, their lack of awareness and even organisations’ lack of knowledge of how to assist users and maximise benefit claims. [Interruption.] Perhaps the Minister is confirming the details of how people claim those benefits. It is clear to me that the interface for normal people dealing with it has been deliberately designed to deny access.

We know for a fact, as a result of freedom of information action, that deflection scripts are practised for universal credit. There is an insidious ethos within the Department for Work and Pensions to deflect and deny access to rightful entitlements. That is utterly shameful and is a fact—an example was alluded to earlier. In my constituency, just 56% of those who are eligible to claim pension credit do so, according to the recent Independent Age study. That means that about 4,610 people claim it but 3,648 do not, leading to a cumulative total of £11 million a year that is unclaimed in my constituency.

That is not good enough. I am afraid, in a constituency that faces some of the worst social challenges in not just Scotland but the United Kingdom. It is a mark of shame on the DWP that the figure is as high as it is. There is a clear correlation between levels of social deprivation and the under-claiming of benefits that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. We currently have a regressive system, because the onus is on the individuals with the least capacity to claim the benefits. That must be fixed. The dice are loaded against them and it is not good enough.

That was just a simple insight into one example of when I went around my constituency and discovered the hardship that this issue is causing. I think that the people at the Alive and Kicking club would appreciate it were the Minister to commit to sending a DWP representative to visit the club, speak to the service users there and talk to them about how they can maximise their rightful entitlement. I think that that would be received very well. I look forward to the Minister committing to give at least that measure of reassurance to my constituents. The figures as they stand are shameful, and I hope that the Government will address them with due urgency.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) on an excellent speech. It is noticeable that the Celtic nations have dominated the debate so far, with one honourable exception in the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock). I have noticed something else in the debate, and we should show sympathy and solidarity with our Conservative colleagues, who are all nervously watching their telephones as the reshuffle begins. If social media is to be believed, we are looking at an episode of “Game of Thrones”—“The Red Wedding 2”—but we will see what happens in the next few hours.

As I said, the hon. Member for Ogmore made an excellent speech on access to pension credit and pressed home the statistics that he read out. The Independent Age charity informed me that there is an unclaimed £9,664,000 in the Glasgow South West constituency on a yearly basis. Frankly, that is an astonishing figure. It is outrageous that the Department for Work and Pensions is allowing billions in benefits to go unclaimed by poor pensioners. As the hon. Member for Ogmore said, four in 10 pensioner households that are entitled to pension credit are not receiving it. When we add that to the TV licence proposals, which I will come to, it looks very much like poorer pensioners are missing out on many aspects of state support that they should receive.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) and others have rightly invited DWP to try to sort out the situation, but some of us feel that, as Members of Parliament, we have to address it as well. I am organising a pension credit event for pensioner clubs and other organisations—bowling clubs, for example—during the summer recess, to show their members what they are entitled to and highlight that they will have friends and neighbours who are entitled to pension credit but are not receiving it.

We have other decisions on pension credit. The outrageous decision to cut pension credit for mixed-age couples could cost some couples £7,000 a year. It really is not good enough for the Government to say that a decision was made in 2012. There have been two general elections since then, and the make-up of Parliament is a
lot different. There really should have been parliamentary scrutiny before 15 May, when the Government decided to put that forward. It is unacceptable, and just another addition to the long list of policies that are hurting older people.

I want to touch briefly on TV licences, because I think a number of hon. Members have suggested, and I agree, that it could end up being a false economy for the Government—[Interruption.]—I am obviously getting agreement from outside, as I am being cheered. It is a false economy because what could end up happening is that we will have people claiming pension credit to try to keep their free TV licence, which will cost the DWP a lot more than if it had kept TV licences under its domain. There is also the issue of the 1950s-born women, many of whom were not properly informed of the changes. Some have been affected by the mixed-age couple rules, and some single 1950s-born women could be eligible for pension credit, but they will have to wait longer to claim it because of the increase in pension age.

I want to close by emphasising that any suggestion that austerity is over is absolutely farcical. The Government have continued to target austerity at the most disadvantaged. The changes they are making to pension credit, and the fact that they are not proactive in ensuring that poorer pensioners know they are entitled to it, emphasises the point very well indeed.

5.3 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. The people who built Britain are entitled to expect but the best in retirement. As my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) put it, they paid in throughout their lives in the expectation that they would be supported in the twilight of their years. The sense of grievance was brilliantly brought to life by the outstanding speech given by my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore). I pay tribute to him for securing this debate and for everything that he is doing.

Let us look at the history of pensioner poverty. In 1994-95, 28% of pensioners lived in poverty. That fell to 13% in 2011-12 as a consequence of action taken by a Labour Government: a fall achieved by offering extra help for poorer pensioners. However, that progress has been slammed into reverse, partly because of the chaos over pension credit, but also because of the changes to welfare policy. Pensioner poverty is now rising—back to 16% in 2017—suggesting that the previous progress has indeed been slammed into reverse. The sense of grievance about that was encapsulated by the excellent contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones).

Some 14 million people now live in poverty in the UK—over one in five of the population—and they include 1.9 million pensioners. Reference was made to the excellent work done by Independent Age. I pay tribute to that remarkable organisation, which found that a more than a million pensioner households across Great Britain are forced to live in poverty owing to the Government’s failure to act on pension credit—these are the pensioner households missing out, or PHoMoS. Since the last general election, that has meant that the Government have held on to a staggering £7 billion—£3.5 billion each year—in unclaimed pension credit that should have gone to pensioners, a figure that will increase to a staggering £17 billion by 2022, equating to £10 million every day.

That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) was absolutely right to point to the sense of anger at the situation. His is an organisation called Alive and Kicking and mine is called Elders with Attitude, but the message is the same. In fact, I have their T-shirt.

Getting pension credit is all the more important now because of what is happening with TV licences, about which I will say more later on. Forgive me if I stress once again that, as an initiative, pension credit was a landmark achievement of the last Labour Government. They cut pensioner poverty consistently, and at the heart of that achievement was the strategy relating to pension credit, but it has been slammed into reverse.

As hon. Members will know, the origin of pension credit was as an income-related benefit specifically designed to lift pensioners out of poverty. Introduced in 2003, it was created to ensure that all older people receive a minimum amount of income and has played a major role over the years in the reduction of pensioner poverty, until now. It is all the more important that pension credit is paid and that the people who deserve it get it.

On the one hand, there is a stereotype that all older people own their own homes, but, sadly, this is against a background of decreasing home ownership and rising rents in the private sector. Independent Age’s research shows that more than half a million older people in England now live in private rented accommodation, and that more than half of the 330,000 pensioners who have moved into poverty since 2013 are either private or social renters. Pension credit is all the more important for them.

On the other hand, pension credit is essential—for example, to pay for transport costs. Particularly in rural areas and for people with health or mobility issues, a car or taxi can be the only way to reach necessary services. Pension credit can also mean that older people are able to take part in social activities, reducing the risk of loneliness.

Pension credit is important for all those reasons and an additional one, which my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) mentioned: it is a gateway to accessing other benefits. People missing out on pension credit could also be losing out on up to £7,000 a year in additional help. Pension credit can act as a gateway to housing benefit up to £5,020, to council tax support up to £1,670, to the warm home discount at £140, and to NHS costs, including dental treatment or eye care, up to £296. So it is all the more important that people who are entitled to pension credit get it.

To add insult to injury, it was announced earlier this month that free TV licences for the over-75s will now be means-tested. Several hon. Members have referred to that, and rightly so. The Library’s research shows that more than 3 million people will be affected by that move. It is estimated that 1.3 million poorer over-75s are eligible for pension credit but do not claim it. They will lose their free TV licences due to the proposal to tie licences to pension credit.
It is also estimated that 1.6 million pensioners living alone will lose their free TV licences in a means-tested system. That is absolutely wrong. In my experience, television can indeed be a friend to a lonely pensioner. The Tories’ idea to increase take-up of pension credit is, as is often mentioned, an “online toolkit”, but the problem is that its track record of achievement is lamentable. Pension credit is an online toolkit, but that has shown drastically declining usage since 2014. More than half of over-75s in the UK say that they have not used the internet in the past three months, and the amount of people accessing the toolkit fell by 84% between 2014 and 2018, with only 2,078 people using it last year. The fact that more than 1 million households in the UK are not claiming the pension credit to which they are entitled shows that the Government’s efforts simply are not working. It was therefore right that my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore secured this debate to focus on that.

I will refer to one other outrage, to be frank: the changes to pension credit slipped through on the same night as the first Brexit meaningful vote: from 15 May, new pensioners whose partners are younger than the state retirement age of 65 may no longer claim a means-tested top-up called pension credit. Instead, they will be forced to claim the much less generous universal credit alongside their younger partner. The couple rate of universal credit is £114.81 a week, compared with £255.25 a week for a couple on pension credit. That amounts to a potential loss of £7,320 a year—another outrage.

The crucial question is what the Government will now do about that. I strongly support my hon. Friend’s recommendations on targets and his call to hear the Government’s action plan to right an undoubted wrong. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) said, the aims set out by Independent Age are eminently achievable over a five-year period, with targets being incrementally increased to get us to a position where 100% of those entitled to pension credit actually get it.

I will close with the point that I started with. We have a sacred duty to those who built this country. They endured so much not only in the world of work, but in conflict defending this country. The scale of the problems they had to overcome throughout their lives is sometimes unimaginable. They paid in throughout their lives. In retirement, they expected to be looked after for the rest of their years. It is absolutely wrong that pension credit is not working and, as a consequence, hundreds of thousands if not millions of pensioners are not getting that to which they are entitled. I say to the Government in all earnestness: Ministers should be ashamed of that.

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) on securing this important debate, which I accept addresses significant and real issues. I must also congratulate him on his marriage. He will agree with the Prime Minister—bear with me—when she made the point at Prime Minister’s Question Time today that those who choose to marry a Member of Parliament do so with great bravery. It is an honour and privilege to get married, but choosing to marry a Member of Parliament is a bold thing. I wish Mrs Elmore well, and I wish them both well for the future.

It is also a great privilege and pleasure to welcome the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) to this place. This was the first time I have heard her speak; she spoke most eloquently. I congratulate her on her win, and wish her good fortune and enjoyment of this great privilege to hold a position in this House, where she will hold Government to account and, possibly, in about 30 years, have a Labour Government—obviously under a new leader, as everyone in the House of Commons seemed to agree today.

Before I get into the nuts and bolts of the debate, I will make a point that is fair across the board and yet matters. It is entirely right for the hon. Member for Ogmore and the Opposition parties generally to hold Government to account, but it is also right that we all celebrate, support and talk glowingly about the various voluntary and charitable organisations that do such great work in all our communities.

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to the Minister for making that point. Does he agree that organisations such as the Gloucestershire Older Persons’ Association, which helps with everything from digital technology to benefits and so on, are precisely the ones that Government ought to be supporting to ensure that those who are entitled to pension credit or any other benefit get them? Supporting those charities is something that, respectfully, the Government could do.

Guy Opperman: I will not necessarily make fresh policy on Government support for charities—

Chris Elmore: Go on!

Guy Opperman: Much though I am urged to do so by the hon. Gentleman. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) asked if my phone was turned on, but it is most definitely turned off—with respect and due deference to the Chair—and it is not for me to make new tax or incentives policy.

A perfectly legitimate point, however, can be made in two ways in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and several other speakers. Voluntary organisations do a fantastic job of explaining to our older community—some of whom are digitally challenged and some fully up to speed online—the opportunities to claim and the things out there that the Government will provide, and that applies to any Government down the years. Basically, those organisations should have all our support, and anything that individual Members of Parliament, local authorities and local organisations can do to assist their efforts is entirely right. In my constituency, I have visited the Men’s Shed in Hexham and various support organisations, such as Age Concern in Corbridge. I fully accept that they do a fantastic job, as similar organisations do in Cheltenham and as does my hon. Friend. If we have the ability to use them more, I am happy to take any suggestions on board.

I accept that Government actions are criticised and I understand that it is for us to make our case, but I make a further point that the pension credit toolkit that we reissued in April, with two versions this year, provides...
copious advice not only to the individual who wishes to claim but to the voluntary organisations out there. I urge any voluntary organisations without access to the pension credit toolkit—which gives guidance, advice, assistance and recommendations of how to disseminate vital information to our constituents—to take it up, because it is of great importance.

All those things having been said, I want to make it clear that part of our case is that we would love pension credit take-up levels to be higher. The benefit is specifically intended to provide support to some of the poorest and most vulnerable pensioners in our community, and there is no question but that we are already committed to ensuring economic security for people at every stage of their life, especially when they reach retirement.

We are forecast to spend more than £120 billion on benefits for pensioners in 2019-20, which includes £99 billion on the state pension. As a result of the triple lock, from April 2019 the full yearly amount of the basic state pension is about £675 higher than if it had been uprated just by earnings since April 2010. That is a rise of more than £1,600 in cash terms.

In respect of pension credit, the value of the standard minimum guarantee this year is the equivalent of more than £1,800 per year higher in cash terms for single people, and more than £2,700 for couples, than it was in 2010. As a Government, we also spend £2 billion a year on winter fuel payments, which are payable to all pensioners, including those on pension credit.

The overall trend in the percentage of pensioners living in poverty has been a dramatic fall over recent decades. Rates of material deprivation for pensioners are at a record low. In fact, between 2009-10 and 2017-18, material deprivation for pensioners has fallen from 10% to 7%, and rates of relative pensioner poverty before housing costs have halved since 1990. We want to maintain that achievement. It is important that hon. Members understand that more than 1.6 million people already claim pension credit. That equates to £5.4 billion of claims. Indeed, as of November 2018, there were 2,450 pension credit claimants in the constituency of the hon. Member for Ogmore, and over 100,000 in the constituency of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) is married to a former Minister, now Mother of House, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who was in favour of the state pension age in the dim distant past in 1997, when she was Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Hon. Members will understand that I am the latest in a long line of Ministers who have continued the policy of successive Governments to increase the state pension age by reason of equality legislation and the increase in life expectancy, which is light years away from the three score years and ten of our grandparents.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) raised the issue of the BBC in the past. The Government look forward to hearing more from the BBC about its detailed plans for communicating and implementing that change. That is clearly a matter for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport; Government officials continue to engage with the BBC, but it would be wrong not to point out that in 2015, when the decision was made, the director-general at the time stated:

"I think we have a deal here which is a strong deal for the BBC. It gives us financial stability...The government's decision here to put the cost of the over-75s on us has been more than matched by the deal coming back for the BBC...I think being in control of our income...is a very grown-up response for the BBC and a grown-up response for any organisation".

The House can draw its own conclusions from what Lord Hall said in 2015 and the consequent decision that it has made. I hope that the BBC will think again once it has reflected on the comments that it made in 2015 and the nature of the pushback that there has been.

Jack Dromey: Is the Minister seriously suggesting that the Government bear no responsibility whatsoever for the BBC’s decision? Does that not sound like the Government are washing their hands of responsibility?
Guy Opperman: No; I was quoting what the BBC said about the fiscal settlement, which made it clear that it was a strong deal that gave the BBC financial stability, and that the decision to put the cost on the BBC had been
“more than matched by the deal coming back for the BBC”, which it then decided to take a differing approach to. Officials will continue to monitor the position.

I want to talk briefly about historical activity. Successive Governments have tried to promote pension credit, yet the take-up has remained stubbornly at around 60% for some considerable time. When pension credit was launched in 2003 there were higher figures, of up to 74%, but the Office for Budget Responsibility’s fiscal risk report from May 2008 stated that
“experience from 2003 to 2008, suggests that very large increases in take-up are unlikely”.

The Department for Work and Pensions under the Labour Government commissioned and examined that report. Successive Governments have put forward a variety of innovative approaches, but research in 2010 indicated that the most common reason given by those identified as eligible, for not claiming pension credit was that they believed they would not be entitled, typically because they had savings or other sources of income.

Patricia Gibson rose—

Guy Opperman: I will not give way because I only have a minute before the hon. Member for Ogmore will make his closing remarks. There are other reasons, and I urge hon. Members to publicise pension credit. I urge the voluntary organisations, which are the most trusted organisations in a community, to support the processes. We use a variety of channels to communicate information about benefits, whether pension credit or other benefits. People can check whether they are likely to be entitled using the online calculator on gov.uk, or they can make a claim by calling a freephone number.

We engage with people who may be eligible for benefits at pivotal stages, such as when they are approaching state pension age. An accompanying leaflet contains information about pension credit and advice on how to check eligibility, and a freephone telephone number if they wish to discuss their pension credit entitlement. We also target those who report a change of circumstances. We know that the best way to reach eligible customers is through trusted stakeholder organisations, which may be best placed to understand the local circumstances and needs in their communities. That is why I strongly recommend the online toolkit for the agencies and individuals, but I welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter.

The Government are committed to increasing the number if at all possible. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the debate, and I wish him very well in his future married life.

5.28 pm

Chris Elmore: I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate today. There seems to be a bit of a Celtic theme coming from across the Scottish and Welsh nations, but I also thank all those colleagues from across the House who represent seats in England.

I thank the Minister for his response—it would be churlish of me not to—but it is disappointing, because there is a real need not just to rely on the voluntary sector to increase the use of pension credit.

Guy Opperman indicated assent.

Chris Elmore: I can see the Minister nodding, and I am sure he would acknowledge that. The reality is that pensioner poverty is increasing. The Government need to do more, not only in advertising; they need a constructive way, through other DWP benefits such as housing benefit, which I mentioned, to try to increase the uptake. They should be talking to Independent Age about how the Government can finally start to increase the access to pension credit.

I do not think it is just a case of the Minister’s saying that he wants to do this; the next Minister or the next Secretary of State, whoever they may be in the rolling hours, needs to take this on as a real task, to ensure that pensioners get the benefits that they are entitled to. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) said, those pensioners built this country; they deserve our support and it is crucial that they get the benefits they are entitled to. I am grateful to everyone who made a contribution, and to the Minister and various hon. Members for their congratulations on my recent marriage on Saturday. I can confirm that my wife is a good advocate for marrying an MP; she ensures that I behave myself and everything else.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
The legislation came into force when I was just four years old, and I had already realised by that point that my life was very different from that of other children. My parents had four children together between 1976 and 1980, but mum then developed schizophrenia—a mental illness that causes muddled thinking or delusional thoughts, and changes in behaviour. The causes of schizophrenia are still very much unknown, but even less was known about the condition in the early ‘80s and treatment was rudimentary to say the least. But because of mum’s condition, talking about mental illness has been part of my life for as long as I can remember. That has been the case throughout my family because of our circumstances. It has shaped my life.

Some of my earliest memories are not necessarily the easiest to talk about, but this is one of the earliest memories I have. After mum’s mental health broke down, my parents split up. We stayed with mum initially. She was unable to care for us properly. With the best of intentions, on a cold day when she could not work the heating, she lit a fire in our living room. That fire caused huge damage. The scars from the fire stayed with us literally—physically—because we could not afford to make the necessary changes for some time after that.

Mum kept me out of school, convinced that I was ill; there was no illness. For many years, I was convinced that I had been kept in an incubator after being born, because mum convinced me that I had had lung problems at birth. I found out later that that was not true.

Dad eventually got custody, and the four of us grew up with dad, but on visits to mum, she would be unsupported and unwell. I remember staying over and her giving me a bowl of cereal with what I thought was orange juice on it—the milk was so off that it was orange. But mum had thought that that was sensible; she was just trying to feed us. She did not know, because she was so unwell.

Mum had another son; I have a half-brother called Sebastian. She was unable to look after him because she had also been kept in an incubator after being born, and she had another son, half-brother. She was unable to care for us properly. With the best of intentions, on a cold day when she could not work the heating, she lit a fire in our living room. That fire caused huge damage. The scars from the fire stayed with us literally—physically—because we could not afford to make the necessary changes for some time after that.

Mum kept me out of school, convinced that I was ill; there was no illness. For many years, I was convinced that I had been kept in an incubator after being born, because mum convinced me that I had had lung problems at birth. I found out later that that was not true.

Dad eventually got custody, and the four of us grew up with dad, but on visits to mum, she would be unsupported and unwell. I remember staying over and her giving me a bowl of cereal with what I thought was orange juice on it—the milk was so off that it was orange. But mum had thought that that was sensible; she was just trying to feed us. She did not know, because she was so unwell.

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Mental Health Act does need to be reviewed, particularly because of—this is the point that he has been making—the impact it has on the immediate family. How can we go forward such that the wishes of the person who is being detained are taken into account and the family’s wishes are taken into account, in a way that provides protection for the vulnerable but also recognises people’s particular needs and choices?

Neil Coyle: That is very much what I will be coming on to and what I hope we will hear more from the Minister on; it was the subject of an independent review.

I was talking about the prevalence of mental health conditions in Southwark and people I have seen at constituency surgeries. These statistics for Southwark are from the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust, which is my local mental health trust. Close to 4,000 people have what it defines as a serious mental illness; that does not include things such as dementia. Almost 48,000 people are currently experiencing a common mental health condition. Across the borough, 22,000 people have both a mental health condition and a long-term physical condition. And almost 4,000 children in Southwark have a mental health condition.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for making a speech that is very powerful and very personal. The number of mental health nurses in England has fallen by 6,000 in the past 10 years. Does he agree that we need the correct number of staff, and staff with the correct expertise, to meet the needs of the service in supporting people with mental health issues?

Neil Coyle: I absolutely agree and will come on to some of those figures.

I referred to the children in Southwark who have mental health conditions. The NHS’s overall target for ensuring that children and adolescents can access mental health treatment is just 35%. That is remarkably low, and I hope the Minister will have something to say about it today. In the meantime, while that is the national standard, Southwark’s Labour council has set an ambition to ensure that 100% of children and adolescents can access mental health care. As part of that commitment, the council has made £2 million available for local schools to support the emotional wellbeing and mental health of pupils. It is also developing a mental health hub service for young people. That is in partnership with—jointly funded by—the local clinical commissioning group.

As I have said, I think that my personal experience has given me an additional strength in working with local people and families who are affected by these issues, but being open about my family experience does not mean that I have not seen discrimination or stigma at first hand. I was about 10 or 11 when I said to a friend at school that Mum had schizophrenia and he asked whether that meant I had two mums. That was a surprising reply, but obviously there was a lot of confusion then about what schizophrenia actually was. Some of it is still out there.

Sadly, one thing that remains is the perception that people with schizophrenia are somehow more dangerous. Actually, mum’s experience and that of many people with schizophrenia is that they are more likely to be targeted, because their erratic behaviour when they are unwell can draw the attention of others, who might target them for robbery and other offences.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for the way in which he is opening the debate and particularly for his comments on schizophrenia. If they have the right support, there is no reason why anyone with schizophrenia should not live a normal life, including being able to work.

Neil Coyle: I completely agree. Sadly, the figure for people with schizophrenia in work remains at about 5%. It is just 5%, because the support simply is not there and the medication and treatment are not there on a routine basis to ensure that they are able to work.

Figures suggest that one in four of us will experience mental ill health at some point in life, often because of bereavement or a relationship breakdown. I pay tribute to all the organisations involved in the Time To Change campaign, which has done brilliant work to challenge the stigma and discrimination that affect people with mental health conditions in employment and elsewhere.

The change in language and awareness of conditions is one reason to seek reform now. For example, the Mental Health Act 1983 is defined as:

“Act to consolidate the law relating to mentally disordered persons.”

The language around mental health has changed much since the current law was enacted. We also need to consider its far reaching powers.

The independent review of the Mental Health Act, published seven months ago concluded:

“The Mental Health Act gives the state what are amongst the most significant powers that it has; the power to take away someone’s liberty without the commission of a criminal offence and the power to treat that person even in the face of their refusal. Because of that, we think that is important that the purpose of the powers is clear, as should be the basis on which they should be used.”

It is hard to disagree with that conclusion, especially given the number of people who are affected by those extensive powers.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate, and on his personal and emotional contribution—I believe that adds everything. People living with dementia also fall under the Mental Health Act. There are concerns around section 117 and the right for aftercare support once someone is detained under the Mental Health Act, particularly those living with dementia. Does my hon. Friend share my concerns on that?

Neil Coyle: Certainly, there is insufficient support for a whole range of people. We have sadly seen a roll-back of support, independence of choice and control in a number of areas, including social care support, health services and direct benefits for some disabled people, particularly in the past nine years.

The extensive powers, which I described, were used to detain 50,000 people last year—a 47% increase in the past decade. The only other people detained in this country are those in criminal custody. Those citizens have safeguards to protect them from going to jail, but we do not have the same safe standards of support and safeguards for mental health care. Those who commit a criminal offence have a police investigation, the CPS...
We can turn this situation around. The independent review of the Mental Health Act, chaired by Professor Sir Simon Wessely, recommended that four principles be written into a revised Act. First, it recommended that choice and autonomy, even for someone detained under the Act, must be respected, enabled and enhanced wherever possible. Secondly, it recommended that the compulsory powers contained within the Act should be exercised in the least restrictive way possible. Thirdly, it recommended that services and treatments should be of therapeutic benefit and delivered with a view to minimising the need for Mental Health Act powers to be used. Fourthly, it recommended that the individual must be respected, and that care and treatment must be provided in a manner that treats them accordingly.

I seek the Minister’s views on those principles being incorporated in forthcoming plans. If those four principles had existed when my mum was detained—she has been sectioned more times in my lifetime than I can remember—I would have had more reassurance that her needs, rights and wishes would have been the starting point for the care and treatment she received. Sadly, that was not the case.

This is the first debate to be held on the Mental Health Act since that review was published, which is astonishing, given the level of use of the powers in the Act and the level of support for reform. The review made 154 recommendations. The Government accepted two immediately and agreed to publish a White Paper by the end of this year to bring forward full legislation. I welcome that; there is no one who does not want to see that. However, given the paralysis caused by Brexit, and the new Prime Minister and Cabinet, can the Minister confirm that that timetable has not slipped?

**Janet Daby:** Does my hon. Friend agree that a new mental health Act must prioritise children and young people? The statistics relating to young people are cause for concern.

**Neil Coyle:** It certainly should, but we should not have to wait for new legislation—some measures can be taken before that. Given that the White Paper is due by the end of the year, legislation many not come soon enough to help some of those young people who are experiencing problems now.

I hope the Minister will indicate that the Government’s rhetoric on parity of care will be matched by action on preventing the need for detention. Sadly, all the evidence points in the other direction. Parity of care—the requirement to treat mental and physical health equally—was enshrined in law in 2012 and became part of the NHS constitution in 2015. Although mental health accounts for 28% of the overall disease burden, as the NHS terms it, it received just 13% of NHS funding, according to the Centre for Mental Health. In cash terms, the King’s Fund has shown that between 2012 and 2017, funding for acute and specialist hospitals grew by almost 17%, while that for mental health trusts grew by just over 5.5%.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists has found that, taking into account inflation, the real-terms income of mental health trusts across the UK has fallen since 2011. It says that 62% of mental health trusts in England reported a lower income at the end of 2016-17 than in 2011-12. Sadly, only one trust experienced a rise in funding in all five financial years. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has also reported that mental health trusts received £105 million less in 2016-17 than in 2011-12, at today’s prices. There is no parity of funding, even though the Government are legally committed to it.

The 40% rise in detention over the past decade has come at the same time as a loss of overnight beds—between 2010 and 2017, the figure went down from more than 25,000 to less than 20,000—and a 15% decrease in the number of mental health nursing posts. Demand is rising as a result of detentions, but the number of staff has diminished and there is also less space available. The Care Quality Commission, which regulates mental health services, has reported that previously preventable admissions are now not being prevented because of cuts to less restrictive alternatives, such as community mental health services. There has also been an increase in the number of people with at-risk factors when it comes to detention, such as social exclusion and untreated drug or alcohol misuse.

Clearly, it is not in someone’s best interest to be detained if that is avoidable. A breakdown of mental health and behaviour can be deeply damaging for individuals, and their families and loved ones, but detention is extremely costly, especially compared with drug and alcohol treatment services or other interventions and support in the community. The average cost of each detention is estimated to be just over £18,000. The 50,000 detentions over the past year cost an estimated £900 million. That money could have gone so much further in earlier interventions to prevent detention.

Of course, there are also costs to how people are identified or present themselves in crises that result in detention. Sometimes they are homeless. I know the Minister has done a lot of work on that. We have met on several occasions and I know that she views homelessness as a public health issue—an issue that overlaps with the topic of this debate. Homelessness as a result of mental ill health increases physical health issues, which result in costs to the NHS.

Sometimes people in crisis are identified by the police. The last time my mum was sectioned—I think it was in 2016—she had had a car accident in which she hit a bollard. No one was injured, but she was prosecuted for the accident. My family and I—including my sister Alex, who I know is watching—had sought help for mum. We knew that she was becoming unwell and that she was not taking her medication, and we tried in advance to alert people to her need for support and to get her back on track, but that did not happen. She had agreed to plead guilty when the case went to court—she was guilty; she hit the bollard and no one else was responsible—but when she was asked how she would plead, she said that she could not be guilty because she had been wearing blue that day. Of course, that made no sense to anyone. I was very grateful for the help and resulted in the ordering of a psychiatric assessment, which was a pathway back into mental health care.

That was not necessary. Police and court involvement caused unnecessary cost to the taxpayer. If earlier interventions had occurred at the request of family members, that could have been avoided. I ask those hon. Members who have not been out with their local police and emergency responders to please do so. The
last time I did it in Southwark, the police responded to a surprising number of 999 calls that involved someone with a mental health condition. That is not just anecdotal evidence; it is backed up by national statistics.

Troublingly, police statistics show an increased use of section 136 of the Act. That power is used by the police exclusively to remove “mentally disordered persons without a warrant.” Between 2015-16 and 2017-18, the use of that power in Southwark doubled, from 60 detentions to 121. That number fell slightly last year, but the shocking overall rise shows the price of underfunded mental health services, with the police often picking up the pieces in situations that should be handled by healthcare specialists and community interventions. Of course there will be some who are unknown to services, but most are not, and there are some who present with issues relating to suicide. Tackling the majority of cases upstream should be the target. I hope the Minister will state how that will be done through a White Paper or new legislation.

I welcome the previous Prime Minister’s commitment to end the use of police cells to detain people who are experiencing mental ill health. I hope that that commitment will continue under the new Government, because a police cell is no place for someone who is experiencing a mental health crisis. Although there has been a 95% fall in the use of cells and custody facilities since 2011, in the latest figures from 2016-17 they still accounted for almost 4% of detentions. I hope that the Minister will set out when the Government expect the number of people going through the system to be zero.

The point that I am trying to ram home is that overreliance on sectioning and detention can be bad for the individual and their families, but also for the taxpayer. We can do better than that. It is not just a matter of the loss of liberty: the Care Quality Commission has also sounded the alarm over risks for people when they are detained, including compulsory treatment and sexual assault. It reports that almost one fifth of patient records—double the proportion in the previous year’s study—“showed no evidence of consideration of the least restrictive options for care.”

It also stated:

“We have seen limited or no improvement in the key concerns we have raised in previous years.”

That is the regulator saying, “Not only have we identified the problem this year, but we told you about it in previous years, and still no improvement has been made.” Its evidence shows that 1,120 sexual safety reports were made in a three-month period in 2017, of which 457 were about sexual assault or harassment of patients or staff. Some of our most vulnerable citizens are at risk of sexual assault while they are detained under the state’s powers. That is an absolutely appalling record in any civilised society.

These problems all undermine mental health treatment and use of the Act and make it no surprise that research commissioned by the Mental Health Alliance shows that individual experiences of being detained under the Act are far from positive. It surveyed more than 8,000 people, and the majority of respondents who had been detained did not believe that the Mental Health Act sufficiently protected them from inhuman or degrading treatment. Some 61% of respondents who had been detained disagreed with the statement, “People are currently treated with dignity when detained”, as did 41% of mental health professionals. The unity behind the case for reform and true parity of care could not be clearer. I hope that the Minister will cover those issues and confirm more of what the Government aim to put in their Bill when it appears, including human rights provisions.

At the Disability Rights Commission in 2004-05, I helped to bring organisations of and for disabled people together behind the principles that were then put in the Mental Health Act 2005:

“A person must be assumed to have capacity unless it is established that he lacks capacity.

A person is not to be treated as unable to make a decision unless all practicable steps to help him to do so have been taken without success.

A person is not to be treated as unable to make a decision merely because he makes an unwise decision is made.”

Our right to make bad decisions is enshrined in legislation. I apologise to any smokers present, but they make a bad choice every time they light a cigarette, and arguably the Conservative party has chosen badly in selecting the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). The fourth and fifth principles are:

“An act done, or decision made, under this Act for or on behalf of a person who lacks capacity must be done, or made, in his best interests.

Before the act is done, or the decision is made, regard must be had to whether the purpose for which it is needed can be as effectively achieved in a way that is less restrictive of the person’s rights and freedom of action.”

We have precedent in legislation, and we need to support that approach again in reforming the Mental Health Act, with a resolute belief in patient-centred care, with as much choice, control and dignity as is humanly possible.

People’s experiences of being detained vary wildly. It cannot be right that some people are treated worse simply because the place where they become unwell does not have access to the right level of support. We need more standardised access to care, and more standardised care when it has to be provided. I recognise that detention cannot always be avoided, and that it has welcome results when people come out better than when they went in, but even when it is necessary, it must be done better—and there are ways to do that.

Advance decisions were one of the review’s two recommendations that the Government accepted. It is crucial that patients be involved in planning their care as much as possible. The Care Quality Commission’s research shows that under the current legislation, a staggering one in five patients detained have no input whatever in their care plans. It examined the plans in place for those patients and found that most of them were of poor quality, lacked planning and had no evidence of patients’ consent to treatment when they were admitted to hospital. Introducing advance choice documents so that people can set out their wishes about future care and treatment, and giving them more legal weight than they have under the current system, would help to solve that problem and improve care for thousands of people.

I will give a quick practical example for anyone who needs it. Medication for schizophrenia has improved dramatically. Some of the medication that mum used to take would cause regular, sustained vomiting, which caused teeth loss and worse. Different treatments are...
available. If she were sectioned and put back on that medication, knowing the side effects, it would obviously make the treatment worse for her. I hope that the Minister will give a strong indication about the Government’s plans for advance decisions and the ability to make choices that can improve the treatments available.

When a person is detained under the Act, they have a “nearest relative” who has certain rights to be involved in their care. Many family members and patients value the fact that relatives are given a statutory role, but that relative is chosen from an outdated hierarchal list that is based on age, rather than on the views of the individuals involved or on whether they have a good relationship. The Government accepted that recommendation from the review. I hope that the Minister will have more to say about that today—[Interruption]—and less about stopping Brexit, which is the chant outside that may have been caught on the microphones.

Those who are detained under the Act have effectively no legal say over their treatment and no automatic right to advocacy in the event of their detention. The fact that such rights are not enshrined in the legislation illustrate that reform is badly needed. Establishing a right to an advocate for all mental health in-patients, whether voluntary or detained, without having to ask for one, would also radically improve care, as would the statutory inclusion of a patient’s advance wishes in their treatment plan. I hope that the Minister will give an indication on that matter today as well.

I will cut down the bit of my speech about resources, because they have already been mentioned and I know that other hon. Members wish to contribute. However, cuts have had serious implications, including for the distances that people, including children, have to travel for treatment: they are often taken hundreds of miles away from their friends, family and community. That cannot be acceptable. Wider cuts to council budgets and the public health agenda have also had an impact, and my constituency has experienced the knock-on effects. We lost an organisation called CoolTan Arts, which used to provide creative and employment support for many disadvantaged people with mental health conditions.

My very real fear is that the bad old days have crept back. For too long, Ministers have ignored the problems. There have been cuts to services, and we are seeing more ill-trained or morale-sapped staff; an overuse of agency crews; rising use of detention, which locks the problem away out of sight; and compulsion rather than empowerment. That must change. The new Prime Minister must listen to what is said in this debate; I hope he will. The White Paper that has been promised must be delivered and must reflect the spirit and ambition of the independent review.

New legislation must also be passed to update the Act. It is not just about getting a better piece of legislation; more importantly, it is about better treatment for the thousands of people with mental health conditions and their families up and down the country. There is cross-party support for this work: 49 colleagues have signed early-day motion 1242, which “calls on the Government to reform the Mental Health Act...during this Parliament”.

There is appetite in the Commons for that reform, so I hope it will be delivered.

We have a window of opportunity to improve thousands of people’s lives. I hope that the Minister and the new Cabinet and Government will take it.

1.58 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thank you, Ms Buck, for calling me so early in this debate. I am sure that I speak for everybody who listened to the remarkable speech of the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) when I say that it was a privilege to do so. We should all be immensely grateful to him for illustrating the important policy points that he had to make by means of his agonising experiences in his immediate family in his very early years. We all thank him for it.

Given how many hon. Members wish to contribute, I will speak very briefly. I note that the hon. Gentleman’s speech was briefly interrupted by some shouting outside the Chamber to do with Brexit: it seems to be a common theme that mental health debates tend to happen at times when they are overshadowed by other issues. For example, when I became a Member of this House in 1997, I came second in the private Member’s Bill ballot. I chose to introduce the Mental Health (Amendment) Bill, which was designed to achieve improvements for people who suffered catastrophic breakdowns such that they needed to be admitted to acute mental health units.

At that time, the person who came first in the ballot chose to address a subject of massive national importance, namely the banning of hunting with hounds, and I could not help but notice the contrast between the packed main Chamber on the Friday that was considering the welfare of foxes and the rather more thinly occupied main Chamber a week later, as was customary, when we were trying to consider the welfare of human beings. It was ever thus.

The points at issue then are, to some extent, still points at issue now. They have already been touched upon, at least in part, in the excellent opening speech that we have all heard. My particular concern was the need for there to be separate therapeutic environments for people who had to be admitted to acute units who suffered from very different types of mental illness. In other words, the idea that somebody suffering from acute depression should be cheek-by-jowl with somebody suffering regular psychotic outbursts was obviously a recipe to make a very serious situation even worse.

While I was doing the research for that debate, it was drawn to my attention by staff at acute units that their particular nightmare was the thought of what would happen if there was inadequate staffing coupled with mixed-sex wards. I was really rather shocked and shaken today to hear the statistics cited by the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark about the level of danger of sexual assault among in-patients, because for quite a number of years I and various other colleagues waged a campaign to abolish mixed-sex wards in mental health in-patient facilities. At first there was talk of separate bays, if I recall correctly, which by no means would help but notice the contrast between the packed main Chamber to do with Brexit; it seems to be a common theme that mental health debates tend to happen at times when they are overshadowed by other issues.

And successive Governments kept saying that they would ha have answered the necessities of the problem. And successive Governments kept saying that they would do it, and even that they had done it, so it is particularly disturbing to hear about the level of concern that still exists about this issue.

The question of inadequate numbers of beds has already been touched upon by the hon. Gentleman. It has to be said that, for once, this is not the responsibility or fault of Government, because after the closure of so many of the large asylums, the pendulum—in my opinion, and I am not an expert; I have to say that I am not a medical doctor—swung too far the opposite way.
I remember, in the New Forest area, having to fight a bitter campaign—which ultimately failed—to prevent a 35% reduction in in-patient beds in acute units. If I remember correctly, two of five units were closed. We were prepared to compromise and say, “Close one of the two units. Close 16 of the beds, rather than 32, and see how you get on,” but the authorities would not listen and they forced the closures through. It was the Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust, which later became notorious in the mental health sphere for other reasons, that forced through the closure of all these beds, and the system has been rammed and overflowing, and under excessive pressure, ever since.

There was another knock-on effect of the swinging of the pendulum too far back from the correct policy of closing the larger asylums, and that was that, by having fewer permanent facilities, we lost the ability to have what was technically—or maybe not very technically—known as the “revolving door”. This was the idea that, yes, if we could get more people back in society, so that they could make their own way and live their lives freely and without having to be in-patients, the very existence of a network of permanent establishments—albeit for other purposes—meant that there were always plenty of opportunities, so that if somebody felt that a trough was coming they could seek help easily for, as it were, almost a top-up of treatment, just for a few days. That would then set them back on track and it meant that they would not suffer—

Neil Coyle indicated assent.

Dr Lewis: I am delighted to see the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark indicating his agreement. It meant that they would not then suffer a much worse breakdown, which would have meant that they would have to be incarcerated, for want of a better word, for a much longer period.

Debbie Abrahams: To prevent people, including people living with dementia, from having to be admitted to hospital, there needs to be community support and after-care support once people are discharged, to ensure that they can be kept as healthy and independent as possible in the community for as long as possible.

Dr Lewis: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, as long as we recognise that what is needed is a range of facilities. Even the most ardent advocate of doing away with in-patient beds would, if pressed, admit that there will always be some people who at some point absolutely need to have some in-patient treatment.

If there are some people who need to go in for a considerable period of time, and hopefully there are a lot more people who do not need to be admitted to acute units at all, it follows almost logically that there will be some people who are on the borderline between the two, who can get by in society with a degree of self-awareness—either their own or that of their immediate family—and that when the warning signs appear, provided there is that network of specialist care with beds for very short-term stays, they can receive whatever I call a “top-up”, or, if we were talking about servicing a vehicle, something that will prevent a much greater collapse from happening later, with all the consequent horrors.

The question of what happens when people are admitted to acute units arose on a second occasion. I mentioned the first occasion, when I tried to introduce my private Member’s Bill in December 1997 and it was overshadowed by foxhunting. On a second occasion—on 9 December 2010, to be precise—I had secured an Adjournment debate on what happens about the information that is given to someone’s nearest and dearest when an adult is sectioned and goes into an acute unit. That occasion was on the day of the key debate about the trebling of student tuition fees, so once again we found mental health being somewhat upstaged by other matters that were of national importance. However, that is no reason not to persist or not to continue to try and emphasise to Ministers how these issues will never go away until they are finally tackled.

On that occasion in December 2010, I raised the case of the daughter of my constituents, Mr and Mrs Edgell. Sadly, their daughter—who was called Larissa but known as Lara—had taken her own life in 2006. For two years prior to that, the medical authorities had refused to share information about her with her parents; because she was an adult in her thirties, they refused to share vital information about her suicidal thoughts with her parents, on the grounds of patient confidentiality.

It subsequently turned out that there were very good guidelines that said that such information should be shared. So, I wrote to the then Minister with responsibility for care services, the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis), saying that there was clearly a breakdown in the system if adequate rules existed but were not being put into practice locally. The rather unsatisfactory answer that I received at the time was that the responsibility lay with the local medical authorities to ensure that the central guidelines were implemented.

As I say, that was at the end of 2010, so it was a long time ago. I wonder whether the Minister will be able to reassure me that there is now more central direction. In the case of Lara and her parents there was inadequate sharing of vital information, under the mistaken belief that patient confidentiality trumped the fact that an adult patient was incapable of making her own decision. I would like to know whether that situation has been rectified, or whether we are still dependent on local medical institutions and authorities to apply a central guideline that ought to be better known.

This week, I received a letter from Lara’s mother, who asked me to attend this debate. I can do no better than to read from what she says, not so much about what happened to her daughter but about the continued interest that she has in the workings of the mental health services. She says that she would like to make her own recommendations; given what happened so tragically in her immediate family, we owe it to her to give serious consideration to those recommendations, which are as follows:

1. The 1983 Act should be revised to prioritise the dignity of individuals who come to be in the Service’s orbit.
2. Such individuals should have their values and world views respected and have a significant say in the manner of their treatment.
3. They should have the option to refuse certain treatments.
4. Mental hospitals must be places where patients feel safe: there have been numerous allegations of staff members being abusive, provocative and/or intimidating.
5. Use of force should be absolutely minimised. This includes physical restraint, seclusion, or forced medication.

6. A reduction in ‘sectioning’.

7. A reduction in stigma”— and finally:

“8. All aspects of the Mental Health Service should be more open, and subject to independent scrutiny from time to time.”

I will conclude by making one left-field observation relating to the armed forces. The Select Committee on Defence, which I have the honour of chairing, has been recommending for some time that we establish a centre of excellence for the mental injuries suffered by those who put their life on the line to defend this country, preferably alongside the national centre for physical rehabilitation at Stanford Hall. We have now raised this issue twice with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, who has given us a reasonably encouraging response. However, once again, we feel that he is coming up against resistance because of the philosophy that people must be treated locally when at all possible, not admitted as in-patients in centralised locations. That is causing a pushback against our idea.

Our idea is based on the fact that those who suffer injury in combat situations have experienced a peculiar and unique form of trauma, different from those that ordinary mental health professionals can be expected to understand. I am sure that my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) will want to expand on that topic, if he is lucky enough to catch the Chair’s eye. We believe that there is a case for a national centre of excellence, and that the welfare of members of our armed services who suffer mental injury should be no less important to us than the welfare of those who suffer other, physical forms of injury in the cause of defending our freedom.

2.14 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): As always, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Buck. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on an incredibly powerful speech that was very detailed and knowledgeable about this issue. Obviously, my hon. Friend was speaking from personal experience, which was very brave of him.

It is clear from the findings of the independent review of the Mental Health Act, published last year, that the current legislation needs significant reform. There has been a 47% increase in detentions under the Act over the past decade, while the proportion of people living with a serious mental illness remains relatively unchanged, so clearly there is some imbalance there; it cannot be right that the number of detentions is going up. I echo the points that have been made about the link between this issue and the cuts to, and failings of, other services in the community that might be able to help at an earlier stage. Perhaps that is one reason why people are ending up in the most serious of circumstances; that is, being detained.

Being detained in a secure mental health unit is obviously going to be an intimidating and frightening experience for anyone. However, it is particularly intimidating for people with learning disabilities and autism, especially young people with those conditions, so I will focus on those groups in my speech. I raised this issue at Health questions on Tuesday, and the Minister—not the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), but another Minister from the Department of Health and Social Care—gave a very thoughtful response.

One of the things that the Minister said was that learning disabilities, autism or other special needs are often not diagnosed until a child is detained in a mental health unit, which again shows the failings. Child and adolescent mental health services are incredibly under-resourced, and schools are really stretched when it comes to education, health and care plans and working with children who show signs of mental health problems. It is so important that we put proper resources in, so that we can give those children the help they need as early as possible. I am sure that the Minister responding to today’s debate, the hon. Member for Thurrock, agrees with that.

Under the Act, people with learning disabilities and autism can be sectioned with no mental health diagnosis if they are displaying challenging behaviour. The independent review found that the Mental Health Act was “being used inappropriately for people with a learning disability, autism or both, to deal with a crisis that has arisen because of a lack of good community care or placements...It is particularly intimidating for a person with autism, learning disability or both to be removed from a place they are familiar with or from people they know, even if at the time there seemed little alternative...Instead of improving their mental health, the environment (including relationships with staff) has made them worse, not better.”

One of the common characteristics of autism, for example, is being wedded to routine, and being uncomfortable with unfamiliar circumstances and stimuli that those people would perhaps not get in a more protective environment. That can be particularly challenging.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission echoes such concerns, stating:

“The Commission is concerned about the lack of suitable provision for people with learning disabilities and autism, who may be in restrictive institutional settings because there is insufficient community-based support. The Government failed to meet its minimum target to reduce the number of people with learning disabilities and autism detained in inpatient settings, and at the end of March 2019 there were still 2,260 children and adults living in these institutions. On average, they had spent almost 5 and a half years detained away from home. There were more than 2,600 restrictive interventions recorded against inpatients with learning disabilities and autism in a single month, including physical, chemical and mechanical restraint, seclusion and segregation. Of these, 875 interventions were used against children.”

Most of those people should never have had to go into an in-patient unit, let alone be subject to those types of restrictive intervention. They are ending up in such units because of challenging behaviour due to unmet needs in the community. Those needs, as I have said, should be met with vital investment in community mental health services.

From my experience of people who have come to my surgeries, other casework that we have been dealing with and what I have picked up from visiting institutions, it seems that mental health services suit certain people because of the pathways developed in the NHS, but others do not fit into that category. For example, a child with learning disabilities was rejected for anxiety counselling, and they were later diagnosed with autism. To do the standard CAMHS anxiety counselling, someone has to have a certain ability to rationalise their actions and think about how they operate. That cognitive behavioural therapy-type approach was not suitable for that child, but that meant that nothing was available, because that was the pathway for young girls suffering from anxiety.
I had another case where a constituent was told that she was too traumatised by a recent experience to go through the counselling on offer through her GP. She clearly was not in a serious enough condition to be sectioned, however, so it seemed like she was caught between two things. She clearly needed help, but she was deemed to be too serious a case to get the help that was available. We need to look at the people, rather than just trying to fit them into categories and, when they do not fit into categories, rejecting them from the system, almost as though we are saying, "Come back when you are a lot worse, and then perhaps there is something we can do for you." That has to be the wrong approach.

Going back to children in particular, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has expressed specific concerns about the adequacy of therapeutic community-based services for children. Because of that lack of community provision, children are being detained when they should not be. According to NHS Digital, at least 1,777 people aged 17 or under were detained under the Mental Health Act in 2017-18. Of those, more than a thousand were admitted to a non-local bed, in many cases more than 100 miles from home. Some children and young people under care of Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire CCG had to travel up to 243 miles away from home for mental health care. That cannot be in the child’s best interests and will add to the sense of isolation and anxiety, and it can also prevent their families from being properly involved in their care.

A recent Children Commissioner’s report found that many parents feel they are being shut out of decisions about their children’s care and are not always informed about incidents involving their children. Serious incidents had happened in hospital without families even being told. Some families had even faced gagging orders where they had been prevented from speaking out about their children's care. The independent review calls for better safeguards to protect children and young people, ensuring that they are treated in hospital only when necessary and that their rights as a child are clearly set out. There is a need to establish clear tests as to whether children and young people are able to consent to hospital admission or treatment and whether they should be involved in decisions made about them. Clear roles need to be established for parents in care planning and treatment.

The review also states that there needs to be more advocacy available for children and young people. That is particularly important where conflicts arise between the clinical team about how to meet the best interests of the young person, including where contact between young people and their parents is seriously restricted—in some cases, the mental health crisis might be the result of chaotic family circumstances at home or ill treatment—or where the wishes of the young person conflict with the wishes of the adult.

Every in-patient child or young person should have a personalised care plan that includes their views and wishes and access to an advocate. They should be regarded as a child in need under the Children Act 1989 so that parents can ask for help from their local authority.

As the British Medical Association lead for mental health, Dr Andrew Molodynski has said: "Warehousing unwell people in locked wards far from home goes against the very nature of mental health rehab—to help them reintegrate back into society.

Unnecessary detention of vulnerable patients is not only unhelpful in terms of their recovery, but an ineffective use of 'taxpayers’ money. Too much money is being given to private firms to look after people with serious mental health problems in units often hundreds of miles away from their homes due to a shortage of NHS beds. That figure was £158 million in 2016-17 and £181 million in 2017-18—an increase of £23 million.

Last year, an extensive study of mental health rehabilitation by the Care Quality Commission found that stays in private beds cost twice as much as in the NHS because they tend to last twice as long. It found that the annual cost of rehab was £535 million and that private beds were on average 30 miles away from patients’ homes, whereas in the NHS they are only nine miles away.

One of the cases that I have been dealing with recently is that of a child who is in a mental health unit 150 miles away from home, but the unit closest to her home is in special measures and not accepting new patients. However, the unit she is in is ranked as outstanding and she seems to be making good progress. Clearly, when parents are faced with such a choice, they want their child to go to the best unit possible, but that can put huge pressures on a family, in particular when they have other children, as well as jobs and lives. They might also not have the money to decamp to somewhere so they can visit their distressed child each day. There is a real lack of support in the system for families placed in such circumstances, with their whole lives disrupted by trying to be in two places at once.

Another problem is that the quality of care in hospitals can be highly variable. The Whorlton Hall case demonstrated just how awful situations can be, and how badly people can be treated in some places. In a recent investigation into children with learning disabilities or autism living in mental health hospitals, some families told the Children’s Commissioner about the excellent support that their children had received—it is important to put on the record that there is good care out there—but others had shocking stories to tell. For example, one family said that their son had not been washed for six months while in hospital. Basic care needs were not being met.

Despite improvements in recent years and the drive towards parity of esteem between physical and mental health services, it has not been realised. The aspiration is noble and shared by both parties, but we need to invest far more in our mental health services for people to get the support they need. I welcome the fact that the need for better community services was highlighted in the recent NHS long-term plan, and I am pleased that the Government have committed more funding to severe mental illness and to greater use of alternative mental health crisis provision, such as crisis cafés. However, an overhaul of the Mental Health Act is clearly needed if that investment is to be used in the best interests of patients by ensuring that their dignity and rights are protected and that they are treated in hospital only as a last resort.

The previous Prime Minister committed to new legislation to bring the Mental Health Act into line with a more modern understanding of how best to treat mental health. She confirmed that a White Paper would be published before the end of the year. The Minister is probably wondering whether she will be in post by the end of today, but even if she is moved on to greater things, I hope she asks the new Prime Minister to give that the same priority as the previous Prime Minister did.
Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck; thank you for calling me to speak. First, I pay tribute and give my thanks to the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) for securing the debate. Some of the best days we have in this place are when people recount their personal experiences and what drove them to the interests and causes they have in this place. It was remarkable listening to his experiences, which reinforced why we need to move what we do on mental health away from having a good conversation to actually changing things in a way that means something in the communities we serve.

With a new Prime Minister just two days into the job, it is a welcome opportunity to put this important issue on the agenda before summer recess. I look forward to the Government delivering on the White Paper that they publish by the end of the year. Mental health is an area that I have been trying to make a difference on since I came into this place. I have spoken openly about my own experiences of obsessive-compulsive disorder. I have said before that while I might like to pretend it is a distant memory, those who know me well know that it is not.

Reforming the Mental Health Act 1983 matters to me because I think it is important that we give specific, considered attention to the people whose mental illness is so severe that the state needs to step in to protect them or potentially other people. When people are unhappy or potentially other people. When people are unhappy they need support. The 1983 Act provides that, but as I recently discussed at an all-party parliamentary group on mental health event on that very topic, that support is not always as beneficial and therapeutic as it might be.

Members will know that I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on mental health. At the event I mentioned, we were pleased to welcome Sir Simon Wessely as one of our speakers. His speech was very informative about some of the key changes that the review recommends and where we are at politically in making the new vision a reality for those who suffer with their mental health in our communities.

One thing that stood out to me in Sir Simon’s address to the group was that, while rates of detention have increased, the rates of severe mental illness have remained relatively stable. Gold standard studies such as the adult psychiatric morbidity survey show that, so how do rates of detention shoot up by 47% in the last decade when the rate of mental illness among the population is almost unaltered? Something is not working, and I welcome the review’s recommendation to raise the bar and tighten up the criteria for detention.

We were also privileged to hear at that meeting from Georgi Lopez, a young woman who bravely shared her experiences of being detained under the Mental Health Act with members of the APPG. Her powerful testimony made it clear that legislative reform is required to change things for the better. I will share some of Georgi’s story with the House to illustrate how the Act negatively affects some people’s lives when they are vulnerable and very unhel. I thank the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark for sharing his experiences of the Act. We must keep such stories in mind when we talk about the potential of the forthcoming White Paper.

Georgi is 23 years old. She was first detained under the Act when just 17, and was detained for the majority of the next four and a half years. Georgi was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa shortly after completing her A-levels. She had been preparing her application to the University of Oxford. Shortly after her AS exams, she was taken to A&E, as she was severely dehydrated and malnourished. Her parents were given an ultimatum: to have Georgi voluntarily admitted to a psychiatric hospital or for her to be sectioned. They chose voluntary admission.

For the first few weeks in a psychiatric hospital, Georgi complied with all the treatment she was given, but following her first meeting with a psychiatrist she was told that she would be assessed to be detained under section 3 of the Mental Health Act. She was also put on highly sedative medication. She and her parents objected to her being detained because, up until that point, she had followed her treatment plan as asked, without need for coercion or detention. They were not listened to and she was detained.

Hon. Members can imagine how someone who has done everything that they have been asked to do to manage their condition would feel on having that control taken away from them, with little to no reason given. Georgi dealt with that loss of power by declining to take the medication that she had been prescribed. She was then forcibly injected with sedatives. That experience shows why Professor Wessely’s report is aptly titled “Increasing choice, reducing compulsion”.

I later heard about Georgi’s second experience of detention, which was completely different. She said that she was treated like a human being, and the staff were very interested in her past, her interests and her aspirations. Her care team involved her and her family in every decision about her treatment. Although it took her some time to rebuild her trust in the system and the Act, she believes that she owes her life, health and happiness to that positive experience, where she had choice and autonomy.

Georgi was clearly right when she told our APPG that her first experiences of treatment were neither caring nor conducive to her recovery. I agree with her, but her second experience, where her team involved her in her own care and helped her to rediscover herself and her identity, shows that it is possible to provide good psychiatric care. Georgi is in fact now an aspiring psychiatrist. People think that it gets easier to share your story; it does not—it always takes courage and bravery. I hope that by listening to Georgi’s varied experiences of the Act we can see that, although it is possible to provide care that involves patients in decision making, that does not always happen.

The Act shapes the culture and practice in mental health units. We need to change it so that Georgi’s positive experience of the Act is standard across the country. I fully support reform and I am pleased that the Government have committed to a White Paper by the end of the year. We need to seize the opportunity to get this right, and I am sure that our new Prime Minister will show leadership on this issue, which is important to my party and my constituents.
importantly, things have changed, remember the 1983 general election. It was a long time Wessely’s report. As my hon. Friend said, some of us rather than being a danger to anybody else, is possibly can deal with someone in mental health crisis who, rather than being a danger to anybody else, is possibly more of a danger to themselves.

Like others, I accept and welcome Professor Simon Wessely’s report. As my hon. Friend, some of us remember the 1983 general election. It was a long time ago, but there are some similarities, as he said, with the current political world. Importantly, things have changed, including our attitudes on a whole range of things. The key issue that comes out of Sir Simon Wessely’s report is the need to put the individual at the centre of everything. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View gave a very good example of how, when we get it wrong and do not put the individual at the centre, things are bad for that individual. Clearly, his constituent was treated inhumanely. We must put people at the centre. That is difficult, as people who are in mental health crisis can have great difficulty in making decisions, but that does not mean that they have lost capacity in all circumstances. That is one of the things that Sir Simon raised in the report.

The use of the Act should be a last resort, not the first course of action in dealing with people who are in mental health crisis. As the report says, we also need to involve the individual in decision making. That can be difficult; I accept that people can refuse treatment. However, if it is properly explained and people are involved in the decision, there are better outcomes for them individually and in-patient time will be reduced.

I have spoken before about advocacy. Owing to the draconian powers that the Act bestows on the state, it is important that the individual has access to independent advocacy. I welcome the recommendation for people to have to opt out of having an advocate. That puts the onus on the state to have independent advocates trained and available, and to ensure that people know how to access them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark also raised the issue of family members, which can be very difficult. The report’s suggestion to move towards having a nominated person is the way forward. In the past, assumptions have been made that an individual wants certain relatives involved; on a number of occasions they do not want that, and it may not be in their best interests. The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) made the point that we need to try to involve family members whenever we can, because they are an important part of supporting the individual and ensuring that they get the help they require.

I am concerned about a lot of issues related to the Act, including the need for a timetable for implementing the recommendations. A White Paper has been promised, I do not criticise the Minister because, as I have said before, since she has been in post she has been a strong advocate for mental health issues. However, this matter has to be a priority. I know we can get blindsided by big issues regarding Brexit, but the implementation of these changes is important and should be a top priority.

The report states that we need to investigate why the Mental Health Act is used more against members of black, Asian and minority ethnic communities than others. I accept that there may be a stigma attached to mental health issues in certain BAME communities and that it might give rise to particular questions, but that topic needs an inquiry all of its own. Unless we get answers to why the Act is being used more in those communities, we will not be able to make the necessary changes.

Why is the Act being used more? Perhaps there is a simple answer. Ever since we closed the asylums in the early 1980s, we have put neither the investment nor the policy in place to support people with long-term enduring mental health conditions in the community. That is about money to pay for the support that individuals need, but it is also—my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) raised this point—about pathways, how people get into the system, and the disconnect between the various agencies with which people come into contact.

The all-party parliamentary group on social work has just conducted an inquiry on that subject. I am not going to steal the thunder of my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), who chaired the inquiry. It was very informative, and I was privileged to be involved in it. The disconnection and lack of integration between local councils and the health service is clearly an issue, and it is not necessarily just down to money; it is also to attitudes. The system needs to be put back together. It is no good telling somebody who is in a mental health crisis, “I’m sorry, but you are not my responsibility; that is a local authority issue,” if they present to the NHS or vice versa. That needs to be put right.

In County Durham we have a very good integrated system of local government and NHS care, which works very well. If we are to put that wraparound care around individuals such as the mother of my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark, it must be integrated; it must be joined up. It cannot be fragmented.

Is the problem all about the availability of beds? I would say no, it is not. The right hon. Member for New Forest East is right that we have cut beds back too quickly, thinking that we do not need them and that we can manage people in the community when we cannot. The argument that follows is, “The answer to this is more beds.” Well, I am sorry, I do not think it is, personally. What I want is a good community-based model to support people in the community. That is going to take money. It needs a clear, worked-through policy. It has to include local authorities and it has to include health. One of the biggest issues that people leaving in-patient beds face is the question of where they will live, and it is not surprising that many of them end up on the streets in our communities. We need a joined-up approach.

As I said earlier this week in another debate on mental health, we must have a joined-up local system that includes not just the agencies I have mentioned, but the
community and voluntary sector. If we are going to support people in the community, in my experience it is often best done by voluntary and community sector organisations. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark said at the beginning of the debate, many of those organisations are under pressure because grants are being cut. We need a joined-up approach.

While I am on my hobby horse about the voluntary and community sector, can such organisations bid for contracts from clinical commissioning groups and local authorities? In many cases they cannot, because they are not big enough. The contracts are drawn up in such a way that they are not available to those organisations. In terms of value for money and local input, that would be very important.

We must also support and develop staff in the sector. During the inquiry, we met some amazing, inspiring young people who were entering social work and majoring in support for people with mental health issues. In Durham a few weeks ago, I had the privilege of meeting some of the young people who were taking part in the Think Ahead programme—I think it was started by one of the Minister’s predecessors—which aims to get social workers trained in mental health work. Most of those I met said it was a very rewarding field to get into, when it was properly supported.

What about other Government policies? We need joined-up policy at the local level to support individuals, but we also need to make sure that mental health is hardwired into Government policy. I have said that on a number of occasions, and I will do so again. For example, if someone in the community has a long-term mental health condition, fails her independent payment assessment and is sectioned—I handled a similar situation a few weeks ago—what does that cost the taxpayer? It is no good for the individual and it is no good for the taxpayer. Under mandatory reconsideration, the PIP was reinstated. We have to make sure that consideration of mental health issues is built into policy and that the policies of other Government Departments are not creating problems for individuals.

Finally, as we know, many individuals in prison have mental health problems. The current system for transferring individuals from prison to mental health facilities is not working. That is another issue that I have raised previously. Those on indeterminate or fixed sentences who come up for assessment by the Parole Board face a double jeopardy situation. They have to have a mental health assessment by both a mental health tribunal and a Parole Board. That cannot be right. It leads to, on average, an extra 18 months in prison, where proper treatment and proper planning is difficult. It does not help them or the system, and it costs more to keep them in prison. We need a system where one single assessment would be enough to make sure that those people get the support they require.

This is about money and it is about reforming the existing system, but we must also ensure that both national and local policies enable a joined-up, wraparound service. With the right investment and the right political will, we can get there. We are not going to go back to putting people in institutions or asylums; people should be able to live a happy, contented and safe life in the community, with the wraparound care that they deserve. That is what we should be providing, as a decent society.

2.48 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) for a very moving opening speech. It was a very brave speech, because he was sharing difficult personal experiences, and that made it all the more compelling.

I want to focus on the use of restraint, which is one of the four key issues that the review covers. Last year, Parliament passed my private Member’s Bill, which became known as the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Act 2018, but is better known as Seni’s law. I was very grateful to the Minister for her support on the Bill, which introduced a system for reducing the use of abusive and coercive restraint in mental health settings. It establishes in law, for the first time, some very important principles, including the need for trauma-informed care. Some of the principles in the Act, which was of necessity relatively narrowly drawn, could and should be applied more widely. That is the point I hope to impress on the Minister this afternoon.

Perhaps I can remind colleagues of the human story behind Seni’s law—the Minister knows it, but other colleagues might not. Seni Lewis was a young graduate aged just 21. His parents found him having a traumatic mental health episode at home one Sunday morning, something he had never experienced before. They took him to the local hospital, expecting to find the care that he needed and deserved. He ended up at the Bethlem Royal Hospital, where his parents stayed with him until late evening before leaving to go home. Seni became very alarmed when he found out that he was alone, and he tried to leave. The hospital staff decided to section him and therefore tried to stop him leaving.

There were never any allegations that Seni threatened or assaulted anyone, but the hospital called the police. It ended up with 11 police officers dragging Seni, with his hands cuffed behind his head and legs in braces, into a seclusion unit, where they took turns sitting on him as he was pinned down on the floor. Seni’s spinal column was broken and he went into cardiac arrest, then into a coma. He died shortly afterwards.

Looking at the pictures of people who have died in mental health detention, we see many young black faces like Seni’s. Widely held prejudices about young black men and psychosis, drugs and aggression lead them to be subject to more severe treatment than other patients. In extreme cases such as Seni’s, it leads to death. It is a form of institutional racism, and we need to call it out and confront it.

I first met Seni’s parents three years after his death, just after I had been elected to Parliament in a by-election. They came to see me three years after this terrible incident because there had still been no inquest into his death, no public explanation of how or why their beloved son had died, no learning to prevent similar deaths in the future, no closure and no justice for Seni’s deeply distraught family. It was only after a very long public campaign and the intervention of the then Minister for mental health, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), and the then Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), that an inquest was finally opened, seven years after Seni’s death. It found that Seni had been subject to severe and
prolonged restraint that had caused his death. It castigated the police and the mental health services and warned that, without change, other people in the mental health system would die in the future, just as too many have died in the past.

Seni’s law began as a cross-party attempt to start the process of change by creating a new national system for recording the use of restraint in mental health settings. We will soon be able to see what is happening in different mental health trusts and hospitals, and compare like with like to identify and spread best practice in reducing the use of abusive and coercive restraint. However, the same system needs to be extended to all settings where people with mental ill health might be subject to restraint, and I invite the Minister to comment on any plans she has to do that.

The review makes it clear that we need to do more. Deaths in mental health settings should be investigated in the same way as deaths in any other form of state detention are investigated. When someone dies in prison or in a police cell, there is an automatic external investigation by an independent national body, which publishes a final report and shares what it has found. However, when someone dies in a mental health setting, as Seni Lewis did, there is no such fully independent investigation. In Seni’s case, the health trust investigated itself, and lessons that needed to be learned were not learned. Owing to errors by the Independent Police Complaints Commission, the Metropolitan police were able to block an inquest for a full seven years after his death. It should not be possible for the organisation under investigation to control the scope, timeliness, quality and content of the report on their own potential failure, because of the risk of a cover-up.

I pay special tribute to the powerful campaigning work on this issue that has been carried out by the charity Inquest. I fully support its demand for non-means-tested legal aid to be available to families at inquests, so that there is a level playing field between the bereaved family and the well-funded organisations accused of potential wrongdoing. Such investigations must be conducted by fully independent bodies that command the confidence of the public and bereaved families. By failing to learn from preventable mental health deaths, we condemn other vulnerable people to the same tragic fate.

Seni Lewis died in the most horrific circumstances, and his parents then had to fight for justice over seven years, just to find out what had gone wrong. Seni’s law stands as a testament to his life, but it is time to go further. The review of the Mental Health Act 1983 creates an opportunity to do so. We need to ensure that every bereaved family can get the justice they deserve. We need to ensure that, through a fully independent system, every lesson we need to learn is learned and acted on, so that we can keep every vulnerable person with mental ill health safe in future.

2.55 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, and to follow not just the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing the debate, and I thank him for sharing a very powerful and personal testimony as well as offering solutions to the crisis in mental health. So often we can blather away in places such as here in Westminster Hall; we can talk about the problems, issues and suffering, but sometimes we do not offer solutions. It is our job to come up with solutions, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark and others have offered some.

As some colleagues might know, I have the privilege of chairing the all-party parliamentary group on social work. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) said, we recently undertook an inquiry on the role that social workers play in upholding the principles outlined in the independent review of the Mental Health Act 1983, and on how that role can be recognised and enhanced in new legislation.

I believe that social workers are regularly, if not always, undervalued, yet their work is incredibly valuable in supporting and helping the most vulnerable people in our society—be it children at risk, older people in need of a bit more support, or families who experience breakdown and need the independent support that a social worker can provide. Of course, social workers also support people with mental health needs, although many people do not realise the tremendous role that they play in that. They ensure that mental health problems are not a barrier to anybody achieving the things they want, and that people get the appropriate treatment and care that they need.

Back in 2018, I met with two approved mental health professionals in my role as the chair of the APPG on social work. They are known as AMHPs—perhaps it is something to do with their electrifying personalities. They explained that there was a need to promote the role of social workers in mental health services, and I now understand why that is necessary. The legislation and policy often skim over the work of social workers, perhaps because it is so varied and hard to pin down.

In December, the independent review of the Mental Health Act 1983 published its report and recommendations. In preparation for a Government response, the APPG decided to have our own inquiry and add to that great piece of work. Some 9,000 social workers work in a defined mental health role, accounting for about 4% or 5% of the core mental health workforce, and 95% of AMHPs are social workers. I know it will take more than legislation to embed the kind of changes we would like to see, and work will have to be done by CCGs, local authorities, the NHS and social work leadership—to name but a few—if we are to succeed and get the change that is needed. I am hopeful that the APPG’s report and recommendations will act as a staging post on the way to cultural and legislative change.

Mr Kevan Jones: Was my hon. Friend impressed, as I was, when we met various people giving evidence to the inquiry? The best practice was where local authorities and the NHS were co-located and working closely together, rather than when it was being divided.

Alex Cunningham: Yes, that was most certainly the case. I shall remark on that a little later in my speech. I was really concerned to find that the number of joint
working arrangements was diminishing rather than increasing across the country, but I will address that a little later.

I was surprised to hear in the evidence sessions that health and social care integration, which the Government are officially pursuing, is going backwards. My right hon. Friend spoke about that in detail. A key message from the APPG is that the Government need to urgently examine how they can better support the integration programme, arrest the decline and ensure that people work together. Social workers in health and in local authorities need to work much more closely together.

Integration in mental health services is about bringing the social mode into healthcare settings, where social approaches sometimes struggle to gain acceptance and respect when compared with the medical model. We do not suggest replacing one with the other but, as integration implies, a full marriage of the two models so that the needs of the individual are met in one place. Better still, a properly integrated social model would make sure that treatment and care planning were guided by the person in their own context, rather than fitting them into a pre-existing diagnostic box. Such an approach means greater consideration of the social determinants of mental ill health—factors such as socio-economic background, education, housing and family dynamics. We have heard examples of that throughout the debate.

The APPG report made several recommendations. The new mental health legislation should open with a definition of the social model and the importance of addressing the social determinants of mental illness alongside biological and psychological determinants; it should explicitly name social workers as the key professionals doing the work; Ministers should ensure that the team preparing new mental health legislation also produces guidance on how it is intended to interact with other legislation such as the Mental Capacity Act 2005 and the Equality Act 2010; the CQC should be mandated to provide an annual report to Parliament on the progress of health and social care integration; and social work leadership—this is particularly important—on trust and CCG boards is necessary. I think it is more than necessary; it is essential. They are professional people with a major and specific role and they should be at the table where the decisions are made.

The report also recommended that new mental health legislation must have greater regard to both health and local authority resources. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham talked about the lack of resources within the system. CCGs should be held transparently accountable for their duties under section 140 of the current Mental Health Act, or any new legislation, making sure that there are enough beds in the right places. The people detained under section 3 of the Mental Health Act should be reviewed by a social worker, and families and carers of all people detained should be provided with financial support. That point was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who talked about the effect that it can have on families when a family member in crisis is 150 miles or more away. A national dataset on the number of Mental Health Act assessments should be established as part of the DHSC mental health services dataset. Those recommendations are not unreasonable. I hope that the Department for Health and Social Care will take note and address the gaps where professionals say that they are.

I recently had the opportunity to take part in the Bill Committee for the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill, and I spoke about that in detail. During the passage of that Bill, I was quite surprised to find out that the Bill had not been subjected to any pre-legislative scrutiny, despite its central role of redeveloping the laws of this country for depriving people of their liberty. I said that I thought the Government needed to pause and think again about the implications of the plans that Ministers were putting before us, listen to the countless charities, other organisations and professionals who work with the legislation every day, and come back with a Bill fit for purpose. It should not have been about a basic political argument between the Government and the Opposition. It is about a debate between the law makers and the people, some of whom at a particular time in their life can be subject to some of the most restrictive legislation that we have. Sadly, at that time the Minister did not listen, and the legislation we are left with will need to be reviewed before too long. I feel the same about moving forward with reviewing the current legislation over the next few years, but it should be done with a more thorough and transparent approach than necessary; it is essential. They are professional people with a major and specific role and they should be at the table where the decisions are made.

The legislation that we create or amend affects the most vulnerable in our society, as I have said before, but it should be considered with extra care and attention. I do not think that we did that in the recent Bill Committee, so we must include those who know what they are talking about, such as the professionals, the experts and the social workers—those who have worked on the frontline of mental health care and know where the gaps are and how we can ensure that we do better for those who receive care under mental health provision. We must and can do better. I hope that as we move forward, Ministers will listen and get it right.

3.6 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, as it was to serve under Ms Buck earlier. I join others in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing this debate and echoing their comments about the moving way in which he opened the debate. He started with his own family experience and then made a very powerful speech. I am sorry that you missed it, Mr Hanson. We heard contributions from the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), as well as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and my hon. Friend the Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham). I am sure we all want to thank Sir Simon Wessely and his team for their work in reviewing the Mental Health Act.

The wide range of perspectives in the debate is welcome. It shows how wide-ranging the work is and how it touches on so many different aspects. One thing on which we all agree is that the current Mental Health Act is not working. It is too often overly restrictive and fails to give people the support they need, as we have heard. Before I discuss the contents of the review, I
want to mention why it is so important that we get this right, because being detained under the Mental Health Act, although it is sometimes life-saving, can be immensely damaging if it goes wrong, and we have heard already about how it can go wrong. I, too, am going to talk about a case: the case of Matthew Leahy.

On 7 November 2012, Matthew was admitted to a mental health hospital under the Mental Health Act. On 15 November, he hanged himself in his room at the hospital. The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has identified failures in Matthew’s care that may have led to his death, but they have taken seven years to come to light. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) talked about delays. They are exasperating, concerning and impossible for families who have to live with the loss of a loved one. Some of the failures in Matthew’s case were truly shocking. He complained that he had been raped in the mental health hospital. The ombudsman found that had Matthew not phoned the police himself, it is not clear that staff on the unit would have done so. Anyway, the police failed to take action.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark referred to the level of sexual assaults on patients—an appalling record, as reported by the CQC. It should be of deep concern to us that that is happening. Staff also failed to act when Matthew reported, and he had physical injuries that could have been caused by rape, which should have been a major cause of concern. It is also deeply concerning that his care plan was falsified and other paperwork was lost. Although he had a care plan for his first 72 hours in the unit, staff produced a fuller care plan only after he died. That that should have happened when he was apparently under the protection of the state is unacceptable. We must ensure that we know what went wrong in his and other cases of death so that we can act to prevent it from recurring.

There have also been issues with the subsequent investigation. The initial report by the NHS partnership contained inaccuracies about how Matthew’s care had been planned. Across the board, the partnership failed to learn the lessons of Matthew’s death, which compounds the tragedy of that young man taking his own life while he was in the care of the state. As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North has said, there should be independent investigations of deaths that occur in mental health hospitals. I know that the Minister has been asked before to set up an inquiry into Matthew Leahy’s death. I ask her to commit to doing so now, so that we can learn the lessons from that tragic event and prevent such a thing from happening again.

Sir Simon’s recommendations will not solve every problem with our in-patient mental health services, but the Opposition believe that they would improve them, and would remove many of the major issues with the Mental Health Act. Although we have a little time, we cannot focus on all 154 of the recommendations. I just want to discuss the principles that he felt should be central to the operation of the Act. My hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark outlined those four principles in his opening speech.

The first principle is choice and autonomy. Of course, it should go without saying that, wherever possible, we give people control over what is happening to them. I am glad that the Government have committed to introducing advance choice documents. Those will be central to ensuring that people can exercise choice over what happens to them. We have heard in many of today’s speeches why that is important. I ask the Minister to confirm today, if she can, when those plans will be brought forward. There will be instances when people cannot exercise the choice themselves, so Sir Simon’s proposals for the new nominated person role and increased use of advocates will ensure that in those circumstances people are still able to influence their care.

During the passage of the Mental Capacity Act 2019 there was a great deal of discussion, involving my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North, about advocacy. We must ensure that local authorities are fully funded to provide those vital services. It would be a travesty if someone were denied a voice because of budget constraints at their local council. Can the Minister tell us whether the Government will provide additional funding for advocacy to ensure that that does not happen?

The second principle is that of least restriction. It seems self-evident that we should try to ensure that people retain as much of their freedom as possible, but we have heard of the number of ways in which that does not happen. It might mean supporting people to enter mental health hospitals voluntarily rather than being detained, or ending the use of seclusion and segregation and the terrible cases of restraint that we heard about.

The third principle is therapeutic benefit. Again, it should be self-evident that everything done under the Mental Health Act should be clearly aimed at helping the person in question to recover. If it is not, what is the justification for detaining them? My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East talked about people with autism and learning difficulties in mental health hospitals, and we have to question how often their detention for periods of five years, or five and a half years, helps them at all, and whether any of what happens to them could be talked about as treatment.

Finally, Sir Simon emphasised the importance of treating the person as an individual. In particular, that section of the review focused on the current experiences of young people and people from BAME communities in mental health facilities. We have heard about that in speeches today. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East talked about the lack of support for families of children with out-of-area placements. Sir Simon recommends that, while those still exist—my party pledges to do away with them—financial assistance should be available when a young person is admitted to a placement away from their family. We are committed to ending inappropriate out-of-area placements, but my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East talked about a case where, if a facility was the only one that would be able to provide the care, a parent would choose it. However, that support and financial assistance must be available. It is not right to cut off a young person’s support network when they need it most.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham also talked about why the powers under the Act are being used more with people from BAME communities, and we must focus relentlessly on the facts.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that we cannot leave the matter where it is? We need an inquiry into it. Sir Simon calls for more research, but unless we have an inquiry we will not be able to get the policy changes to identify what is, clearly, going wrong.
Barbara Keeley: Indeed, and what my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North has said, today and in speaking about the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Act 2018, has helped us to focus on the issue of the number of times when young people—particularly from BAME communities—are subject to the Mental Health Act, segregation and restraint. It is not acceptable. None of those cases is acceptable, but it is totally unacceptable if one group seems to be singled out in society for such measures—particularly tragically in the case of Seni. I applaud my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North for taking that one case and pushing it through to legislation, and the Minister for supporting it.

All the principles I have outlined are important. It is only by following them that we can ensure that a reformed Mental Health Act will work in the interest of those it is designed to help: people with mental health conditions. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government will accept recommendation 1 of the review, that the four crucial principles be put on the face of the Act? We had a bit of a battle during the passage of the Mental Capacity Act 2019 in getting the Minister to accept that things should be on the face of the Bill, but things such as advocacy are pretty important, and it will not be acceptable if they can be overlooked or treated as a budgetary problem.

Alex Cunningham: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of our particular concerns was the way that the proposals related to young people and the fact that although there appeared to be safeguards that might look after adults, the protection for young people, and provision to give their families the necessary help to support them, was thin?

Barbara Keeley: Indeed, and we did try valiantly to get the Minister to accept amendments, but she would not. There is concern. It is a good thing to include 16 and 17-year-olds in the legislation, but not if there are no safeguards. There are real worries. In many cases that I have looked at, and where I continue to try to support families, parents feel ignored and helpless. They feel that mental health hospitals act without reference to the people who know the young person best.

One area in which Sir Simon did not make recommendations was the definition of a mental disorder. Specifically, he concluded that it was not appropriate for his review to decide whether autistic people should remain within the scope of the Act purely because of their autism. I agree with Sir Simon that that is a complex topic, but we should not let it be an excuse for inaction. Autism is not a mental health condition, but the Mental Health Act treats it as though it is. As a result, there are 1,150 autistic people in in-patient mental health facilities. A proportion of them will have mental health conditions that require treatment, but it should never happen that someone is detained purely because they are autistic or because they present with behaviour that could be challenging. I know of many cases where that is happening.

We all saw the deeply disturbing BBC “Panorama” programme on Whorlton Hall, which revealed the shocking treatment of autistic people while detained in mental health hospitals. I am sure we would all agree that that treatment is simply unacceptable, but we must do more to prevent it. The best way of doing that is to ensure that people are not put into in-patient environments unnecessarily. If someone does not have a mental health condition that is being treated, they should not be held under the Mental Health Act. Can the Minister confirm that when the Government bring forward the proposals in the review, they will go further than Sir Simon and commit to ending the outdated practice of treating autism in the same way as mental health conditions?

It is eight months since Sir Simon’s final review was published, although it does not seem like it. He made more than 150 recommendations. We did not expect the Government to respond to all of them straightaway, but in eight months they have responded to fewer than a dozen recommendations. The other 140 apparently have to wait for the White Paper. We have heard about more reviews from the new Prime Minister this morning. All we seem to get is more rounds of consultation and more reviews, but Sir Simon consulted widely during the review. His review was informed by the experiences of 988 people, including 467 service users—the inclusion of service users is praiseworthy—and evidence from 75 organisations and 90 professionals working in the field. I hope that the Government will take that into consideration.

Barbara Keeley: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of our particular concerns was the way that the proposals related to young people and the fact that although there appeared to be safeguards that might look after adults, the protection for young people, and provision to give their families the necessary help to support them, was thin?

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The only reason I can see for further consultation would be if the Government were planning to go further on some of the recommendations than Sir Simon did—for example, in removing autism from the scope of the Act. Can the Minister confirm whether that is the case? If not, can she tell us why she feels that the consultation that Sir Simon carried out is insufficient? Surely it would be better to publish a draft Bill and carry out pre-legislative scrutiny in the normal way than to do what has become known as kicking the can down the road. Six months ago we were promised a new set of guidance on the Mental Capacity Act, but that has not been mentioned at all since then. Those are the things that should be coming forward.

We have also been told that there will be a mental health White Paper to implement the findings of the review—we find ourselves waiting for Green Papers and White Papers. Someone could be forgiven for looking at that and thinking that the Government simply do not care about people waiting for much-needed reforms. I know that the Minister cares, but do her Government care? Can she give us a date for the publication of the Government’s mental health White Paper? It is popular to say a season or the end of the year, but a date is more useful to work with. I realise that it is a time of great uncertainty for Government Ministers—I hope that we will see this Minister in her place in future—but a firm date would help us to hold the Government to account should they let their focus slip.

People with mental health conditions have been let down for too long. The review represents a rare opportunity to make changes that have cross-party support—the consensus in this debate has been encouraging—to a system that does not work properly. I hope that the Minister, and the incoming Government, do not waste this opportunity by delaying it further, which would leave people stuck in a system that is harming, not helping, them.
3.20 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price):** This is probably as well informed and good a debate as I have ever had to respond to. I hope I can do justice to all the good points that have been made, because we have covered all the key issues relating to how we better support people with mental ill health.

I associate myself with the comments about the personal speech of the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), which he made in such a dignified way that I was incredibly moved by his story. What struck me about the experiences that he detailed was that they were his normal, which brought it into stark relief that we are talking about the real day-to-day lives of human beings. It is incredible to hear what people have to cope with on a daily basis. He reminded us that the 1980s had the best pop music, and I was reminded of the “Karma Chameleon” lyric: “Every day is like survival”. When we are talking about people with severe mental ill health, every day is like survival, so I thank him for that.

The hon. Gentleman’s speech covered everything that we need to tackle and I do not disagree with anything he said. Obviously, some of the charges that he levelled at me are challenging and I do not want to duck them. Everybody is impatient that we are perhaps not doing as well as we would like in helping people with mental ill health. I share that impatience, but I will not promise that it can be sorted overnight. We are rolling out a significant increase in services and in the workforce to deliver them, which takes longer than anyone would wish.

I will try to address the points that have been made. It was a great pleasure to hear from the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) and to support him in delivering Seni’s law. In connection with that law, he has reminded us that when deaths happen to people who are detained by the state, we absolutely owe it to their loved ones, and to the person who died, to be open with them. The truth is often anything but, because the associated institutions of the state collude to protect themselves. Other Ministers and I are determined that we are the servants of the people, and those institutions that are there to deliver services for the people should remember that and should engage in a spirit of openness.

I have met Seni’s parents and I could not admire them more for the dignity with which they have borne their experience and the good use that they have put it to. I genuinely feel guilty, however, that we have let them down. Hon. Members will be pleased to know that we have had those discussions at the ministerial board. My ministerial colleagues in other Departments and I want to get a grip on how we properly hoist in the learnings from coronial reports. I look forward to engaging with hon. Members on that, but I will write to the hon. Lady specifically on the issue of Matthew Leahy. It is worth noting that we are looking at the principles of sexual safety in wards, which is not just about getting rid of mixed-sex wards. People are very vulnerable in those situations and it is all about the care regime.

Dr Lewis: Can the Minister tell us in simple terms what the situation is regarding the continuation or discontinuation of mixed-sex wards in mental health acute units?

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** On mixed-sex wards specifically, I cannot tell my right hon. Friend what the proportion is, but we are ensuring that the guidance on sexual safety on mental health wards is being rolled out. I will write to him specifically on that, if he will indulge me.

Barbara Keeley: An important point is that Matthew Leahy phoned the police to report the rape, but they concluded that it was part of his delusion—that was the reason they gave for not taking action. In the case of Whorlton Hall, the police also did not act on reports of assault, although assault was clearly going on. The Minister needs to take that problem up with the Policing Minister. It is not acceptable that what someone says is ignored if they are autistic or detained under the Mental Health Act 1983, because the level of sexual assault is disturbing, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) said.

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** That is an excellent point, and it plays into a general prejudice that people who are in detention are just an inconvenience to be managed. In the context of Sir Simon’s review, the whole ethos that

in March 2018 with a promise that the findings would be published in spring 2019. From the temperature today, we know that we are way past spring and into summer, but we still do not have a date for when they will be published. Can the Minister share a date by which we might expect that to happen?

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a straightforward answer to that question but I will write to him with a commitment. It is very boring, but Brexit has diverted officials in the Department. Obviously, no-deal preparations in the health service are a matter of public concern, so we need to make them, but we still need to get on with business as usual. It is an important issue.

The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) mentioned the case of Matthew Leahy. I will go away and reflect on that, but I will give the same message as I gave in response to Seni’s law. Generally, we need to get a proper grip on how we learn from deaths that happen when somebody is in the state’s care, because that is clearly unacceptable. We have coronial reports of all those occasions. People should not be waiting the length of time that they are waiting for inquests. When inquests happen, again, there is usually representation from the various institutions involved and the family can be left feeling very under-represented against a mass of organisations trying to avoid liability. We need to tackle that properly.

We have had those discussions at the ministerial board. My ministerial colleagues in other Departments and I want to get a grip on how we properly hoist in the learnings from coronial reports. I look forward to engaging with hon. Members on that, but I will write to the hon. Lady specifically on the issue of Matthew Leahy. It is worth noting that we are looking at the principles of sexual safety in wards, which is not just about getting rid of mixed-sex wards. People are very vulnerable in those situations and it is all about the care regime.

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**Jackie Doyle-Price:** That is an excellent point, and it plays into a general prejudice that people who are in detention are just an inconvenience to be managed. In the context of Sir Simon’s review, the whole ethos that
any reform we make should be about empowering patients brings with it obligations to challenge other aspects of the system, not just the care providers. The hon. Lady is right to say that I need to take that up with the Prime Minister, which I will do as part of rolling out our preparations for the White Paper. I understand the hon. Lady’s lack of confidence when I say that the White Paper can be expected before the end of the year, but that is certainly my ambition, notwithstanding the fact that I know she has been waiting rather a long time for another paper that she was promised.

I can reassure the hon. Lady on the extent of the work that Sir Simon has done and the engagement we have had, especially with service users. Rather like the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark, those service users shared with us their personal experiences, often reliving significant distress. Given that they have participated and that we have raised their expectations, we would, to be frank, be letting them down if we did not address that. I do not think that would be in any way forgivable, so, as long as it is on my watch, we will be pushing ahead.

As the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark said, we are dealing with legislation passed in 1983, so although this appears to be a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reform this legislation, I hope that is not the case. The situation is probably more symptomatic of the fact that we have not given this matter as much attention as it deserves, but clearly that has changed. The world has changed in terms of how we debate mental health, and that is welcome. Chiming in with the discussion we have had today, I am keen that we take this matter forward with consensus.

I pay tribute to the leadership that Sir Simon has shown in this review. As well as not ducking the controversial aspects of examining the legislation, he has engaged in dialogue and dealt with them in such a way that it is accepted that Members, peers, service users and professionals need to consider them. I am incredibly grateful for what he has done.

We talk more about mental ill health now, but when it comes to severe mental illness—the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark spoke about schizophrenia—that is something that reveals incredible prejudice in people. As we have heard, if someone is able to manage their condition, they can live a full and independent life, but the key is being able to manage the condition with the appropriate support. We still have a lot to do in educating the public and society about the real impact of severe mental illness.

There are so many issues, but I will try to address them all in the time I have. The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) asked about out-of-area placements for people with autism and learning disabilities. I must say that this is something that really bothers me. Far too many people remain in institutional care and in out-of-area placements, and nowhere is that more true than in the field of learning disabilities and autism.

It is interesting, once we dig under the issue, to see that we have been very successful in getting people with learning disabilities out of in-patient care and into the community. However, that has been matched by a bigger increase in the number of people with autism finding their way into in-patient care. That tells me—I do not think this will be a surprise to anyone in the Chamber—that we are not doing enough to diagnose autism early enough, and as a consequence we are not equipping people with the skills to be able to live independently.

The ultimate result is that we end up putting people in in-patient care. Quite often, those people are forgotten about and it becomes very expensive to keep them there, so not only are we failing people by not having services for them early enough, but we are adding significant cost to the taxpayer and, frankly, doing harm, because the longer those people stay in in-patient care, the more their ability to live independently diminishes. As far as I am concerned, that is a major failing that we need to address.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the Minister for that. There are two aspects that I have come across. First, it is often when a child reaches their teenage years, which we know are difficult for any child with all the turmoil that is going on physically and mentally, that the anxiety takes over and they eventually go into crisis, and things that perhaps should have been picked up sooner are only picked up then. Secondly, that seems to be particularly true for girls. We know that it is more difficult to diagnose girls with autism than to diagnose boys. I was told yesterday, although I do not know whether this figure is true, that one in four girls in mental health units with anorexia is diagnosed with autism. There is a lot of work to be done in the early years, before they reach that crisis point in their teens.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I agree with every word that the hon. Lady says. One of our expectations of the new mental health support teams that we are rolling out into schools is that they will be able to work with schools and to spot people who might be in trouble. She is right that, with girls particularly, autism is under-diagnosed, and by the time the challenges start to have an impact on mental health, it is much more difficult to give people appropriate support. Early diagnosis is key.

I am pleased that we are now setting up a unit within the Department of Health and Social Care to look at neurodiverse conditions and what more we can do to improve service provision for them. I am also pleased that NHS England shares my concern about this and that we can expect more work on it, but there remains a lot to do and I do not shirk from admitting that.

Barbara Keeley: There is also the financial difficulty that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) referred to. Private hospitals that autistic people and people with learning disabilities end up in tend to be very expensive—we know that the placements can be as much as £730,000 a year. The answer is to fund placements in the community. Years ago, when we were moving people out of long-stay mental health institutions, there was a dowry system. The Government do not have a dowry system to help with this, so Transforming Care failed because there was no mechanism to transfer funding from the NHS, which is taking the hit on cost, to cash-strapped local authorities. If local authorities are to continue being cash-strapped, and I hope they are not, some mechanism is needed there. My party has pledged to put in £350 million a year of transfers to make that happen. Does that idea recommend itself to the Minister? I know she is bothered about this.
Jackie Doyle-Price: I partly agree with the hon. Lady. The answer is better help within the community, but I come back to the point that the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) made so well. It should not be about beds or in-patient care. The fact that we still have that, and that it is increasing, is a mark of failure. I do not think it should be addressed by reinvestment in in-patient care in the community. The key is putting the support in earlier, and that is what we must aim toward.

The hon. Lady mentions that many of the providers are private, and she is right. One of the challenges I am setting NHS providers is how we can be more innovative, co-commissioning with local authorities to ensure that we have more supported accommodation available in the community, recognising that there will be a saving across the system. I am very clear; I will take it on the chin that local authorities have had more financial challenges than the NHS has as we have tackled public spending, but ultimately, we must think about that person and ensuring that they have holistic care. Silo-based decision making is not doing the people who need our help any good. That is still a work in progress.

The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) is right about the role of social workers here. I have regularly debated with hon. Members about the workforce challenges that we face in delivering improved mental health services. NHS England is very clear that that will be developed only through new multidisciplinary models of care, in which social work will play a part. We can also make much better use of people with lived experience in delivering care for people with mental ill health, not least because engaging with mental health professionals can be very intimidating and threatening, particularly for somebody going through a crisis, and someone with lived experience can bring a very different perspective to that relationship. Much more can be done about that. That underlines the point that hon. Members made a number of times about the need for appropriate support services.

Alex Cunningham: I wonder whether I can prise from the Minister a commitment to look at the fact that there has been a deterioration in the number of authorities that are working with our health partners. Integration is deteriorating, rather than increasing. The model must be better, and all professionals must work together.

Jackie Doyle-Price: That is a fair challenge. We certainly will. One of the difficulties when there is a financial challenge arrangement is that people retreat into their silos and say, “This bill is your problem.” That is not good enough. We have to be better at challenging them when that happens.

I am very clear that commissioners need to be much more imaginative. There is often a tendency to over-medicalise some of these issues. We have heard today that wrap-around services can be delivered much better by the voluntary sector, with better value for money and in a less intimidating way. That can often be more reliable than relying on in-NHS services.

There are two aspects to homelessness. It can often be symptomatic of a mental health issue or addiction; it is symptomatic of the fact that the person needs help. Equally, it exacerbates the issues that those people have. We have made resource available to tackle the holistic needs of rough sleepers, but again we are treating the problem at the crisis end. People struggling with their housing situation will be more likely to need help, so we need to look at what else we can do to support people at that stage.

I was challenged on when we will end the use of police cells to detain people under the Mental Health Act. I want that to be written on the face of the Act, so that there is a clear binding commitment to do that. We have reduced it by 95% so far with places of safety, so I am confident in saying that detention in a police cell is a rarity these days; nevertheless, we need to guarantee that.

On in-patient care and out-of-area placements, it is clear that people recover more quickly if they are closer to their family and friends. As the hon. Member for Bristol East said, there is sometimes a need for specialist support. We need to look at how that interaction happens with NHS England. Specialised commissioning and delivering a very narrow service will inevitably lead to out-of-area placements, but are we doing more harm than good? Should the best be the enemy of the good? NHS England commissions a quantum; it does not scrutinise individual commissioning decisions. That is more likely to happen if it takes place locally. That is still work in progress.

Alex Cunningham: Recognising that specialist provision might be 150 miles away, will the Minister accept the recommendation from the APPG inquiry that families who do not have the means should be funded so they can visit and spend time with their loved one?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I cannot commit to delivering that, but I can commit to looking at it. I hope that is good enough for the hon. Gentleman.

Kerry McCarthy: In the case that I was talking about, the problem was not just that the treatment was so specialised that it was that far away, but that that was when the bed became available. It is a bit of a lottery. The one closest to home was not taking in new patients because it was in special measures. There would have been other places closer. If the person does not accept a bed when one becomes available, they may have to look after a distressed child for an awful lot longer.

Jackie Doyle-Price: This comes back to housing. One challenge is getting access to a bed, and another is when the person comes to leave, because we need to discharge people into safe living environments. Are there enough supported housing solutions? No, not always, so the bed remains full. I am having conversations with colleagues in local government to see what more we can do to deliver more supported housing so we can get the pathway going. We could fix it by making more beds available, but that is not really the answer. I am concerned that the longer we leave people in in-patient care, the more harm we do. We have to get that movement through the system. Hopefully, if we do that, people will be less likely to grab the first bed because they can be confident that more will become available more frequently. That is where we need to get to. I appreciate that right now it feels desperate.

There is an issue with quality. The Care Quality Commission has a challenge in deciding whether more harm will be done by taking enforcement action on a place rather than working with it to improve. We see
that writ large in TV programmes such as “Panorama”. There is a massive disparity in the quality of care. I challenge the CQC to be a lot more aggressive when we see poor standards of care.

The hon. Member for Bristol East mentioned private providers. People have heard of The Priory. They hear that celebrities go there and they think it is a centre of excellence. The truth is that the care there is less than optimal, but someone with a loved one who needs hospital treatment will not know that. We need the CQC to have a lot more teeth in terms of improving what comes out of its inspections. The system generally needs to support it in doing that.

Mr Reed: I am grateful to the Minister for giving me another opportunity to ask a question. While she is on housing, there is a growing issue of vulnerable young people and looked-after children being placed in unregulated, semi-supported homes or hostels. Some of them have severe mental ill health. When they are placed in such settings, they do not receive the support they require and become a danger to other people residing there. That happened in the awful case of Lance Scott Walker, a looked-after teenager in the care of Islington Council. He was placed in a hostel in Ealing, where he was stabbed to death by another young person with schizophrenia. It is clearly inappropriate for young people to be put in those kinds of setting. Is the Minister intervening with local authorities and the Department to try to prevent a repetition of that case?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank the hon. Gentleman for sharing that case. I was not aware of it. Some local authorities are not as good as they should be in discharging their responsibilities as corporate parents. It is clearly their duty to ensure that looked-after children are housed in an appropriate setting. That issue lies outside my purview, but I will take it up with colleagues in the Department for Education to ensure that we are properly enforcing our obligations towards looked-after children in relation to housing. That is clearly a concern to us.

Gosh—I have so much to get on to. The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark talked in particular about Southwark and rightly challenged me by saying that seeing perhaps only 35% of children was not enough. I agree, but I have been really impressed by the efforts made by Southwark on mental health support for the school population. It illustrates the importance of good leadership and working collaboratively with other organisations. I was pleased to visit Charles Dickens Primary School—I do not know whether it is in his constituency.

Neil Coyle: It is. They have great expectations for the children.

Jackie Doyle-Price: It is a fantastic school. It was amazing how the principle of mental wellbeing ran through the whole school from walking in to the point where the kids pick up a sticker that reflects their mood and put it on the whiteboard, so straightaway the teacher could look out for those who were feeling a bit distressed. The other amazing thing was the teaching assistants, who instead of being based in each classroom all had specialisms and did lots of one-to-one activities outside the classroom. Even more importantly, there was a facility to reach out to parents pre-birth—obviously families tend to go and see schools. I was hugely impressed, and that goes to show how we should be encouraging innovation and imagination with regards to these services. In fact, it is probably the poster organisation to show that mental health is not everybody else’s problem; it is all our problem. The ability for such engagement in school is fantastic, so well done Charles Dickens Primary School.

Members will be pleased to know that Sir Simon Wessely has worked with the sector, and interest groups in the sector, in coming up with his proposals. I am also in regular dialogue with them to discuss the principles. In the spirit with which we all approach reform of the Mental Health Act, we obviously want to keep people safe, so there needs to be the power for potential detention, but most importantly we need to protect the rights of patients and empower them. That is the principle that I really want to underline.

Barbara Keeley: We have moved past the point of discussing people with autism and learning disabilities. I take on board the Minister's concern, but I wonder whether she could answer my question. Under a reformed Mental Health Act, is she looking at—or minded to look at—changing how people with autism are included as if they have a mental health condition? That is important to a lot of people, and Sir Simon did not rule on it.

Jackie Doyle-Price: We need to look at issues about autism in the round. The hon. Lady is right that it is currently treated as a mental health issue for the reasons outlined by the hon. Member for Bristol East: it is not diagnosed until a mental health issue materialises. That is really the issue. I would like us to use the 10th anniversary of the Autism Act 2009 to reboot our approach to ensuring that we are looking out for people with autism. In a way, we must go through the same journey with autism and learning disabilities as we have with mental health. That does not really answer the question from the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

Barbara Keeley: It is about the legislation.

Jackie Doyle-Price: As far as legislation is concerned, ultimately people with autism who are suffering from mental ill health will be detained under the Mental Health Act. Perhaps we ought to pick up how that interacts with other legislation as we develop the White Paper. The overlap is a clear problem.

I have paid tribute to Sir Simon Wessely. We are all about making sure that our reforms deliver genuinely person-centred care. We should be removing coercion and control as far as we can.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) talked about Georgi Lopez, who addressed the all-party group and whom I had the pleasure of meeting. She tells a compelling story about her contrasting experiences. She readily concedes that on one occasion being detained under the Act was the best thing that could have happened to her, but on another occasion it did her genuine harm. In fact, Members who read Frank Bruno’s book will find exactly the same story. It is almost as if once someone is on that pathway and under detention, they will always be seen through that prism. We need to tackle the underlying prejudice. People who are suffering from mental ill health are vulnerable; they are not an inconvenience. Any services provided by the state need to be working with them to support them, not to do them harm.
Our overall objective when we asked Sir Simon to look at the Act was to reduce the rising number of people detained under it. I hope that underlines the spirit with which we are approaching the inquiry. We also asked him specifically to address the disparities in how the Act is used, highlighting in particular the impact on black and ethnic minority groups, but also on women. It is of great credit to him that he went much further than that and led a full review of the entire Act. Again, that raises the expectations on me to deliver fundamental reform—but that is fine; it is what I am here to do. He did so with such speed, and having taken so many with him, that he has provided exactly the right conditions to approach reform.

Sir Simon built relationships with service users and carers, and I am riding on the back of them. I meet those people regularly to hear directly from them about their responses to his recommendations. We will continue with that. I have been struck by some of the experiences shared with me by service users and family members, which bring home how disempowering it can be. I often talk about the arrogance of medical professionals who, when someone turns up and says, “Fix me,” send them along. That dismissiveness can be more so in mental health than anywhere else. We need to ensure that we put in a regime that treats people with dignity and respect.

At the heart of this issue, the current Act has much too big a disempowering effect, which does too much to remove people’s autonomy and not enough to support their decision making and influence over their own care. It is dehumanising. We should look at detention as the last resort, because it does genuinely do harm. That is not to be critical: staff will act with the best of intentions, but a lot of it depends on culture. When Georgi Lopez shared her experiences, she talked about the two very different cultures of the organisations in which she was detained. When the CQC visits such places and assesses whether they are well led, it must assess the culture and whether patients are genuinely empowered.

I do not think we should duck the fact that sometimes we will have to detain people for their safety and that of others, but we need to ensure that we have the right guarantees in place. I am struck by something that Sir Simon always says: from the moment of detention, release planning should start there and then. A credible care plan is all about getting people back out and re-empowered. It should be based on consent and empowering the patient.

As has been mentioned, Sir Simon’s report contains 154 recommendations. I will work with the Ministry of Justice on a joint White Paper from both Departments, which will come forward by the end of the year. We have already started to implement the recommendations that we can, and I hope that Members are reassured by how, last week, the previous Prime Minister re-emphasised her commitment to making sure that we tackle the issues regarding black and ethnic minority detainees. I know she will continue to have a full interest in these issues from the Back Benches. I reassure the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South that if she sees no sign of a White Paper, she has a good ally on the Government Benches to hold the Government’s feet to the fire. I look forward to engaging with all hon. Members on those recommendations when we come forward with our White Paper, for which we should also consider the issues that have been highlighted during the debate.

As I have said, we want to modernise and ensure that people who are detained under the Act receive better care by improving patient choice and autonomy in their treatment. We will introduce statutory advanced choice documents to enable people to express, in advance of detention, their view on the care and treatment that works best for them.

It is important to talk about the role of family, because we have agreed that patients should be able to identify a nominated person who will have the power to look after their interests under the Act. At the moment, the next of kin is the default. I have heard compelling evidence from patients who have said that that is not always appropriate. Family members can often be a source of abuse or additional pressure and harm, so patients want to be able to nominate someone, which seems extremely sensible. I recognise that that will cause some controversy.

Dr Lewis: The Minister says that that seems extremely sensible but if, for example, somebody is seriously mentally ill and imagines that their parents mean them harm when they are actually doing everything they can in support, should the parents be locked out from knowing what is happening to their child?

Jackie Doyle-Price: We will have to have that debate. My right hon. Friend articulates the opposing position to what I have heard. I regularly hear his example when I chair the national suicide prevention panel. We have had dialogue with NHS organisations and there is a consensus statement setting out the framework by which reports can be given to family members. Equally, patients who are detained under the Act should be able to say which family members should not be consulted about their treatment. For example, we see women who are victims of domestic violence and abuse by their partner and find themselves detained under the Act; their partner would normally be their next of kin, but it would not do those women any good for that person to be contacted.

Dr Lewis: I quite agree, but my debate was nearly nine years ago. Is it not a bit late in the day for the Government to say, “Well, we are having a conversation about this?” At the time, there seemed to be some quite sensible rules, but the main problem was that the local mental health authorities were not applying them. If anything, it seems that we are further away from our objectives than we were nine years ago.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I think my right hon. Friend misunderstands me. We have a consensus statement that governs how NHS organisations and practitioners should deal with people at risk of suicidality, although there is concern among bereaved families that it is not always followed. Equally, in delivering a service that empowers patients, those patients should be able to identify their nominated person. Those discussions take place much more frequently when people set up new relationships with NHS practitioners. When they change GP, for example, they are invited to nominate a person, in case there are any safeguarding issues.
Dr Lewis: I hesitate to intervene one last time. I fully accept the Minister’s point about abusive partners, but what if the person is desperately, seriously ill and delusional, and the mother is not allowed to be told information about their offspring, because they are technically an adult? At what point do you decide that the person has lost capacity to identify correctly with whom information should or should not be shared?

Jackie Doyle-Price: That highlights the importance of having a nominated person earlier in the journey. I do not disagree with my right hon. Friend, but he highlights the difficulty of our work to get the balance right between keeping someone safe and respecting their wishes. I fully anticipate that when we produce the White Paper on this issue, he and I will probably have another debate about it. It is important that we get it right, with the safety of the patient in mind while empowering them to make their own decisions.

I have already mentioned that we will end police stations being places of safety under the Act, and that will be included in any legislation. On equalities, we are working with the NHS to introduce the first ever race equality framework to ensure that mental health care providers work with local communities to improve the ways that patients access and experience treatment. An important point is that although we are concerned that under the Act there are far too many detentions of people from black and minority ethnic communities, it is possible that is partly because they find it difficult to access services. We need to address that properly.

To help to address that, we are also launching a pilot programme of culturally appropriate advocacy. Clearly, we will need to make that resource available to ensure that people have access to it. The review said that we need to learn a lot more about that whole issue, so we will work with the National Institute for Health Research, which will launch a call for research later in the year to give us more answers. Jacqui Dyer MBE is our Mental Health Equalities Champion, and she will play a leading role in taking forward the review’s recommendations on tackling the injustices faced by black and minority ethnic services users.

I have spoken for quite some time; I hope I have covered most of the aspects mentioned. On the issue of funding, I have probably bored everyone senseless by saying that we are determined to deliver a much-expanded service, and our focus must be on developing those community services. We have made resources available to do exactly that through the long-term plan, but that is not to say that the issue is not still challenging. However, I hope we will be able to do much more in the community for people with severe mental illness, so that we can treat them in the community rather than have them go into crisis care.

To illustrate that with an example, if we can get people out of beds and into the community, the ability to look after more patients is really stark, so it starts to pay for itself. I discussed that with a clinical director from the NHS who said that if they remove three people from in-patient beds and have them in the community, the productivity is so much greater straightforward. We rely on good local leadership to crack that and make it happen.

I have covered most of the things I wanted to. I will just reiterate my thanks to all Members who have participated in a very good debate, and I look forward to having discussions on the White Paper as it develops.

David Hanson (in the Chair): The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark has the opportunity to wind up, if he so wishes.

4.8 pm

Neil Coyle: I thank all colleagues for their comments and personal experience. When I worked at the National Centre for Independent Living, the charity ran Experts by Experience across social care. I hope that the Minister takes note of that—it sounds as if she is talking about involving survivors, service users and carers in future plans. I thank the Minister for her frank admission that we need to do more. Again, I thank all the organisations involved.

Some people are commenting online that too few of us are here in the Chamber, but lots of work goes on outside such debates as this one. For example, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) referred to the all-party group on social work. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) also works on mental health outside that group, and reference was made to the previous legislation of my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed).

I asked the Minister 10 things, I think, most of which were covered in her response, but I will follow up on some. On children’s access to mental health care, it is great to acknowledge the leadership of Charles Dickens Primary School in Southwark, but that 35% target is a national one, and it would be good to know from the Minister what more is coming in the system. On the principles in the independent review, she mentioned gratefulness, an indication about the principles, and she just touched on the advocacy issue. It is important to note that the piloting of the culturally appropriate advocacy is more limited in scope than the review intended, so it needs to be expanded to everyone, whether informally through in-patient care or to people detained. The model should be an opt-out one, which was the preference of the review.

The Minister confirmed that the White Paper will still be on time. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham talked about when legislation might appear, and perhaps the Minister will indicate that in correspondence. She touched on resources, the need to expand the service offer and how it pays for itself—how she is making the case for parity of resource allocation in the system would be good to know. She spoke positively about the nominated person and better involvement of nearest relatives, and that is really welcome. That person is of course chosen when someone is well—that is the key difference. No matter how ill someone becomes later on, or how badly they suffer delusions, the person whom the patient chose when well is important.

Earlier upstream interventions were mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), and others. The Minister commented that the high level of detention through not getting that right was a mark of failure. The spirit of the plans is to get that level down. It would be good to see more.

It was brilliant to hear about the custody cells, which will be included in any legislation. That is a brilliant commitment. On sexual assaults, I think that the response
was that we need to learn more. I welcome the earlier campaign of the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) to end mixed-sex wards, but such incidents are still occurring. More needs to be done, just as it does on the issue of deaths. There was a specific request for an inquiry, and it would be good to know the Minister’s view of that.

On standardised support and care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East told us about the family of a child with autism having to make that decision on whether to travel. The Minister said that too many are in that position, and it is something that the CQC should look at. Given that the CQC may only gain the powers and resources that she mentioned through Government, I think a stronger case needs to be made for that.

On advance decisions, there were some positive comments but I will come to an end. The lyrics of “Karma Chameleon” were mentioned by the Minister, and Prime Ministers might “come and go”, but the people who need their lives transformed and who need better mental health care experience the outdated legislation every day. I hope that after the White Paper we will see real pace to deliver reform.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered reform of the Mental Health Act 1983.

4.13 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Written Statements

Monday 8 July 2019

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 9 July 2019. The UK will be represented by Mark Bowman (Director General, International Finance, HM Treasury). The Council will discuss the following:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President will brief the Council on the outcomes of the 8 July meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU. Ministers will then discuss potential new sources of revenue for the upcoming multiannual financial framework: the EU’s long-term budget.

Own resources

The Finnish presidency will then give an update to the Council on the potential new sources of revenue for the upcoming multiannual financial framework, following a discussion during the early morning session.

Presidency work programme

The Finnish presidency will present its work programme on economic and financial matters for July to December 2019, followed by an exchange of views.

Appointment of the President of the European Central Bank

The Council will be invited to adopt a Council recommendation on the appointment of Christine Lagarde as the next President of the European Central Bank.

European semester

The Council will be invited to adopt the 2019 country-specific recommendations as part of the European semester process.

Any Other Business

The Dutch Finance Minister will brief Ministers on the topic of aviation taxation and carbon pricing.

DEFENCE

Contingent Liability: Case Telescoped Cannon and Ammunition Contract

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): I am today laying before the House a departmental minute to advise that the Ministry of Defence (MOD) has received approval from Her Majesty’s Treasury to recognise a contingent liability associated with the design authority support for case telescoped cannon and ammunition (CTCA) contract extension.

The departmental minute describes the continued contingent liability that the MOD will incur as a result of signing an amendment to the CTCA contract. This amendment extends the exclusion to the contractor’s liability for indirect and consequential losses until March 2021. Due to the value of the contract it is not acceptable for the industry participants to incur such a risk, the value of which cannot be quantified.

For completeness, in addition to the clause outlined above, the contract contains a limitation of liability against contractor’s personnel at Government establishments and an overall limitation of liability linked to the value of the contract (£4.8 million). After completing a robust risk assessment these have been found not to create any further contingent liabilities.

EDUCATION

Children’s Health and Wellbeing in Schools

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): Today, the Department for Education has published details for its new healthy schools rating scheme. This is one of our key commitments under the Government’s childhood obesity plan, which sets a national ambition to halve childhood obesity rates by 2030 and significantly reduce the health inequalities that persist.

The healthy schools rating scheme celebrates the positive actions that schools are delivering in terms of healthy living, healthy eating and physical activity, and it will support schools in identifying further actions that they can take in this area.

This voluntary rating scheme will be available for both primary and secondary schools. Schools will engage in a self-assessment exercise and will receive their rating based on their responses to questions around food education, compliance with the mandatory school food standards, time spent on PE in school and the promotion of active travel for pupils’ journeys to and from school.

The first schools participating in the scheme will receive their reports and certificates in July 2019. We encourage all participating schools to use this scheme to reflect on their future actions, and to share their achievements with parents, pupils and the wider school community.

The scheme is part of a wider series of Government actions to support children’s health and wellbeing, which includes delivering free school meals for over a million disadvantaged children each year; doubling the PE and sport premium to £320 million a year; investing up to £26 million to kick-start sustainable school breakfast clubs; investing £9 million in our holiday activities and food programme in summer 2019; and updating the school food standards to reduce the amount of sugar in school meals.

We welcome any feedback on the scheme during its first year and will use this information to inform future scheme developments. Guidance for schools on the healthy schools rating scheme is now available on www.gov.uk.
Higher Technical Education Reform

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): I am pleased to launch the consultation on higher technical education (levels 4-5) in England. Qualifications at this level sit between level 3 qualifications, such as A-levels and the new T-levels, and level 6 qualifications, such as bachelor’s degrees.

Our vision is for higher technical education to be a prestigious choice that delivers the skills employers need, encourages more students to continue studying after A-levels or T-levels and attracts workers of all ages looking to upskill and retrain.

The proposals in this consultation are the next step in our programme to reform technical education. They build on the introduction of T-levels and our investment in apprenticeships as part of our modern industrial strategy to improve productivity and help people progress in their work and lives.

The Government’s review of higher technical education has found that there is growing employer demand for the skills provided by higher technical education. But it also found that uptake of higher technical qualifications is low by international standards, has fallen over time, and is low by comparison to other levels of education.

Some higher technical qualifications and courses are well-recognised and valued by employers and students. But overall there is low awareness and varying quality, with the range of terminology, qualifications and provider types creating a complex landscape that is hard for employers and students to navigate.

The starting point for our reforms is to raise the prestige of higher technical education and strengthen its value to employers by putting their needs and quality first. Improving quality now—to demonstrate the value of higher technical qualifications—will lead to increased uptake of higher technical education in the future.

To do this we are proposing a new system to make it clearer which higher technical qualifications provide the skills that employers want. This will be delivered through the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education signalling which qualifications deliver the knowledge, skills, and behaviours set out in employer-led national standards. This will help qualifications at this level command the confidence of students and employers alike.

Alongside this we propose working with the Office for Students to demonstrate the quality of providers, so there is more high-quality provision delivered across higher and further education, including through our flagship employer-led national colleges and institutes of technology.

Finally, we want to make higher technical education a positive and more popular choice by raising awareness and understanding of the new suite of institute-approved qualifications in colleges and universities, and among potential students and employers.

These reforms will take time to deliver. We want to work with everyone who wants to improve higher technical education. I strongly encourage everyone with an interest to contribute to the debate, so we can build the world-class technical education system our students deserve and our country needs.

[HCWS1694]
Informed by this Government policy, the Environment Agency will update its national strategy for flood and coastal erosion risk management.

The Government policy statement will take into account information from many sources including the UK climate projections 2018¹ and climate change risk assessment²; the first national infrastructure assessment³; and responses to recent consultations such as those on: the Environment Agency’s draft national flood and coastal erosion risk management strategy for England⁴; “Improving our management of water in the environment”⁵; local authority funding for flood and coast as part of the review of local authorities’ relative needs and resources⁶; and the infrastructure finance review consultation⁷.

The call for evidence which I have published today focuses on some specific issues on which the Government would like additional evidence. They are:

- What we understand by the term “resilience”—asking how the term resilience is currently used, and whether the different aspects of resilience could usefully be brought together into one overall concept.
- Describing outcomes, driving action and monitoring progress—seeking examples of cases where metrics have been used effectively to achieve an overarching outcome, and information on the advantages and disadvantages of using composite metrics to describe, drive and monitor flood and coast outcomes.
- Adapting to coastal change—seeking information about what coastal protection authorities have done to join up decisions about managing the coastline with wider plans and decisions for the area, and examples of whether councils have used, or tried to use, powers to fund specific coastal erosion works or to create coastal change management areas.
- Corporation tax relief for business contributions—asking how businesses have used the provision for businesses to receive corporation tax relief on their contributions to Government-funded flood and coast projects.
- Local funding initiatives for flood risk management—seeking examples of local initiatives funded from sources other than the public sector and what could be done to help these types of initiatives succeed.
- Developer contributions—asking about the barriers and enablers to the use of developer contributions to ensure developments are safe for their lifetime, and what arrangements are in place for maintaining flood assets in new developments.
- Managing financial risks from flooding—asking about how organisations manage the financial risks associated with flooding, in the context of climate change.

I will arrange for copies of the call for evidence to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

¹ https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/research/collaboration/ukcp
⁶ https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/review-of-local-authorities-relative-needs-and-resources
⁷ https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/infrastructure-finance-review

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Persecuted Christians: Review of Support

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I have today deposited in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament the independent review of Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) support for persecuted Christians, conducted by the Anglican Bishop of Truro, the Right Reverend Philip Mounstephen.

The review is the conclusion of a project that began in December 2018, when I asked Bishop Mounstephen to carry out this important research with the full support of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The UK has always been a leading champion of human rights. In recent years, the FCO has stepped up its work on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). In response to new evidence and as a sign of the UK’s commitment, the Prime Minister appointed Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon in 2018 as the UK’s first special envoy for freedom of religion or belief.

In that role, Lord Ahmad has championed FoRB across Government, through the FCO’s diplomatic network, and in his travel overseas. The UK has raised the rights of religious minorities at the highest levels, including in Nigeria, Iraq and Pakistan. Lord Ahmad has also worked with British diplomatic missions—including at the United Nations in Geneva and New York—to defend FoRB. Furthermore, he has overseen the provision of significant funding through various projects and programmes, including over £250 million to support people who were driven from their homes by Daesh’s persecution.

Today, about 245 million Christians worldwide are believed to face persecution for their faith. The evidence suggests the problem is getting worse. The number of countries where Christians face religiously motivated harassment rose from 128 in 2015 to 144 a year later, according to the Pew Research Centre.

The review builds on the Bishop’s interim report published in May 2019, which examined the scale and character of religious persecution. It includes further findings and recommendations about how the FCO might improve its response.

The review draws on information from: non-governmental organisations; Church leaders; reporting from the FCO’s diplomatic missions; interviews with FCO staff and analysts; FCO written sources (including reporting from the network, research papers and policy notes); interviews with retired members of the FCO and with those who have suffered directly from discrimination or persecution. I offer my particular thanks to those who bravely shared their harrowing experiences.

I welcome Bishop Mounstephen’s report and its recommendations. We are working across Government to agree a formal collective response.

The review will also be available on the gov.uk website, and further information is available on the review’s website at https://christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/interim-report/.
TRANSPORT

Inclusive Transport Strategy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): This month marks the one-year anniversary since the publication of the Inclusive Transport Strategy. As Transport Accessibility Minister I am very proud of all that has been achieved in the last 12 months and this Government remain fully committed to delivering against the commitments set out in the strategy.

While a relatively short period of time has passed since the publication of the strategy, we have already reached some significant milestones and continue to make steady progress in delivering the strategy’s commitments. Achievements include:

- A commitment to extend the Access for All programme with an additional £300 million, delivering improvements at a further 73 stations between 2019 and 2024;

- An invitation to motorway service stations to apply for a share of £2 million funding for fully accessible Changing Places facilities, supporting disabled people to travel easily and comfortably on the road network;

- The introduction of the first ever impartial and independent Rail Ombudsman, making sure passengers are heard and that they get a fair deal when train companies fall short;

- The extension of the Blue Badge eligibility criteria to include people with non-visible disabilities (mental, cognitive, learning, psychological, and neurological); and

- The publication of the “Inclusive Transport Strategy: Monitoring and Evaluation framework”.

Nonetheless, I acknowledge that there is still more to do to ensure that all disabled people have the same access to transport as everyone else and can travel confidently, easily and without extra cost. The Government will continue to work with transport operators, charities and disabled people’s organisations to ensure we achieve our overall goal, which remains to create a transport system which offers equal access for disabled passengers by 2030, with assistance if physical infrastructure remains a barrier.

I have today written to the Chairs of the APPG for Disability, the Transport Select Committee, the Women and Equalities Select Committee and the Health and Social Care Select Committee, including further detail on the progress of the past year. Copies of this letter have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1699]
**Written Statements**

**Tuesday 9 July 2019**

**BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY**

Energy Council

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The EU Energy Council took place on 25 June 2019 in Luxembourg. The UK was represented by the Deputy Permanent Representative to the European Union, Katrina Williams.

**Council conclusions on the future of the energy systems in the Energy Union**

The presidency put the Council conclusions to member states for adoption. The aim of the conclusions was to identify priorities for the next decade of the energy transition, following on from the recently adopted clean energy for all Europeans package and the Commission’s long-term strategy for decarbonising the European economy.

Member states exchanged views, with comments largely focusing on language which reflected their varying positions on the role of nuclear, gas and carbon capture usage and storage in the future energy system. Many member states also recommended that the text reflected greater ambition in line with the Paris agreement, and some expressed disappointment that the EU had not agreed a 2050 net zero greenhouse gas emissions target at the 20 June European Council. Other member states highlighted the importance of a just transition, and the need to integrate concerns about security of supply.

The UK intervention reinforced the importance of ensuring the transition to a safe and sustainable low carbon energy system to meet emissions reductions targets, highlighting the UK’s revised target of 2050 to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions. The UK joined other member states in highlighting the need for a technology neutral approach to maximise member states’ abilities to deliver these targets. The UK also stressed the negative signal that not agreeing conclusions would send.

Following small amendments to the conclusions, member states adopted the text.

**EU external energy relations**

The Commission provided information regarding the EU’s external energy relations, setting out context of the EU’s current relationships with Africa, the US, China and the eastern Mediterranean.

Member states generally highlighted the importance of ensuring that the EU’s relationships with these groups were in line with shared objectives of ensuring European energy security and facilitating the transition towards a decarbonised energy system.

The UK’s intervention highlighted the importance of de-risking investment in Africa, noting the potential role that international climate finance may play in unlocking greater flows of private finance toward clean growth. The EU-US relationship was noted to be important for increasing access to liquid natural gas, which would help to increase regional energy security, diversity of supply and competition. Regarding China, the UK highlighted the importance of focusing on practical co-operation and applying international standards, with a view to encouraging China to shift domestic and regional investment to low carbon alternatives to coal.

**Any Other Business items**

The Commission gave an overview following on from its recent assessment of the draft National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs), which member states had been required to submit under the governance regulation. It noted some of the collective challenges that member states faced to achieve their existing renewable energy and energy efficiency targets.

The Finnish delegation updated member states on the work programme for their incoming presidency. They highlighted that their presidency would be used to further enhance the EU’s Energy Union and its objectives, and would promote dialogue among member states about their draft NECPs.

Ministers had an informal discussion over lunch on the role of the euro in the field of energy.

**HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE**

Promoting Professionalism, Reforming Regulation

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): Today I am publishing the Government response to the consultation “Promoting professionalism, reforming regulation”.

“Promoting professionalism, reforming regulation” set out proposals to make professional regulation faster, simpler and more responsive to the needs of patients, professionals, the public and employers.

We will take forward legislative changes to the regulators’ fitness to practise processes and operating framework. We believe that this will realise the greatest benefits for regulatory bodies, registrants and the public.

These changes will deliver:
- Modern and efficient fitness to practise processes;
- Better supported professionals; and
- More responsive and accountable regulation.

We will also make the legislative changes recommended by the Williams review into gross negligence manslaughter in healthcare, including removing the General Medical Council’s right to appeal decisions made by the Medical Practitioners’ Tribunal Service.

These changes are a real step forward in delivering on our manifesto commitment to reform and rationalise the current outdated system of professional regulation of healthcare professions.

In developing our response, we have reflected on and responded to the findings of a number of recent reports, including the NHS long-term plan and the interim people plan.

The consultation received over 900 responses from individuals, organisations, healthcare professionals and members of the public. I would like to thank all those who took the time to respond to the consultation. Their views will be instrumental in shaping the future of professional regulation in the UK.

The UK and devolved Governments will now work together to develop and then consult on draft legislation.
HOME DEPARTMENT

Modern Slavery

Mr and Mrs Field, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and the noble Baroness Butler-Sloss GBE to conduct an independent review of the Modern Slavery Act.

The final review was laid in Parliament in May 2019. The review made 80 recommendations aimed at improving our response on four discrete themes: the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, transparency in supply chains, legal application and independent child trafficking advocates.

The review made a compelling case that now is the time to strengthen elements of our legislation and its implementation. The Government have accepted many of the review’s recommendations now. Some recommendations require further consultation to determine the best way to deliver them. To support this, we are now launching a consultation on proposed measures to strengthen the transparency in supply chains legislation.

The consultation seeks views from all interested parties on proposals to extend the reporting requirements to public sector organisations, measures to increase transparency and reporting quality and civil penalties. The consultation opens today and will run for 10 weeks. On certain recommendations relating to independent child trafficking advocates, the Government have committed to publish a further update to Parliament.

I am grateful to the reviewers and all of those who contributed to the review for their comprehensive work on this report. Tackling modern slavery remains a priority for the Government and our response to the review will form a significant part of our future priorities. To implement our response, the Government will continue to work in partnership with law enforcement and criminal justice agencies, devolved Administrations, the private sector, NGOs, civil society and the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner.

[HCWS1704]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): I have today received the interim report from the independent Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission. I have placed a copy in the Library and made it available on www.gov.uk. I would like to thank the commissioners for their work to date and look forward to receiving their final report later this year.

[HCWS1703]
OPSS will closely monitor the recall and it will take further action should it become necessary to ensure public safety. It will continue to work closely with other Government Departments and key stakeholders to raise awareness of the recall.

The message for consumers who have an unmodified dryer is to stop using and unplug their dryer immediately and to contact Whirlpool for a replacement.

[HCWS1707]
Appropriate recommendations on how far the process, products and framework may need to improve and evolve to meet the needs of local residents and local taxpayers, and the wider public interest.

A copy of the terms of reference has been placed in the Library of the House.

[WomensEqualities]

**WOMEN AND EQUALITIES**

**Opposite-sex Civil Partnership**

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): This Government want to see more people joined in a legal union, in the way they want, with the person they love. Greater commitment leads to greater family stability, and greater security within relationships helps to protect children’s interests.

That is why the Prime Minister announced last October that we would extend civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples. Since then, the Government supported the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration etc.) Act 2019, brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), through the parliamentary process.

The Act paves the way for opposite-sex couples to form civil partnerships. Now we are preparing to make those rights a reality through the supporting secondary legislation.

Today we have published a paper entitled “Implementing Opposite-Sex Civil Partnerships: Next Steps”, setting out how we intend to implement opposite-sex civil partnerships by the end of this year. This includes important issues such as parental responsibility and parenthood, financial benefits and entitlements and the protections we intend to put in place for religious organisations in relation to civil partnerships. The Government have already sought views from key stakeholders on most of these issues. We intend, wherever appropriate, to extend existing rights that apply to same-sex civil partners or opposite-sex married couples to opposite-sex civil partners. This document is not, therefore, a formal consultation.

The issue on which we are keen to hear views is conversion into and out of marriage. We know that there are some opposite-sex married couples who would have preferred to form a civil partnership, had this option been available to them, and may therefore wish to convert their marriages to a civil partnership. We are seeking views on proposals to introduce a new right for opposite-sex couples to convert from a marriage to a civil partnership for a limited period of time, before bringing this and the existing right for same-sex couples to convert from a civil partnership to marriage to an end. In this way, couples will have an opportunity to choose the relationship that best suits them, following which marriage and civil partnership will be once and for all established as two distinct and different legal unions by ending movement between them. Our consultation on conversion rights “Civil Partnerships: The Future of Conversion Rights” has also been published today and runs until 20 August.

I have placed copies of the documents in the Library of the House.

We are firmly committed to changing the eligibility requirements for civil partnerships by the end of the year at the latest. Our aim is that opposite-sex couples will be able to register and form civil partnerships by the end of this year. Any substantive changes on conversion are likely to follow in 2020, after the consultation exercise.

[HCWS1705]
Written Statements

Thursday 11 July 2019

TREASURY

Finance Bill 2019-20

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): The Government have consulted on a number of tax policies announced at Budget 2018. Today, the Government are publishing responses to these consultations alongside draft legislation to be included in the Finance Bill 2019-20. This is in line with the Government’s commitment to publish the majority of tax legislation in draft before it is introduced to Parliament.

Policy decisions in response to consultation

In response to consultation, the Government have made a number of policy decisions which are reflected in the draft legislation, relating to:

Off-payroll working rules from April 2020—the Government have previously announced that they will improve compliance with the off-payroll working rules in all sectors by bringing them into line with the public sector from April 2020. The reform will make organisations responsible for determining whether the existing rules apply to the contractors they hire and ensuring the necessary employment taxes are paid. As announced at Budget 2018, outside the public sector, this change will only apply to medium and large-sized organisations. The draft legislation makes clear when non-public sector organisations, including unincorporated organisations, will be considered to be small and therefore not within the scope of the reform. The draft legislation also includes provisions to ensure that all parties in the labour supply chain are aware of the organisation’s decision and the reasons for that decision, and will introduce a statutory, client-led status disagreement process to allow individuals and fee-payers to challenge the organisation’s determinations.

Digital services tax—the Government have previously announced a tax on the UK-linked revenues of certain digital services to ensure that large multi-national businesses pay their fair share towards the public services we all rely on. Following consultation, the Government have made changes to the detailed design to better ensure the legislation delivers on its objectives. The treatment of cross-border marketplace transactions will be changed in cases where a transaction involves a non-UK user located in a country that levies a DST on similar transactions. There will be various changes to the administrative framework. The DST will now be payable annually rather than in quarterly instalments, and it will be assessed on a group-wide basis. An exemption for financial and payment services from the definition of an online marketplace will also be included.

Corporate capital loss restriction—the Government are introducing a new corporate capital loss restriction that will restrict the use of carried-forward capital losses to 50% of the amount of annual capital gains from April 2020. The draft legislation maintains the fundamental design features that were set out at consultation such as the commencement date and the amount of annual deductions allowance. The exemption for the policyholder share of basic life assurance and general annuity business (BLAGAB) gains and losses has been extended to cover all BLAGAB losses that offset BLAGAB gains, and some clarifications have been made to ensure that the regime operates as intended. The Government will also provide exemptions for gains within the oil and gas ring-fence and the REIT property rental business ring-fence.

Further provisions have been made in respect of one day accounting periods, connected party losses and loss streaming rules.

Stamp taxes on shares consideration rules—The Finance Act 2019 introduced a targeted market value rule to prevent contrived arrangements involving transfers of listed securities to connected companies to minimise stamp taxes on shares liability. Following consultation, the Government are extending the market value rule to the transfer of unlisted shares to a connected company. The draft legislation also removes an anomaly where a double-charge can arise on certain company re-organisations.

Technical tax changes

In addition, the Government are publishing a small number of technical tax changes that need to be made to ensure legislation works as intended. These include measures relating to:

Capital gains tax: Relief for loans to traders—extending the scope of the capital gains tax relief in respect of loans to traders, so that it applies to loans made to traders located anywhere in the world and not just the United Kingdom.

Share loss relief—extending the scope of the income tax and corporation tax share loss relief, so that it applies to shares in companies carrying on a business anywhere in the world, and not just the United Kingdom.

Legislation with immediate or retrospective effect

The Government have published legislation for the following measures that will have immediate or retrospective effect:

Deferred corporation tax payments on cross border transfers—this legislation will allow companies to defer payment of tax that arises on certain transactions with group companies in the European economic area. This is intended to provide certainty for UK business following a recent first-tier tax tribunal decision. The legislation will apply to corporation tax that becomes payable for accounting periods that end on or after 10 October 2018.


Previously announced policy changes

The Government are also publishing legislation for the following policy changes announced earlier this year:

Windrush compensation scheme—payments will not be subject to income tax, capital gains tax or inheritance tax when made under the Windrush compensation scheme.

Future responses

The Government previously consulted on proposals and subsequently draft legislation last year to reform penalty regimes for late filing and late payment across taxes. The Government remain committed to these reforms. The timing and details of implementation will be announced at a future fiscal event.

As announced at Budget 2018, to tackle the hidden economy, the Government are considering a tax registration check linked to renewal processes for some public sector licences. This is known as “conditionality”. The timing of any change will be announced at a future fiscal event.

For other consultations, the Government are continuing to consider the responses and will respond in due course.

Draft legislation is accompanied by a tax information and impact note (TIIN), an explanatory note (EN) and, where applicable, a summary of responses to consultation document. All publications can be found on the gov.uk website. The Government’s tax consultation tracker has also been updated.

[HCWS1713]
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): Agriculture and Fisheries Council takes place in Brussels on 15 July.

As the provisional agenda stands, the Finnish presidency will start with a presentation of their work programme for the coming six months.

The main item for agriculture will be on the post-2020 common agricultural policy (CAP) reform package, which covers three regulations: the regulation on CAP strategic plans; the regulation on financing, management and monitoring of the CAP and the regulation on the common market organisation (CMO) of agricultural products. Member states will exchange views on the environmental and climate-related aspects of the reform package.

The Commission will also present the report from the high-level group on the sugar market.

There are currently four items scheduled under “any other business” where the Commission will update the Council about;

the state of play on African swine fever;
animal welfare during transport in high temperatures during summer months;
the progress report on the implementation plan to increase the availability of low-risk plant protection products and accelerate implementation of integrated pest management in member states; and

[HCS1710]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Minister for the Middle East, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murry), will attend the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 15 July. It will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini, and will take place in Brussels.

The FAC will discuss current affairs, Iraq, Iran and the Central African Republic. There will also be an informal lunch with the Moldovan Foreign Minister Nicolae Popescu.

Current affairs

HRVP Mogherini will provide an update on the current situation in Sudan and progress in African Union (AU) and Ethiopian mediation efforts towards a civilian-led Government. The HRVP will also debrief Ministers on Ukraine and the outcomes of the 8 July EU-Ukraine summit. We expect HRVP Mogherini to raise recent developments in Venezuela, as well as the Sahel following her recent visit.

[HCS1711]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Windrush Lessons Learned Review

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The terms of reference for the Windrush lessons learned review set out that the aim was to publish the report by 31 March 2019.

On 8 July 2019, the independent adviser to the Windrush lessons learned review, Wendy Williams, wrote to me about the timing of her review. The complexity and scale of the work required, and the request for her to also consider the right-to-rent scheme following the High Court judgement of 1 March, means that she now expects to submit her final report to me at the beginning of September. I will publish the report as soon as practicable following this.

We are determined to learn from, and right the wrongs of, the past. I look forward to receiving the report when the review concludes. I will consider the recommendations from the review carefully and announce appropriate action.

I will place a copy of Wendy Williams’s letter of 8 July in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCS1714]
Anthony Grainger Inquiry Report

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Today the Anthony Grainger public inquiry has published its final report, which has been laid before the House.

Anthony Grainger was shot dead on 3 March 2012 by an armed firearms officer of Greater Manchester police as part of the covert investigation named Operation Shire. A public inquiry was announced by the then Home Secretary in March 2016 to ascertain the circumstances surrounding Mr Grainger’s death.

I would like to thank His Honour Judge Teague for publishing his report today and for leading this important work, from which we expect to learn valuable lessons for the future. The Government will provide a formal response in due course, once we have fully considered the report, and any recommendations therein.

The report will be available from the Vote Office and to view on the inquiry website https://www.graingerinquiry.org.uk/ and on gov.uk.

TRANSPORT

High Speed Rail (West Midlands – Crewe) Bill: EVEL

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am today placing in the Library of the House the Department’s analysis on the application of Standing Order 83L in respect of the amendments made in the Commons Select Committee stage for the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill.

Clean Maritime Plan

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am today announcing the publication of the clean maritime plan, the UK’s route map to clean growth for the maritime sector and pathway to zero-emission shipping. The UK has one of the world’s proudest and most innovative maritime heritages. In January 2019, the Government launched Maritime 2050, a landmark strategy setting out our vision for the future of the British maritime sector. The clean maritime plan is the environment route map of Maritime 2050. It identifies ways to tackle air pollutants and greenhouse gas emissions in parallel, while securing clean growth opportunities for the UK. A cleaner shipping industry will help make the air we breathe cleaner and safer, and create a healthy environment for the future.

It builds on the role the UK played as a leading voice in advocating for an ambitious global target to reduce greenhouse gases from shipping. The initial greenhouse strategy agreed by the International Maritime Organisation in 2018, set a target to reduce GHGs from international shipping by at least 50% by 2050 and to phase them out completely as soon as possible in this century. By publishing the clean maritime plan, the UK becomes one of the first countries since the agreement of this initial strategy to publish a national action plan. The plan is also the first cohesive national strategy to reduce domestic shipping emissions, as part of our journey to meeting net zero.

A global transition to clean shipping is taking place, presenting significant opportunities for economic growth. Research undertaken for the Government suggests the global market for maritime emission reduction technologies could reach £11 billion per year by 2050, potentially resulting in economic benefits to the UK of £510 million per year.

To capitalise on this economic opportunity and achieve zero-emission shipping, the clean maritime plan makes the following core commitments:

1. A call for evidence in 2020 on non-tax incentives to support the transition to zero-emission shipping, as well as a consultation on how the renewable transport fuel obligation could be used to encourage the uptake of low carbon fuels in maritime, and a green finance initiative for maritime, which will be launched at London international shipping week in September.

A working group and study to identify and support potential UK zero-emission shipping clusters.

Government support for clean maritime innovation in the UK.

Funding of £1.3 million to support clean maritime innovation through MarRI-UK; grant support for early stage research projects related to clean maritime; and a clean maritime award to celebrate leaders in the field of emissions reduction.

A maritime emissions regulation advisory service (MERAS), in place by 2020, to provide dedicated support to innovators using zero-emission propulsion technologies.

The plan also contains a number of zero-emission shipping ambitions, outlining the Government’s vision for the future of zero-emission shipping and the milestones that will need to be achieved to reach it.

This plan has been achieved through close co-operation between industry and Government. The Clean Maritime Council, an advisory body of key stakeholders from across the maritime sector, academia and Government, worked alongside Government to develop the strategy, and will continue to work with us to implement the commitments. A full review of the clean maritime plan’s implementation will take place in 2022.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

First Annual Procurement and Commercial Report

The Secretary of State for International Development (Rory Stewart): I have today published DFID’s first annual procurement and commercial report. This provides a summary of DFID’s procurement and commercial practice, complementing the information contained in the Department’s annual report and accounts and meeting the commitment made at the time of DFID’s review of supplier practices in October 2017 to place more information in the public domain. I am placing copies of the report in the Libraries of both Houses.

The UK is an acknowledged world leader in the provision of development and humanitarian aid. Our aid budget acts not only in the interests of the world’s poorest, but also in Britain’s long-term national interest.
Our global leadership in development requires continuing efforts to improve value for money, efficiency, innovation and effectiveness.

The report therefore sets out the progress we have made over the last two years in the introduction of commercial reforms to ensure the best value for taxpayers’ money and the maximum benefit for poor and vulnerable people across the world from our programmes. These reforms include the introduction of a comprehensive code of conduct for DFID’s supply partners, strategic relationship management of our strategic partners, greater transparency of costs, fees and overheads in our funding agreements and measures to promote the engagement of small and medium-sized enterprises in our supply chains.

We will continue to improve our commercial practice, publishing a procurement and commercial report each year so that Parliament and the public can assure themselves directly that UK is being used effectively.

[HCWS1712]
**Written Statements**

**Monday 15 July 2019**

**TREASURY**

**Public Service Pensions**

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):
The Government are committed to providing public service pensions that are fair for public sector workers and for taxpayers. This is why we brought forward reforms in 2015, based on the recommendations of the Hutton report, to ensure that these pensions are sustainable in the future.

The courts have considered cases regarding the implementation of the 2015 reforms. On 27 June 2019 the Supreme Court denied the Government permission to appeal the Court of Appeal’s judgment that transitional provisions introduced to the reformed judges and firefighters pension schemes in 2015 gave rise to unlawful age discrimination. The Government respects the Court’s decision and will engage fully with the employment tribunal to agree how the discrimination will be remedied.

The ruling relates to the “transitional protection” offered to some members when the reformed schemes were introduced. In order to ensure people close to retirement age were treated fairly, the Government agreed to “transitional protection”, which broadly permitted those members who were closest to retirement at the time new pension schemes were introduced to remain members of their respective old schemes. The court has found that those too far away from retirement age to qualify for “transitional protection” have been unfairly discriminated against. As “transitional protection” was offered to members of all the main public service pension schemes, the Government believe that the difference in treatment will need to be remedied across all those schemes. This includes schemes for the NHS, civil service, local government, teachers, police, armed forces, judiciary and fire and rescue workers. Continuing to resist the full implications of the judgment in court would only add to the uncertainty experienced by members.

The matter will be remitted to the employment tribunal in respect of the litigants in the reformed judges and judicial pension schemes. It will be for the tribunal to determine a remedy. Alongside this process, Government will be engaging with employer and member representatives, as well as the devolved Administrations, to help inform our proposals to the tribunal and in respect of the other public service pension schemes.

Initial estimates suggest remediying the discrimination will add around £4 billion per annum to scheme liabilities from 2015.

The reasons for the 2015 reforms remain: that public service pensions are a significant cost for the taxpayer, now and in the future. The judgment does not alter the Government’s commitment to ensuring that the cost of public service pensions are affordable for taxpayers and sustainable for the long term.

[HCWS1725]

**DEFENCE**

**Chemical Weapons Convention: Declaration of Protective Programme**

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster):
My right hon. Friend the Minister of State for Defence in the House of Lords (The Earl Howe) has made the following written ministerial statement.

The UK’s chemical protection programme is designed to protect against the use of chemical weapons. Such a programme is permitted by the Chemical Weapons Convention, with which the United Kingdom is fully compliant. Under the terms of the convention, we are required to provide information annually to the organisation for the prohibition of chemical weapons. In accordance with the Government’s commitment to openness, I am placing in the Library of the House a copy of the summary that has been provided to the organisation outlining the UK’s chemical protection programme in 2018.

[HCWS1718]

**Inappropriate Behaviour in the Armed Forces: Review**

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt):

In April of this year a report was commissioned to look into inappropriate behaviour in the armed forces. Our armed forces are the pride of our nation, and have a hard-won reputation here, and across the world.

The report which was undertaken by Air Chief Marshal Mike Wigston, concluded that while the vast majority of military personnel serve with great honour and distinction, some unacceptable behaviour does occur. I am publishing the report today.

I am accepting the recommendations of the report in full, including creating a defence authority to provide centralised oversight of their implementation. Detailed work on the design of this body and its responsibilities is now under way.

We are examining the recommendations and ascertaining how we can prevent inappropriate behaviour in the first place, and where it does occur, deal with the perpetrators more effectively. Leadership is key to this approach at all levels of the services from the most senior to the most junior. Everyone has a role to play in setting and maintaining standards. Non-Commissioned Officers in particular are key in holding people to these standards and the values of their service. I am therefore, in addition to the findings of this report, looking to ensure all Non-Commissioned Officers have what they need to address poor behaviour when they see it.

This will clearly take time, and I see today as the start of this work, not the end.

[HCWS1720]

**EDUCATION**

**School Sport and Activity**

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds):

A positive experience of sport and physical activity at a young age can build a lifetime habit of participation. It is central to meeting the Government’s ambitions for a world-class education system which promotes character, good physical health and mental wellbeing. We face a significant challenge to increase and maintain activity levels among children and young people, particularly
given the levels of childhood obesity. Data from Sport England’s Active Lives Children and Young People survey show that a third of children are currently doing less than 30 minutes of physical activity a day, less than half the amount recommended by the Chief Medical Officer.

The Department for Education, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and Department of Health and Social Care are today publishing a joint school sport and activity action plan which will set out the following ambitions:

- All children and young people take part in at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day.
- All children and young people have the opportunity to realise developmental, character-building experiences through sport, competition and active pursuits.
- All sport and physical activity provision for children and young people is designed around building basic skills as well as confidence, enjoyment, knowledge and understanding (known as physical literacy) with a focus on fun and enjoyment, and reaching the least active young people.

The action plan will set out a number of immediate actions that feed into realising these ambitions, including a strong commitment to joint working between schools and the sport sector. The plan also sets out areas of activity for the future with action to be confirmed in a further updated plan later in the year, following the spending review.

The immediate actions include a commitment to an additional £2.5 million from the Department for Education in 2019-20 to support schools through further work on teacher training, more help and advice to enable schools to open up their facilities and make links with providers, as well as providing more opportunities for young people to volunteer in sport. The plan also sets out over £4 million of Sport England investment in new after-school clubs, strengthening the school games competition and active pursuits.

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The Government are also committing to develop regional pilots to trial new and innovative approaches to getting young people active, jointly funded by Sport England and the Department for Education from 2020. The pilots will involve collaborative working from the school and community sector to offer a co-ordinated sport and physical activity experience for young people.

Home Department: Compliance Improvement Review

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): On 9 May 2019 I made a written ministerial statement to notify Parliament of compliance risks that MI5 had identified and reported within certain technology environments used to store and analyse data. In the statement I confirmed that I had established an independent review to consider and report back to me on what lessons could be learned for the future. My statement also notified Parliament that this review, the Compliance Improvement Review (CIR), is now complete and that the Government are publishing the summary section of the report and its recommendations, gisted where necessary for national security reasons.

The CIR was led by Sir Martin Donnelly, a former Permanent Secretary, and examined how the issue arose and considered MI5’s governance and risk management procedures in light of this. The review team had access to all relevant documentation and met key individuals from Government, MI5 and the Investigatory Powers Commissioner’s Office to discuss the background to the risks being identified. I would like to place on record my thanks to Sir Martin and the review team, who have worked diligently to complete a thorough and well-evidenced review.

I was provided with a copy of the review report in late June and have since had the opportunity to discuss it with Sir Martin. The Investigatory Powers Commissioner and the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament have both received copies of the full report.

The CIR identified three areas where improvements can be made. These are: improvements to support an effective compliance culture across MI5; improvements to ensure more effective sharing of information between MI5 and the Home Office to identify emerging issues; and improvements to ensure increased legal input to the MI5 Management Board and ensuring closer joint working between MI5 and Home Office legal advisors. The review makes a total of 14 recommendations to address these issues, which are set out in the document that has been published today.

I can confirm that DG MI5 and I agree with the CIR’s conclusions and my Department will now work closely with MI5 to deliver the recommendations.

It should be noted that the CIR found that there was no attempt by MI5 to hide the compliance risk they were managing. The CIR describes MI5 as “a consistently high-performing organisation, with a growing number of committed and professional staff working under sustained pressure to keep this country safe”, a view I share from my experience as Home Secretary. Copies of the CIR summary document will be made available on www.gov.uk and will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1722]

Serious Violence

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): On 1 April 2019 the Government published a consultation paper on a new legal duty to support a multi-agency approach to preventing and tackling serious violence.

The consultation sought views on three options to support a multi-agency approach to preventing and tackling serious violence including: a new duty on specific organisations to have due regard to the prevention and tackling of serious violence; a new duty through legislating to revise community safety partnerships; and, a voluntary non-legislative approach.
The consultation closed on 28 May and I am today publishing the Government response to the consultation which includes a summary of the responses that the consultation received. A copy of the Government response and related impact assessment will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and will be available on the www.gov.uk website.

**JUSTICE**

**Personal Injury Compensation**

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): Earlier today, I notified the market via the London Stock Exchange group that I would today lay a statutory instrument to change the discount rate applicable to personal injury lump sum compensation payments in England and Wales, to -0.25%. The new rate will come into force on 5 August 2019, in line with the statutory timetable set out by the Civil Liability Act 2018 (“the Act”).

Under the Damages Act 1996, I, as Lord Chancellor, have the power to set a discount rate which courts must consider when awarding compensation for future financial losses in the form of a lump sum in personal injury cases. The legal framework was changed by the Civil Liability Act 2018.

The new framework makes clear that claimants must be treated as “low risk” investors. Under the Act I, as Lord Chancellor, must conduct a review and determine whether the rate should be changed or kept unchanged within 140 days of beginning the review and including the day on which the review starts. I started the review on 19 March 2019, and in conducting this review, I consulted the Government Actuary and HM Treasury.

The Government Actuary provided an analysis of dual rates—this would involve a lower short-term rate and then a higher long-term rate after a “switchover” period. Although I consider their analysis interesting with some promising indications, I do not consider it appropriate, noting the lack of quantity and depth of evidence required, to adopt a dual rate for this review. The potential of the dual rate to be appropriate for future reviews is one that I will consider in more detail.

A full statement of reasons, explaining how I have decided upon this rate, will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

**WOMEN AND EQUALITIES**

**Office for Tackling Injustices**

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): On Friday 12 July, the Prime Minister announced the creation of the Office for Tackling Injustices. This is a new organisation that will hold the Government and wider society to account for tackling key social injustices.

Despite the great progress we have made in promoting fair treatment for all in the UK, we know that too many of our citizens are still held back by the injustice of unequal treatment on the grounds of their socio-economic background, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or disability.

The Prime Minister has spoken of her determination to tackle these “burning injustices”. But all Governments should work to end the injustices that continue to characterise our country for too many. The Office for Tackling Injustices (OfTI) will focus minds on how to create a fairer country in the decades to come.

By shining a light on data on injustices and monitoring change, the OfTI will provide evidence-based challenge to future Governments and wider society to tackle disparities in social and economic outcomes. Data is a hard, sometimes uncomfortable fact, but publishing it and communicating it clearly forces Government and others to hold a mirror up to their own performance and challenge themselves to do better.

The OfTI will have a remit covering social injustices relating to ethnicity, gender, disability, socioeconomic background and LGBT. As well as annually delivering a data-driven report on progress to Parliament, the OfTI will also publish thematic studies into issues relevant to its mandate. It will make use of relevant published data from various public authorities, monitoring trends and considering the underlying causes and drivers for them.

**WORK AND PENSIONS**

**Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council**

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council took place on 8 July 2019 in Brussels. The deputy permanent representative to the European Union, Katrina Williams, represented the UK.

The Council approved the non-binding 2019 country specific recommendations (CSRs) to member states, and endorsed the joint opinion of the Employment and Social Protection Committees, assessing the 2019 CSRs and the implementation of those from 2018. The Council also adopted guidelines for the employment policies of the member states 2019.

The Council debated the “economy of wellbeing” and “employment aspects of the strategic long term vision for a climate neutral economy”.

The Council closed with employment and social policy updates by the Commission on the International Labour Organisation, G7 and G20.

**Health-related Job Loss**

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): I would like to make the following statement on behalf of myself and the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price).
Today, my Department, in partnership with the Department of Health and Social Care, will publish a consultation on proposals to reduce health-related job loss.

As people live and work for longer, more employees are disabled or have long-term health conditions. There are significant and well evidenced benefits for employers, individuals and Government if health-related job loss can be reduced.

For employers, offering flexibility, early support and occupational health advice are the key to successful retention. Employers are best placed to take the early preventative measures that are most effective. There are large variations in employers’ capability and capacity to act with large firms five times more likely to provide occupational health when compared to small firms.

Each year more than 100,000 people leave their job following a period of sickness absence lasting at least four weeks. Survey evidence shows that 44% of people who had been off sick for a year then left employment altogether.

The proposals set out in this consultation include:

- Amending the legal framework to encourage workplace modifications and early action to support individuals on sickness absence leave;
- Reforming statutory sick pay so that it is better enforced, more flexible and covers the lowest paid and potentially, rewards effective action with a new rebate;
- Improving access to occupational health services with additional support for small employers including a potential subsidy;
- Government to provide best practice advice and support for employers on managing health and disability in the workplace.

The evidence and views gathered during this consultation will be used to develop our proposals further and understand the impact of the changes on both employers and employees.

[HCWS1719]
Written Statements

Tuesday 16 July 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Taylor Review: Implementation

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark):

The good work plan sets out the Government’s vision for the future of the UK labour market and how we will implement the Taylor review recommendations. It forms an integral part of the modern industrial strategy and this Government’s long-term plan to boost the productivity and earning power of people throughout the UK and to develop better jobs for all.

Today we are delivering the next phase of the good work plan. The good work plan recognised the vital role effective enforcement plays in ensuring confidence to challenge when the law is broken and in creating a level playing field between businesses. Establishing the director of labour market enforcement has been an excellent innovation, in terms of improving co-ordination across agencies, but we think we can go further. Today, we are publishing a consultation on new proposals for a single labour market enforcement body and will be seeking views on how the enforcement landscape could be simplified.

We will also be publishing the most recent director of labour market enforcement’s strategy, setting out recommendations for the Government which we will be carefully considering. The Home Secretary and I are very grateful to Sir David Metcalf for producing this report prior to his retirement and for all his hard work in this role. We are also delighted to announce that we have appointed a new interim director of labour market enforcement. Matthew Taylor, chief executive of the RSA, will be taking up this role from 1 August for 12 months.

The reforms we have announced today are the next important step in delivering on the good work plan and ensuring we have a labour market that is fit for purpose. We recognise that the world of work is changing and are delivering the necessary reforms to ensure the UK labour market can adapt effectively, and support the needs of both workers and employers.

Copies of the referenced consultation and the director of labour market enforcement’s strategy will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

TREASURY

ECOFIN: 9 July 2019

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):

A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) was held in Brussels on 9 July 2019. The UK was represented by Mark Bowman (Director General, International Finance, HM Treasury). The Council discussed the following:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President briefed the Council on the outcomes of the 8 July meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission provided an update on the current economic situation in the EU. Ministers then discussed potential new sources of revenue for the upcoming multiannual financial framework the EU’s long-term budget.

Own resources

The Finnish presidency gave an update to the Council on the potential new sources of revenue for the upcoming multiannual financial framework, following a discussion during the early morning session.

Presidency work programme

The Finnish presidency presented its work programme on economic and financial matters for July to December 2019.

Appointment of the President of the European Central Bank

The Council adopted a Council recommendation on the appointment of Christine Lagarde as the next President of the European Central Bank.

European semester

The Council adopted the 2019 country-specific recommendations as part of the European semester process.

Any Other Business

The Dutch Finance Minister briefed ministers on the topic of aviation taxation and carbon pricing.

EDUCATION

Teacher Training

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):

In the “Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy” published in January, the Government committed to help great people to become teachers and ensure high quality teacher training.

In support of this, I am introducing a new approach for assessing the numeracy and literacy of prospective teachers, which will replace the existing skills tests.

From October, teacher training providers will become responsible for ensuring that prospective teachers meet the high standards of literacy and numeracy required to be a teacher. Under this new system, trainees will be benchmarked against a defined set of skills they will be expected to have by the end of their initial teacher training.

This new system of provider-led assurance will be introduced at the end of the current recruitment cycle.
Written Statements

Wednesday 17 July 2019

CABINET OFFICE

European Union (Withdrawal) Act: Common Frameworks


The report is available on gov.uk and details the progress made in discussions between the UK Government and devolved Administrations regarding common frameworks in the fourth reporting period covered under the legislation, and sets out that no “freezing” regulations have been brought forward under section 12 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act.

The publication of the report reflects the Government’s continued commitment to transparency.

The attachment can be viewed online at http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-07-17/HCWS1732/

Treasury

EU Agreements with Third Countries

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): The Government are undertaking a programme of work to replace EU international agreements with bilateral agreements ready for a UK exit from the EU either in the event of no deal or at the end of the proposed implementation period. This is essential preparation for the UK’s withdrawal from the EU to ensure that the UK can, where relevant and possible, maintain the benefits of these agreements, thereby providing continuity and stability to businesses and individuals.

As part of this programme, officials in HM Treasury and HM Revenue & Customs are working with their international partners to replace EU Customs Co-operation and Mutual Administrative Assistance (CCMAA) agreements with UK-third country bilateral agreements. These agreements will provide a legal framework for the exchange of information between the UK and international partners on customs matters and continued co-operation between the parties’ customs authorities, both facilitating legitimate trade and supporting international efforts in fighting customs fraud. They also fulfil domestic legal requirements for Authorised Economic Operator Mutual Recognition Agreements (AEOMRAs), which deliver important trade benefits to some UK businesses.

In cases where the other party’s domestic law allows, the “replacement” UK-third country CCMAA agreements will include provision for them to enter into force upon signature, often referred to as “definitive signature”. The parties would thus be bound by these agreements upon signature, although the agreements’ provisions would not have effect until the EU CCMAA agreements cease to apply to the UK. Use of definitive signature in this case would enable the UK and its international partners, in the event of EU exit without a deal, to transfer without interruption key customs agreements that are currently in place by virtue of the UK’s membership of the EU. This is because there will be no change in effect of the agreement due to it being a replication of the arrangement the EU currently has in place with the third country. While many international treaties are expressly subject to ratification, it is also common in both UK and international practice, where practicable, for treaties to enter into force upon signature; in UK law, where a treaty enters into force upon signature, it is not subject to the procedures for parliamentary scrutiny as provided in section 20 of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010. However, as CCMAA agreements are straightforward bilateral agreements, and rely on provisions in the Taxation (Cross-Border Trade) Act 2018, which has already been approved by Parliament, the Government consider that definitive signature is appropriate in these instances.

The Taxation (Cross-Border Trade) Act 2018 provides the necessary powers for the UK to create a stand-alone customs regime once the UK exits the EU. In particular, section 26 of this Act allows for the UK to share information on customs matters with international partners and therefore provides the necessary legal basis from a UK perspective for the co-operation between parties outlined in the CCMAA agreements.

Once signed by both parties, a copy of each UK bilateral CCMAA agreement subject to definitive signature will be laid before Parliament as a Command Paper in the treaty series for information in the normal way.

Where third country partners’ domestic law does not permit them to be bound by signature, thereby requiring ratification by them, the CCMAA agreement will not use definitive signature but will be drafted to provide for consent to be bound by a two-stage process of signature and ratification.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

International Criminal Justice: Support and Funding

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Today we mark the Day of International Criminal Justice, which provides an opportunity to update Parliament on its support for the principles and institutions of international justice in the previous calendar year.

Support for international criminal justice and international humanitarian law is a fundamental element of the UK’s foreign policy. The UK believes that justice and accountability for the most serious international crimes is crucial to building lasting peace and security.

The UK Government believe that the International Criminal Court has an important role in pursuing accountability, but only when national authorities are either unable or unwilling to do so. The UK has long
provided political, financial, and practical support to the ICC. We are one of the largest financial contributors to the Court, contributing £9.7 million in 2018. An example of the UK’s practical support was the sentence enforcement by the Scottish Prison Service of Mr Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi, who was convicted of destroying cultural heritage sites in Timbuktu.

In 2018, the ICC considered situations from across Africa, the middle east, Europe, south-east Asia and South America, with 11 situations subject to formal investigations, and proceedings continuing in three trials: the Ongwen case (Uganda), the Ntaganda case (Democratic Republic of the Congo), and the Gbagbo and Blé Goude case (Ivory Coast). Al Hassan (Mali), and Yekatom (Central African Republic) were surrendered to the ICC.

The ICC’s trust fund for victims plans to launch an assistance programme in the Central African Republic, to provide physical and physiological rehabilitation, alongside material support for victims and their families. The UK contributed funds to the TFV for reparations to victims in Mali.

While the UK continues to support the role of the ICC, reform is required for the ICC to fulfil its mandate as intended under the Rome statute. The UK will work with other states parties, the Court, and civil society, to achieve this goal.

The International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT) continued its mandate to fulfil the residual functions of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. The IRMCT delivered an appeals judgment in the case of Radovan Karadžić, the former Bosnian Serb politician convicted in 2016 of genocide in Srebrenica. Karadžić’s sentence, increased from 40 years to life, sends a clear message that those who commit atrocities will be held to account. The IRMCT continued to hear the retrial in the case of Stanišić and Simatović and issued a decision in the Sešelj contempt case.

The UK supported the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia and the Residual Special Court for Sierra Leone through a total contribution of over £500,000. The UK has also been at the forefront of international efforts to gather and analyse evidence of atrocities committed in the middle east. Since 2016, we have committed £50,000 to the UN International Impartial and Independent Mechanism (HIM) to support the preparation of legal cases for serious crimes committed in the Syrian conflict. The UK also led efforts to adopt a UN Security Council resolution establishing an investigative team to collect, preserve and store evidence of Daesh atrocities in Iraq, and contributed £1 million towards its operation. The first mass grave exhumation was in March 2019 in the Yazidi village of Sinjar.

In reaction to the Rohingya crisis in Burma, the UK worked closely with the EU and the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation to secure a UN Human Rights Council resolution to establish a mechanism to collect and preserve evidence of human rights violations to support future prosecutions.

We will continue to update Parliament on our support to international criminal justice through our annual human rights report.
develop all councillors, the taskforce has noticed occasions where member behaviour has caused it concern. There is a high degree of social capital that the council has yet to fully tap into and the taskforce calls for an innovative approach to harness this enthusiasm. The taskforce has also highlighted that the culture change has still not permeated all levels of the council and silo working remains an issue.

The taskforce has set the bar high for RBKC’s recovery. It is important there is ambition and pace in the council’s recovery efforts over the next three to four months in responding to the taskforce’s recommendations, including:

- Urgently implementing its recovery strategy;
- Fostering a council-wide culture change so that everyone is working together;
- Clearly communicating its recovery plan and develop stronger communications skills;
- Ensuring that the senior team has the appropriate skills and resilience;
- Making a clear commitment to creating a better relationship with its community.

I am assured the council has already set in train action to meet these recommendations. This includes a paper outlining its plans to implement organisational change at the council by 2020.

I will review the process in September, by which point I hope the council will have made sufficient further progress. I look forward to continuing to work with the taskforce.

[HCWS1733]

**JUSTICE**

**Victims of Crime: Code of Practice Consultation**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): Today, I am launching the Government’s consultation on revising the code of practice for victims of crime (the code), which sets out our proposals for improving the code.

This consultation is the first step in strengthening the code, one of the overarching improvements to victims’ experiences of the criminal justice system which we committed to in the cross-government victims strategy, published in September last year.

The vision we set out in the victims strategy is one of a justice system that supports even more victims to speak up by giving them the certainty that they will be understood, that they will be protected, and that they will be supported throughout their journey, regardless of their circumstances or background.

As part of delivering on that vision one of our key commitments was to amend the code to address its complexity, accessibility and language and consult on a revised version. We also committed to update entitlements in the code so they are better reflective of victims’ needs.

This thematic consultation sets out our proposals for amending the code and will inform our second consultation on a revised draft code.

Some of the proposals included in the consultation are:

- Greater clarity around victims’ rights, such as a right to be given information about the investigation and criminal proceedings and the right to make a victim personal statement (VPS);
- A statement within the code that victims who do not report the crime or withdraw from the criminal justice process are entitled to the same support as those who do report the crime;
- Creation of a short, user-friendly overview of the code to summarise the key points that all victims need to know (and a separate one for children/young people);
- Creation of a guide for practitioners working in the criminal justice sector on how to apply the code;
- Revising the current categories for victims entitled to an enhanced service to make it simpler, with a greater focus on identifying and meeting the needs of the victim.

However, amending the code is only part of the picture. To strengthen the code we also committed to:

- Introduce improved reporting, monitoring and transparency to strengthen compliance with the code;
- Bring forward proposals for a consultation on the detail of the victims’ law, including strengthening compliance with the code and the powers of the Victims’ Commissioner.

We are already working with police and crime commissioners and local criminal justice partnerships to improve compliance with the code through improved reporting, monitoring and transparency on whether victims are receiving entitlements. This goes hand in hand with amending the code. On 1 April we issued the first iteration of a framework for compliance with the code.

Once we have revised the code we will then consult on the detail of victim focussed legislation. As part of that we want to strengthen the enforcement of the code to make sure victims receive the services they are entitled to, and criminal justice agencies are held to account if they do not. We also want to explore increasing the Victims’ Commissioner’s powers to better hold the Government to account. However, to do that we first need to revise the code to make sure that the entitlements victims receive are the right ones in the first place.

In developing the consultation, we have engaged extensively with victims and victims’ groups and considered the views and recommendations made by key stakeholders including the Victims’ Commissioner and the London Victims’ Commissioner. This has ensured the consultation is informed by those who have had direct experience of being a victim, as well as those with frontline expertise.

The consultation is available in full at: [https://consult.justice.gov.uk/digital-communications/proposed-changes-to-the-victims-code/](https://consult.justice.gov.uk/digital-communications/proposed-changes-to-the-victims-code/)

[HCWS1730]
**Written Statements**

*Thursday 18 July 2019*

**BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY**

**Furniture and Furnishings: Fire Safety**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Today, I will publish the Government response to our consultation on updating the Furniture and Furnishings (Fire) (Safety) Regulations 1988, which set fire resistance requirements for cover materials and fillings used to make domestic upholstered furniture.

The review aimed to ensure that our legislative framework maintains fire safety for consumers, reflects technological advances in furniture manufacturing practices, and facilitates a reduction in the use of hazardous flame-retardant chemicals as a means of making furniture fire resistant.

The consultation sought views on proposals to amend the testing regime. It also sought views on proposals for clarifying and amending the scope of the regulations, strengthening the traceability requirements to bring furniture into line with other product sectors, updating labelling rules, and extending the time period for trading standards to institute legal proceedings.

The Government are committed to protecting consumers from all safety risks, but we will not compromise on fire safety. During the course of the review, to ensure the highest standards, we sought the views of chief scientific advisers from relevant Departments across Government.

The Government will now develop a new approach to address the different sources and chemical risks posed by fire to upholstered furniture and furnishings. It will focus on safety outcomes (such as reduced risk of ignition, reduced risk of fire spread) and will be underpinned by a set of essential safety requirements which all upholstered furniture placed on the market must meet.

This approach is consistent with that taken for other consumer products. The (new) legislation will be supported by British Standards which will be developed by the British Standards Institution in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders, including industry, fire-safety experts and consumer representatives.

This new approach will continue to ensure that manufacturers place only safe products on the UK market. I will consult on the detail of this new approach in due course. In the meantime, the existing regulations will continue to apply.

**Registration of Overseas Entities**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The Government have today published their response to the report of the Joint Committee on the Draft Registration of Overseas Entities Bill.

The draft Bill was published on 23 July 2018 to enable pre-legislative scrutiny. The Joint Committee formed for the purpose of scrutinising the draft Bill was established in February 2019 and published their report on 20 May 2019. The report was supportive of the Bill and its intentions, concluding that it is “timely, worthwhile, and, in large part, well drafted”. The Government welcome the Committee’s report and thank the Committee’s Chair and members for their detailed scrutiny of the draft Bill. The scrutiny process has been valuable and the Government have accepted a number of the Committee’s recommendations and will be giving serious consideration to others to ensure that the legislation is as effective as possible in tackling the use of UK property for money laundering purposes by improving the transparency of property ownership.

A copy of this Government response will be laid before both Houses.

[HCWS1737]

**TREASURY**

**Senior Managers and Certification Scheme: Extension to Financial Conduct**


In my Written Ministerial Statement of 3 July 2018 [HCWS823] I announced that the senior managers and certification regime would come into force for financial services firms regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority only—also known as solo-regulated firms—from 9 December 2019. I would like to update the House that, in these regulations, there will be two exceptions to the commencement date, for newer categories of solo regulated firms.

The first are benchmark administrators. This is a new category of authorised firm introduced by the EU benchmark regulation, which came into force on January 1 2018. The benchmark regulations included a transitional period such that these firms have until the end of 2019 to become FCA authorised. The SM&CR will commence for benchmark administrators on 7 December 2020 to allow the FCA to carry out a dedicated consultation for benchmark administrators before making final rules for the sector.

The second are claims management companies (CMCs). The Government have already legislated to bring CMCs within the FCA’s regulation, and applications for authorisation are currently being considered by the FCA. Firms awaiting full authorisation, but previously regulated by the Ministry of Justice will have temporary permission to operate. Not all CMCs will have gained full authorisation by December 9 this year, so the commencement regulations confirm that the SM&CR begins for these firms on December 9 this year, or at the date at which they receive full authorisation if this is later.

[HCWS1743]
The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): In accordance with the charter for budget responsibility, the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) has today published its second fiscal risks report (FRR). The OBR published its first FRR in 2017, which the Government responded to in 2018 through the managing fiscal risks report (MFR). FRR 2019 fulfils the OBR’s legal obligation to publish a statement setting out the main risks to the public finances at least once every two years. The report features an updated risk assessment of the original issues the OBR raised in FRR 2017, in addition to highlighting new risks to the public finances. It was laid before Parliament earlier today and copies are available in the Vote Office and Printed Paper Office.

The UK is one of the few countries in the world to publish a standalone report on fiscal risks and the FRR is the only such report to be published by an independent agency rather than the Government itself. The UK is a world leader in fiscal risk disclosure and management and is determined to set the global standard not only for the disclosure of fiscal risks but also for the active management of those risks. The IMF’s 2018 article IV consultation noted that “The UK continues to set international standards with respect to fiscal transparency”. This report keeps the UK at the frontier of fiscal management internationally and demonstrates the Government’s commitment to fiscal transparency and accountability. The publication of FRR 2019 further strengthens the cycle of accountability that the first report started. As required under the charter for budget responsibility the Government will respond formally to the FRR 2019 within the next year.

The Government have helped to build a stronger, fairer economy—dealing with the deficit, helping people into work, and cutting taxes for people, families, and businesses. The economy has grown continuously for the past nine years, the employment level is currently at a record high, unemployment is currently at its lowest rate and level since 1975, inflation is at the Bank of England’s target and real wages are rising. We are tackling the productivity challenge head on because it is England’s target and real wages are rising. We are working our way back to the Red Book rate and level since 1975, inflation is at the Bank of England’s target and real wages are rising. We are working our way back to the Red Book rate and level since 1975, inflation is at the Bank of England’s target and real wages are rising.

The Government have also made substantial progress in improving the health of the public finances since 2010, which have now reached a turning point. The deficit has been reduced by more than four fifths and debt has begun its first sustained fall in a generation. At 2010, which have now reached a turning point. The deficit has been reduced by more than four fifths and debt has begun its first sustained fall in a generation. At 2010, which have now reached a turning point. The deficit has been reduced by more than four fifths and debt has begun its first sustained fall in a generation. At 2010, which have now reached a turning point. The deficit has been reduced by more than four fifths and debt has begun its first sustained fall in a generation. At 2010, which have now reached a turning point. The deficit has been reduced by more than four fifths and debt has begun its first sustained fall in a generation. The Government has reduced the structural deficit by more than four fifths and debt is falling in every year of the forecast. The stress test is based on the IMF’s less disruptive no-deal scenario. The OBR notes this scenario is not necessarily the most likely outcome and it is relatively benign compared to other possible scenarios (for example, assuming limited short-term border disruptions). The OBR reports that this scenario would add around £30 billion a year to borrowing from 2020-21 onwards and around 12% of GDP to net debt by 2023-24, compared with the OBR’s March forecast baseline.

In the long term, the most significant fiscal risks come from structural economic and societal trends such as lower productivity growth, higher interest rates, climate change, and the costs associated with measures designed to adapt and mitigate the effects. The risks the OBR has highlighted further reinforce the need for prudent budgeting and the reduction of debt to more sustainable levels.

Overseas Detainees: Detention and Interviewing

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): On 20 May 2019, in response to an urgent question, I made a statement to Parliament on Ministry of Defence internal policy with regard to the receipt and sharing of intelligence related to detainees overseas. The Secretary of State for Defence internal policy with regard to the receipt and sharing of intelligence related to detainees overseas. The Secretary of State for Defence internal policy with regard to the receipt and sharing of intelligence related to detainees overseas. The Secretary of State for Defence internal policy with regard to the receipt and sharing of intelligence related to detainees overseas. The Secretary of State for Defence internal policy with regard to the receipt and sharing of intelligence related to detainees overseas.

The Ministry of Defence, along with other Government departments, has now finalised its review of the consolidated guidance and has recommended its replacement with a new document: “The Principles relating to the detention and interview of detainees overseas and the passing and receipt of intelligence relating to detainees”, a draft of which was provided to the Government on 12 June 2019. The Ministry of Defence, along with other Government departments, has now finalised its review of the consolidated guidance and has recommended its replacement with a new document: “The Principles relating to the detention and interview of detainees overseas and the passing and receipt of intelligence relating to detainees”, a draft of which was provided to the Government on 12 June 2019.
Departments, has considered these principles, accepts them in full, and has begun work to update its internal guidance accordingly. The principles and revised supporting internal guidance will be fully implemented by the end of the year.

[HCWS1746]

**Defence Fire and Rescue Project**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): My right hon. Friend the Minister of State in the House of Lords (Earl Howe) has made the following written ministerial statement.

I am announcing the outcome of the Defence fire and rescue project which has been examining potential improvements in how fire and rescue services are provided to the Ministry of Defence, both in the United Kingdom and overseas.

In June 2018, I announced the Ministry of Defence’s intention to award the Defence fire and rescue project contract to Capita Business Services Limited and I can today confirm this to be the case. Following a competitive bidding process, Capita’s bid was deemed to deliver the best technical solution and the best value for money for Defence. The 12-year contract is worth £525 million and will mark a step change in capability for Defence’s fire and rescue capability.

The project will deliver a range of benefits whilst sustaining our worldwide fire and rescue capability. These benefits include improved safety for firefighter personnel and those they protect as well as fire risk management for the Department. This will be achieved through the investment in new equipment, technology and training which the contract will enable to happen faster than it otherwise would. In addition, we expect the contract to deliver significant financial savings over the course of its lifespan; money which can be reinvested into other areas of the Defence budget.

I can assure Parliament that these proposed contractual arrangements with Capita have been subject to thorough scrutiny and due diligence processes conducted across Government, including in the Ministry of Defence, Cabinet Office and HM Treasury. These assurance processes included the financial sustainability of Capita and tested their technical expertise to deliver the contract in a sustainable and resilient manner. Safeguards are in place to ensure there is no break in service provision. Capita have experience in delivering fire and rescue service provision as they already operate the internationally recognised Fire Service College at Moreton-in-Marsh.

Initially, around 560 MOD civil servants, mainly firefighting personnel, are expected to transfer under Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations to Capita as the contract is implemented over the next few years. Fire station managers, their staff and trade union representatives of the civilian workforce have been consulted throughout the project and are being formally told of the Defence arrangements with Capita as the contract is implemented. The Royal Air Force and Royal Navy will continue to employ firefighters. Over time there will be a reduction in the number of firefighters in the Royal Air Force due to the introduction of new technology and there may be opportunities in the future for some roles becoming sponsored reserves.

I can confirm that existing fire and rescue services provided to the Atomic Weapons Establishment in Aldermaston, the Defence Science and Technical Laboratory in Porton Down and at US visiting forces bases in the United Kingdom are unaffected by these changes. The Defence Fire Training and Development Centre at Manston will close in due course with training transferred to Capita’s existing fire training facility at Moreton-in-Marsh. The award of this contract will enable the Ministry of Defence to vacate large elements of the Manston site which will be released to support economic development, potentially including housing, in the local area.

This has been a complex procurement with a delay in the award of the contract following a legal challenge from Serco Limited, the other final bidder. We have now mutually agreed an out-of-court settlement of £10 million which provides better value for money for the tax payer than an uncertain and costly court case. I can confirm that the MOD’s accounting officer has commissioned an independent review to ensure we learn from this acquisition process. This will be led by Tony Poulter, a non-executive director at the Department for Transport. The findings of the review will be published after the summer.

[HCWS1758]

**DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT**

**Equality and Listed Events**

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): I have written today to the BBC, S4C, Ofcom and the International Paralympic Committee in a limited consultation on adding the Paralympic games to the listed events regime. I have also copied the letter to Channel 4 which currently holds the broadcasting rights for the next Paralympic games in Tokyo 2020, to other eligible free-to-air broadcasters, and to the Sport and Recreation Alliance.

The Broadcasting Act 1996 gives the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport discretion to designate sporting and other events of national interest as listed events. Once listed, broadcasting rights to such events must be offered to the main free-to-air terrestrial broadcasters (“qualifying broadcasters”) on fair and reasonable terms. Qualifying broadcasters are those which reach 95% coverage of UK viewers and at no additional cost to the viewer than the television licence fee. Broadcasters currently meeting these criteria are BBC1, BBC2, ITV1 and Channel 4.

The current list, compiled in 1998, consists of two categories of events:

- **Group A**, in which full live coverage must be offered to the qualifying broadcasters; and
- **Group B**, in which live coverage may be broadcast on subscription television as long as secondary coverage is offered to qualifying broadcasters.

Under section 97 of the Broadcasting Act 1996, the Secretary of State is able to amend the list providing that they have consulted with the statutory consultees. In my letter I have asked consultees to consider the following:

whether, based on the guidance and criteria given, the Paralympic games should be added to the list;

whether the Paralympic games should be listed under group A or group B of the list;

other factors affecting the likely costs and benefits to the sport concerned, to the broadcasting industry and to viewers, as set out in the guidance on the criteria for listing; and

any other factors relevant to the final decision.

While the Government do not wish to reopen the list of events for a full review, we are committed to supporting more equality in the coverage of sport on TV, and in particular, disability and women in sport. It is for this
reason that I am considering whether to exercise discretion to add the Paralympics to the list, and that I intend on holding a consultation later this year on adding women’s sporting equivalent events to the regime that match the men’s events.

I will inform the House of the outcome once I have discussed fully with statutory consultees. [HCWS1751]

Telecommunications, Radio Spectrum and Postal Services: Statement of Priorities

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): I am today laying before Parliament the Government’s draft statement of strategic priorities for telecommunications, the management of radio spectrum, and postal services.

The statement sets out the Government’s strategic priorities and desired outcomes in a number of areas, including gigabit capable broadband deployment, 5G, spectrum management, the security and resilience of telecoms infrastructure, and furthering the interests of telecoms consumers.

The statement follows a statutory consultation that ran between 15 February and 27 March 2019. This elicited a number of responses from a large and diverse range of respondents, including industry, consumer bodies, local councils, and bodies representing rural interests. This has given the Government a wide variety of views to reflect upon. I would like to thank all respondents for taking the time and effort to respond.

I intend to designate the statement for the purposes of section 2A of the Communications Act 2003 after the end of the statutory “40-day period” (as defined in section 2C of the Act), unless either House of Parliament resolves not to approve it within that period. [HCWS1748]

Ofcom Provision of Information Regulations

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): I would like to update the House on Ofcom’s statutory duty to share information with the Government at least 24 hours before publication, introduced under section 24A of the Communications Act 2003, inserted by the Digital Economy Act 2017. This early access to information from Ofcom is important in supporting the Government’s wider policy responsibilities in safeguarding and improving the delivery of essential communications services on which consumers rely.

To commence the duty I must specify by regulations what categories of information will be exempt from this duty, following consultation with Ofcom. Our consultation with Ofcom has now concluded and I can inform the House of our intention to proceed with the implementation of the duty via a negative statutory instrument later in the autumn.

The categories of information to be listed as exempt in these regulations include broadcasting content standards and broadcasting licensing enforcement. This is to ensure that there can be no accusations or perceptions that the Government have had inappropriate prior knowledge or been involved in these functions. Corporate functions will also be excluded. Other types of information Ofcom proposes to publish, which fall outside of the above exemption regulations, will need to be shared with the Government at least 24 hours before publication by Ofcom once the duty comes into force, unless there are exceptional circumstances or prior agreement is reached.

A memorandum of understanding (MoU) will be agreed between Ofcom, DCMS and BEIS, setting out processes to be followed for the provision of information by Ofcom. This MoU will provide the necessary assurances around who will have access to this information and when, as well as reinforcing the strong procedures Government Departments already have in place to handle sensitive information. Furthermore, additional arrangements for highly market sensitive information will see that such information only has to be shared once UK markets have closed (which may be less than 24 hours before publication), to provide necessary assurances to the companies Ofcom regulates.

The Government remain fully committed to Ofcom’s independence. This duty to provide information will not influence Ofcom’s investigations or decision making. Safeguards in the legislation legally prohibit representations being made to Ofcom before publication and also restricts with whom Ministers, and officials acting on their behalf, can share information before publication. For transparency, the consultation correspondence between DCMS and Ofcom will be published on gov.uk. [HCWS1750]

EDUCATION

National Retraining Scheme

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): The world of work is transforming. In particular, automation is a key opportunity for the economy, creating new jobs and raising wages, but it could also bring significant changes to the economy. This means it is critical that we develop a national retraining scheme that helps prepare citizens for future changes to the economy, including those brought about by automation, and supports them to retrain into better jobs.

That is why we are developing the national retraining scheme through a unique partnership between the Confederation of British Industry, the Trades Union Congress and Government, which will keep the voices of workers and businesses at the heart of the service.

The scheme will initially focus on employed adults aged 24 and over, without a qualification at degree level and earning below a certain wage threshold that we are testing to focus on those earning low to medium wages. We are investing in this group of people first as they have comparatively less access to existing Government support and are most in need of adapting their skills to take advantage of the opportunities the future changes to the economy will bring.

A key feature of the development of the scheme has been to start small, test, evaluate and scale up. We are putting the needs of individuals and employers at the heart of the development of the scheme, conducting
extensive user research to understand what they need from a national retraining scheme. We are also conducting a range of pilots investigating innovative approaches to overcoming barriers to training that adults face.

Today, I am pleased to announce the release of the first part of the national retraining scheme, “Get help to retrain”, to a small number of eligible adults in the Liverpool city region. This digital service will help adults to understand their existing skills, explore alternative roles or occupations and find relevant training to unlock opportunities for a broad range of good jobs that could be within their reach. “Get help to retrain” will be rapidly expanded to more people and more areas throughout the testing phase before being made available to all eligible adults in England in 2020.

This is the first of a series of products that will make up the complete national retraining scheme and marks the first step of an adult’s journey towards gaining the skills needed to secure a better job.

I wish to update the House on the matters discussed.

Adoption of Council conclusions on a sustainable EU chemicals policy

The presidency invited member states to adopt its conclusions on the development of a “non-toxic environment strategy”, and to take action on other commitments made in the seventh environmental action programme (EAP) and other previous texts, which have yet to be fulfilled.

Member states’ interventions focused on the need to improve the safe management of chemicals and ensuring the chemicals sector continues to adhere to EU standards, especially with regards to human health and the environment. Therefore, all were in agreement that the “non-toxic environment strategy” should be published before the end of the seventh EAP in 2020. The majority of member states also made it clear that they supported the need to ensure the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) was provided with sustainable and appropriate funding to allow it to continue to be the centre of knowledge on the sustainable management of chemicals, for the benefit of citizens and the environment.

I intervened to support the Council conclusions and to welcome an EU-wide chemical strategy. This was an important opportunity to reinforce our shared ambition for high environmental standards and continued improvement in the safe management of chemicals. I therefore highlighted our willingness to continue to collaborate with member states and the Commission, as well as other international partners, once we have left the EU, fully supporting calls to act on those commitments made in the seventh EAP. I also welcomed the gathering of data to better inform future decisions and to promote a risk-based approach to regulation, highlighting the need to minimise the impact on animals to achieve this aim.

Regulation on water reuse - general approach

The presidency invited member states to agree the proposed general approach on the regulation on water reuse.

The UK, along with a number of other member states, supported the compromise text provided by the presidency and its intention to promote waste water reuse across the EU for agricultural irrigation, within the context of future water scarcity and the circular economy. I made clear that harmonised rules could generate increased interest in reuse and stated that as drafted, the regulation offered a good degree of health and environmental protection. I also offered the forthcoming Finnish presidency our support in the trilogue discussions to follow between the European Parliament, European Commission and European Council.

The presidency concluded the general approach had been agreed, although two member states (Germany and Slovakia) abstained. The Finnish presidency has stated that it would like to begin trilogue negotiations with the European Parliament in October.

Environmental Implementation Review (EIR) - exchange of views

The Council exchanged views on the 2019 EIR report and the actions needed to ensure better implementation of EU environment policies and legislation.
The member states who intervened broadly welcomed the approach to the second cycle of the EIR, but agreed that additional work was required to identify workable solutions for closing environmental implementation gaps and addressing the root cause of poor implementation.

I took the opportunity to intervene, acknowledging the findings of the 2019 EIR and highlighting some of the additional actions we have taken since the publication of the report. This included the recent announcement of the designation of a further 41 marine conversation zones; the publication of our clean air strategy for England, which was commended by the World Health Organisation; and the forthcoming Environment Bill, which builds on the ambitions set out in our 25-year environment plan for England.

**AOB items**

The following items were also discussed under any other business.

**Clean planet for all (information from the presidency)**

Council noted the information from the presidency regarding the Council debates held on the EU’s long-term climate strategy, “Clean Planet for all: strategic long-term vision for a climate neutral economy”. The Commission intervened to speak about the EU’s position ahead of the United Nations climate action summit in September, and its assessment that the EU will overachieve its current 2030 greenhouse gas reduction target. Several member states intervened with their reflections on the discussion on climate at the European Council on 20-21 June, and to comment on the timescales for securing agreement of the EU strategy by 2020. I intervened to note the Government’s legislation for net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, the Welsh Government’s announcement of their intention to legislate next year for a 95% reduction by 2050, and the Scottish Government’s amendment to their draft legislation to achieve a 2045 net zero target. I confirmed that the UK supported the EU target of achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, while also recognising the need for a just transition.

**Draft integrated national energy and climate plans (presentation from the Commission)**

Council noted the presentation from the Commission concerning the draft national energy and climate plans (NECPs). The Commission stated that they viewed these first drafts as positive overall, though there were areas for improvement.

**Regulation on the monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) of CO2 emissions for shipping (information from the presidency)**

Council noted the information from the presidency concerning the regulation on the monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) of carbon dioxide emissions for shipping. Three member states intervened to raise the importance of aligning the EU MRV regulation with international reporting requirements.

**Carbon pricing and aviation taxes (information from the Netherlands delegation)**

Council noted the information from the Netherlands delegation on their conference on carbon pricing and aviation taxes, held on 20-21 June in the Hague. The member states which intervened on this AOB stated their support for the Netherlands’ initiative.

**Future Environment action programme (information from the Austrian delegation)**

Council noted the information from the Austrian delegation on the workshop held in Hainburg on 11 and 12 June. All member states who intervened emphasised their support for an eighth EAP.

**Clean mobility and electromobility (information from the Bulgarian delegation)**

Council noted the information from the Bulgarian delegation about possible measures to support clean mobility and, in particular, electromobility. Those member states who intervened, whilst supporting the need to look at options to address the rising carbon dioxide levels in Europe and the on-going problems around air quality, highlighted the challenges associated with electric vehicles and the uneven charging infrastructure across Europe.

**Recent international meetings-triple COP; UNEA (information from the presidency)**

Council noted the information from the presidency with limited interventions.

**G7 environment Ministers meeting (information from the French delegation)**

Council noted the information from the French delegation with limited interventions.

**LIFE regulation (information from the presidency)**

Council noted the information from the presidency with limited interventions.

**Update on priorities from Finland on their upcoming presidency**

Council noted the information from the Finnish delegation with limited interventions.

**Additional engagement**

In the margins of the Council, I met with a number of my counterparts from member states to discuss on global environmental issues including our legislation for net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, and the UK’s bid to host the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP-26) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), in partnership with Italy under a UK presidency.

**Global Resource Initiative Taskforce**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): In the 25-year environment plan, the Government committed to establishing the global resource initiative (GRI) to identify actions across supply chains that will improve the sustainability of products and reduce deforestation and other environmental degradation.

The GRI taskforce will put forward recommendations for how key sectors and stakeholders can best achieve the transformative change necessary to realise the GRI ambition on sustainable supply chains. Palm oil and
cocoa are key commodities for which viable measures of sustainability already exist. The taskforce will look at a wider range of key commodities and supply chain measures.

The GRI taskforce is meeting for the first time today and will be chaired by Sir Ian Cheshire. Sir Ian will be joined by business and environmental leaders from organisations including Legal and General, McDonald’s, Cargill, Tesco, the Green Finance Institute, WWF and NGO Forest Coalition.

The GRI presents an opportunity to transform the UK’s approach to sustainable land use and support international commitments on climate and biodiversity, and the sustainable development goals. It can create a model for change that inspires other countries and galvanises wider international action on nature and climate change. The Government anticipate a report in 2020 which can help shape global policies due to be agreed during 2020 and 2021.

[HCWS1739]

GENERAL AFFAIRS COUNCIL

General Affairs Council July 2019

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

The provisional agenda includes:

Multiannual financial framework 2021-27

The Finnish presidency will present its plan for approaching the next phase of negotiations on the multiannual financial framework (MFF). The intention is for member states to reach an agreement on the negotiations by the end of the year.

Presentation of the priorities of the Finnish presidency

Finland took up the EU presidency from 1 July and will hold it until 31 December. The presidency will deliver a presentation on its priorities which include: strengthening common values and the rule of law; making the EU more competitive and socially inclusive; strengthening the EU’s position as a global leader in climate action; and protecting the security of citizens comprehensively.

Implementation of the strategic agenda 2019-24

Ministers will discuss the implementation of the new EU strategic agenda 2019-24. The strategic agenda sets the overarching priorities for the next institutional cycle and it was adopted by the European Council on 20 June 2019. The priority areas are: protecting citizens and freedoms; developing the EU’s economic base; the European model for the future; building a climate-neutral green, fair and inclusive future; and promoting Europe’s interests and values in the world.

Commission communication on further strengthening the rule of law

The Commission will present its new communication on further strengthening the rule of law in the EU.

Rule of law in Poland / article 7 (1) TEU reasoned proposal

The Commission will provide a further update on the rule of law in Poland. This follows the recent judgment of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) on Poland’s Supreme Court law.

[HCWS1747]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

British Council Annual Report and Accounts 2018-19

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

I will attend the General Affairs Council in Brussels on 18 July 2019 to represent the UK. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a full member state and continue to act in good faith.

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[HCWS1747]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Human Medicines Regulations 2012 Advisory Bodies Annual Report 2019

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Lords), my right hon. Friend Baroness Blackwood has made the following written statement:

I have received the annual report of the human medicines regulations advisory bodies for 2018, which has been laid before Parliament today in accordance with the requirements of part 2 regulation 12(4) of the Human Medicines Regulations 2012.

I am glad to acknowledge the valuable work done by the distinguished members of the human medicines regulations advisory bodies and thank them for the time and effort dedicated in the public interest to this important work.

[HCWS1752]

Regulation of Physician Associates and Anaesthesia Associates

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Stephen Hammond): Today I am pleased to announce that we have asked the General Medical Council (GMC) to regulate physician associates (PAs) and anaesthesia associates (AAs) across the UK.

On 7 February 2019 the Government published their response to the consultation on the regulation of medical associate professions in the UK.

The response confirmed the decision announced on 12 October 2018 by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to introduce statutory regulation for
physician associates (PAs) and anaesthesia associates (AAs) (formerly known as physicians’ assistants (anaesthesia)).

However, we set out that further work was required to decide which regulator would take forward regulation of these roles.

Following the completion of this work, we believe that the GMC is best placed to regulate PAs and AAs. Regulation will enable these groups to work to their full potential and provide the very best care to patients as part of a multidisciplinary clinical team, contributing to the development of a safe and flexible workforce. This is an important step towards meeting workforce commitments in each of the four countries including the interim NHS people plan in England.

The UK and devolved Governments will now work together alongside stakeholders to develop and then consult on draft legislation.

[HCWS1741]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Disclosure and Barring Service Annual Report and Accounts 2018-19

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I am today publishing the annual report of the Disclosure and Barring Service (HC 2539). Copies of the report have been laid before the House and will be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS1755]

Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority Annual Report and Accounts 2017-18

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The 2017-18 annual report and accounts for the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (HC 2486) is being laid before the House today and published on www.gov.uk. Copies will be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS1745]

Security Industry Authority Annual Report and Accounts 2018-19

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The 2018-19 annual report and accounts for the Security Industry Authority (HC 2540) is being laid before the House today and published on www.gov.uk. Copies will be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS1754]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Building Safety: ACM Cladding

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): I wish to update the House before the summer recess on building safety, including: my expectations of building owners on the removal of unsafe aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding; the steps this Government are taking on the remediation of existing buildings; wider updates on testing programmes; and early action on delivering the recommendations to reform the building safety regulatory system.

My priority is that residents should be safe—and feel safe—in their homes. All buildings with ACM cladding have had interim safety measures put in place as soon as they have been identified, and fire and rescue services are conducting inspections to ensure those measures remain in place.

However, too many people have been living in fear for too long because of the slow progress being made by those responsible for making their buildings permanently safe. While many building owners have rightly taken action, there are still a number of residential buildings across the public and private sectors with unsafe ACM cladding where remediation has not yet started.

I am clear that this situation is unacceptable. That is why I want to set out my expectations on the timing of remediation of buildings with unsafe ACM cladding. Given the £600 million of funding this Government have made available, there is no further excuse for delay.

In the social sector, other than a small handful of exceptional cases, remediation will be completed by the end of the year.

In the private sector, progress has been slower, which is why this Government took action by announcing a £200 million fund. By the end of December 2019, any building in the private sector which I have not been assured is permanently safe should have a clear commitment to remediation, with a start and finish date agreed. Where no such safety assurance or plan has been brought forward by the end of December, building owners can expect enforcement action to be taken. My expectation is that, other than in exceptional circumstances, building owners should complete remediation within six months of agreeing a plan, by June 2020.

I acknowledge that this Government also have a role to play in ensuring that remediation is undertaken. That is why, on 9 May I announced that this Government were introducing a new £200 million fund to unblock progress in remediating private sector high-rise residential buildings. My Department has been in contact with relevant building owners or managers to enable them to start preparatory work on an application to the fund. My Department will today publish a prospectus setting out the scope and eligibility criteria for the fund, how to apply and the timetable for submitting applications.

To help facilitate remediation, I would like to clarify the planning treatment of ACM cladding replacement works. Planning permission may not be required where the external appearance of a building is not materially altered by replacement cladding. Approval for recladding is only needed if the work amounts to “development” within the meaning of section 55 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 or is required within the terms of a previous planning permission.

Local planning authorities should take a proportionate approach and work proactively with building owners to identify whether planning approval is necessary. I strongly encourage developers to engage with the local planning authority at the earliest opportunity during development of their remediation plans.

Where a planning application is considered necessary, pre-application engagement can help to resolve any issues and assist local planning authorities in issuing
timely decisions. Local planning authorities should also take a proportionate approach to the amount of information needed to support an application and consider carefully whether charging a fee for their early advice is appropriate in these cases. Decisions on applications should be made as quickly as possible and can be made as soon as the time limit for consultation has expired. Building owners would also need to ensure that the work complies with building regulations and that they obtain the necessary approval.

My Department has also commenced a data collection exercise which will enable the Department to build a complete picture of external wall systems in use on high rise residential buildings. We have asked local authorities and housing associations to identify external wall materials and insulation on all high-rise residential buildings 18 metres and over.

On 11 July a fire test in accordance with British standard 8414 was carried out at the laboratories of the fire protection association. This test was commissioned by my Department on the advice of the independent expert advisory panel and involved a cladding system consisting of a class B, fire retardant, high pressure laminate rain-screen with a non-combustible rock fibre insulation. This is part of an ongoing, systematic investigation into the fire risks from non-ACM cladding systems. I can confirm that this system met the relevant pass criteria and that the expert panel are satisfied that this specific system does not present a risk to public safety. Detailed advice from the expert panel on high pressure laminate cladding systems is also being published by my Department today.

My Department has also continued its investigations into fire doors. We have already made available the results of a sample of glass-reinforced plastic composite fire doors tested by my Department. Following the advice of the expert panel, Government expanded the testing to include timber fire doors. Today I am making available the results from the testing of a sample of timber fire doors from 25 manufacturers. I am pleased to report that all have succeeded in meeting the required 30-minute fire performance standard. The sample included a range of glazed and un-glazed fire doors with a variety of hardware and were tested on both sides of the door. The summary results of the timber fire door tests to inform building risk assessments are now available at: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/fire-door-investigation

As a result of our tests, the expert panel have concluded that they do not believe there is a performance concern with timber fire doors across industry, where they are purchased directly from the manufacturer and produced to specification.

It is important to be clear that, although the results of our testing provide assurances for residents who have concerns about their fire doors, it is for building owners to assure themselves that the fire doors they install are fit for purpose and have the required documentation and certification. Guidance for building owners who are replacing flat front entrance doors can be accessed at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/advice-for-building-owners-on-assurance-and-replacing-of-flat-entrance-fire-doors

Since 2007, building regulations guidance has stated that all new blocks of flats over 30 metres should have sprinklers. In 2013, the Department wrote to all local authorities and housing associations, asking them to consider a coroner’s report recommendation that they should consider retro-fitting sprinklers in existing residential buildings over 30 metres.

The housing revenue account borrowing cap was abolished on 29 October 2018, giving freedom to local authorities to help finance unforeseen capital repairs programmes, such as retro fitting sprinklers, as well as build new homes. It is for building owners to seek professional advice and decide whether to fit sprinklers, on the basis of their assessment of the particular risk faced in their buildings.

At the heart of the regulatory reform is our intention to establish a regulator to oversee the safety and performance of all buildings. We are working closely with the health and safety executive (HSE), who are sharing their considerable regulatory experience and expertise to help us shape the functions of the new regulator, alongside other members of our joint regulators group. My Department is working with partners to develop proposals to allow the regulatory functions to exist prior to the new legislative regime being in place. We are similarly seeking the advice and input of the HSE on implementing the new regime following legislation.

[HCWS1757]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ebola Outbreak: UK Response

The Secretary of State for International Development (Rory Stewart): It is nearly a year since the declaration of the tenth Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This is the second largest Ebola outbreak and the first in a conflict zone. The risks remain very high. And we need—as an international community—to keep a relentless focus on these issues: addressing failings in public health systems, controlling cross-border transmission, working with communities, and getting the basics right on surveillance, tracing, vaccination and treatment.

Since my oral statement to the House on 20 May, the number of cases has continued to grow and despite successes in some areas, new geographic areas have been affected—including Goma in the DRC and across the border in Uganda. Yesterday the World Health Organisation declared this outbreak a public health emergency of international concern. This declaration is highly significant and will bring more focus and instruments to bear on the crisis. The UK has been a major donor since the start. This week we have announced up to an additional £50 million of support to combat the outbreak in the DRC. We have also been pushing hard at meetings of the G7 development ministers, WHO and at the UN for more support from other countries.

The affected part of the DRC has suffered from decades of conflict and under-development, is an opposition stronghold, and there is a deep mistrust of national and international institutions. Despite the best efforts of front-line health workers, the response has struggled to gain trust, and responders have been the direct target of multiple attacks. The outbreak has spread to new health zones in the current two provinces, and several areas that were previously under control are now seeing new
cases again. As of 14 July, there have been 2,501 cases, of which 2,407 are confirmed and 94 are probable. In total, there have been 1,668 deaths (1,574 confirmed and 94 probable) and 700 people have recovered. This is the most complex public health emergency in recent history.

For the first time in this outbreak, three cases were confirmed in Uganda in June. This represents the sixth outbreak Uganda has had since 2000. Uganda’s Ministry of Health, with good support from the DRC and significant assistance on preparedness from the UK, reacted swiftly to this long-anticipated outbreak. While Uganda deserves praise for containing these cases, there is no room for complacency, particularly in addressing resources for health facilities where public health systems are weak.

A record number of health zones have now been affected in the DRC. The city of Goma, on the border with Rwanda, has in the last week confirmed its first case. The confirmed case in Goma is a significant development and may increase the risk of further transmission to other areas of the DRC and neighbouring countries. Goma is a significant regional trading and transport hub and we are therefore closely monitoring the situation. We are also asking the WHO to increase its focus on preparedness in the region, particularly in South Sudan and Burundi.

I am thankful for the prompt response by staff at the Ebola treatment centre in Goma, which I visited on my recent trip to the DRC. However, it was clear during my time there that some measures, such as temperature checks at the hospital entrance, are not consistently applied and could be improved. I also visited the Ebola treatment centre in Katwa that has been rebuilt after being burned down in February. This centre seemed to have a good focus on basic procedures and to be making good use of the latest technology, including transparent cubes which allow doctors and families to interact with patients without wearing full protective gear.

I want to once again commend the bravery of the Congolese and international frontline responders who are working incredibly hard to end this outbreak. But they must have adequate support. To ensure a successful response, the UK is committed to supporting the response financially, but also through sending UK-funded experts to the region, including data analysts, response co-ordinators and managers.

The WHO and the UN office for the co-ordination of humanitarian affairs (OCHA) convened a meeting in Geneva on 15 July to focus attention and signal a reset of the response. I was privileged to be able to represent the UK at that meeting, which was timely, as a new strategic response plan (SRP4) covering the next six months of the response will shortly be published.

In Geneva I made clear the UK’s ongoing support to the Government of the DRC and the region more broadly, with a new commitment of up to £50 million for the response in the DRC. So far, UK aid has provided technical experts to eastern DRC, including senior epidemiologists, data scientists and a clinical trials specialist, and previously funded the development of a vaccine, which has helped to contain the outbreak. More than 160,000 doses have been administered to at-risk people in the DRC and neighbouring countries. The vaccine has proved to be over 97% effective and is a vital part of the response in this fragile and complex environment. However, vaccination alone will not end this outbreak, and stronger community ownership is essential. We need to build trust in the response. To end this outbreak people with symptoms of Ebola need to come forward and seek treatment. Effective isolation and treatment will improve their chance of survival and allow the response to follow up quickly and vaccinate those who they have been in contact with.

I also made clear in Geneva that we expect other countries to play a bigger role in the response as a matter of urgency. They need to step up their efforts and funding. The US and UK are the two biggest bilateral donors to the response and although other countries have given some financial support, more is needed. Other countries, particularly francophone countries, which have a presence and history in the region, must support the response with funding, technical expertise and political support.

The UK will also continue to play a leading role in regional preparedness—where we are the largest donor. Events in Uganda demonstrate the value of investing in preparedness activities and health systems strengthening; quick action saves both lives and costs in the long term. Again, other countries should step up their support to avoid a crisis that destabilises the wider region.

The risk of Ebola to the UK population remains very low. Public Health England continues to monitor the situation daily and review the risk assessment on a two-weekly basis. The UK Government continue to work across all Departments to ensure all relevant expertise is brought to bear on tackling this important issue.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Prime Minister’s Trade Envoys

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Prime Minister has today approved two new appointments to the trade envoy programme. The hon Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) has been appointed as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Lebanon (this is in addition to his current role as PM’s trade envoy to Algeria) These new appointments take the total number of trade envoys to 27 parliamentarians covering 58 markets. The Prime Minister’s trade envoy programme is an unpaid and voluntary cross-party network, which supports the UK’s ambitious trade and investment agenda in global markets.

Consultation on Future Free Trade Agreements: Summary of Responses

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): Last summer, we launched four 14-week long public consultations providing citizens and businesses across the UK and overseas with the opportunity to give their
views on potential future free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations with the United States, Australia, New Zealand and on the UK potentially seeking accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership (CPTPP).

Today, I will place a summary of responses received for each consultation exercise in the Library of the House. I will also publish these online on gov.uk.

The public consultations attracted significant interest with 601,121 responses received across all four consultations. In view of the need to ensure that due consideration is given to each submission, we will publish the Government response at a later date but before any formal trade negotiations begin, alongside an outline approach which sets our high-level negotiation objectives and will explain how these have been informed by the consultation responses.

The Government are committed to ensuring a transparent and inclusive trade policy, which supports the interests of consumers and businesses across the whole of the UK. The Government will continue to engage with the public, businesses and other stakeholders in order to understand their views and to help develop UK trade policy.

PRIME MINISTER

Overseas Detainees: Detention and Interviewing

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): The Government are today publishing new guidance titled “The Principles relating to the detention and interviewing of detainees overseas and the passing and receipt of intelligence relating to detainees”. This will replace the existing “consolidated guidance” and follows a thorough review by Sir Adrian Fulford, the Investigatory Powers Commissioner.

Following my request last June for him to conduct a review, the Commissioner held a public consultation in the autumn and organised a Chatham House event in December 2018 for academics, practitioners and representatives from non-governmental organisations to discuss how the consolidated guidance could be improved. He has also taken into account the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament’s recommendations in their June 2018 detainee report and those of Sir Mark Waller, the then Intelligence Services Commissioner, in his 2016 report on UK relationships with partner counter-terrorism units overseas.

The Government have accepted the Commissioner’s proposed principles in full. It is being published today on gov.uk and copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The new guidance is being extended to include the National Crime Agency and SO15 Metropolitan Police Service and will provide clear direction for UK personnel on their interaction with detainees held by others overseas and the handling of intelligence derived from them. The principles will come into effect from 1 January 2020 once the necessary underlying departmental training and guidance is in place. The consolidated guidance will remain in use until then. The Investigatory Powers Commissioner will continue to oversee and report on its application.

The Government are grateful to the Commissioner for undertaking this review. The new principles will ensure that the United Kingdom continues to lead the field internationally in terms of providing guidance to personnel on intelligence sharing in a manner that protects human rights.

Our policy remains clear: the Government do not participate in, solicit, encourage or condone the use of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment for any purpose.

[HCWS1738]

TRANSPORT

Trailer Safety Report

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): Colleagues across the House will be aware that towing safety is an issue of widespread interest and concern, particularly ahead of the key summer caravanning season. In that context I am pleased to announce to the House the publication of a report into trailer safety. This sets out the Government’s position as required by the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Act 2018.

This country has one of the best road safety records in the world, but every death and injury is a tragedy for the families involved. Ministerial colleagues and Department officials have heard directly from families of those affected by fatal trailer incidents. I pay tribute to all those, including the parents of Freddie Hussey, and of Harry Christian-Allan, who have sought to improve trailer safety following such terrible bereavements. I also pay tribute to Members across the House, such as the hon. Member for Bristol South, who have taken action in this area, such as the recently-convened all-party parliamentary group on trailer and towing safety.

This report has helped consolidate and develop the evidence base related to trailers. It is clear, including from roadside checks by the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) undertaken for this report, that many light trailers are used on public roads in a defective state. A focus must be maintained on driving up the safety of these trailers. However, only in a relatively few cases do vehicle defects contribute to serious incidents. Trailer-related incidents share some characteristics with the wider light vehicle fleet, including that human error is a far more prevalent reason for incidents. On the basis of the information set out in this report, the Government is therefore not extending current vehicle testing or registration requirements in relation to trailers.

However, as the report highlights, there is further work in this area which the Government will take forward. There is more information to consider and this report proposes some future steps, including additional trailer checks to be carried out by DVSA. This will build the evidence base further. A number of non-regulatory and other regulatory levers, including previous changes in driving licence entitlements now spreading through the motoring public, will also have an effect.

This report is an important milestone and is not itself an endpoint. I look forward to working together with all parties to ensure that momentum is maintained in this area, and that trailer safety continues to improve.

Attachments can be viewed online at https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-07-18/HCWS1744/

[HCWS1744]
WORK AND PENSIONS

Response to Opposition Day Debate: Inequality and Social Mobility

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): Following the recent Opposition day debate on 12 June, I am setting out the approach this Government are taking to tackling inequality and improving social mobility.

This Government are leading the way in creating opportunity so every person growing up in Britain has the chance to build a bright future for themselves and their families—no matter what their background. Employment has risen in every UK region under this Government, as wages outstrip inflation, the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers has narrowed since 2011 and the proportion of 16 and 17-year-olds in education or apprenticeships is at its highest ever—that is social mobility in action.

Our record on employment is vital to our approach, and one of which we are rightly proud. There are now over 3.6 million more people in work compared with 2010. Unemployment is at its lowest rate since the 1970s having fallen by more than half since 2010. This is not just a London or a south-east success story—over 60% of the employment growth since 2010 has occurred in other parts of the UK. We are working across Government and with businesses to ensure everyone has the chance to gain the skills and high quality jobs they need to compete in a dynamic, global market place.

Around three-quarters of the growth in employment since 2010 has been in full-time work, which we know substantially reduces the risk of poverty. Wages have consistently outpaced inflation for 15 months—in fact they are growing at their fastest rate for a decade. The growth in employment rates has overwhelmingly benefited the poorest 20% of households, and household income inequality is also lower than it was in 2010.

Behind these statistics are people whose mental health and wellbeing are improved by moving into work and having the dignity and security that it brings. There are 930,000 more disabled people in work today compared with five years ago, and 667,000 more children in working households compared with 2010. We know that children in households where all adults work are about five times less likely to be in relative poverty than a child in a household where nobody works.

We also know that children growing up in workless families are almost twice as likely as children in working families to fail at all stages of their education. Since 2011 we have narrowed the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers by around 13% at key stage 2, and 9.5% at key stage 4. We are supporting pupils to thrive at every stage, that is why we introduced 15 hours of free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds on top of the 15 hours’ free childcare offer for all three and four-year-olds.

We are investing in our world-class education system; core funding for schools and high needs has risen from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion this year. We are investing £72 million through our Opportunity areas programme in 12 places in the country with weak social mobility and up to £24 million through our Opportunity North East programme, tackling the specific issues that are holding back young people in the North East. Through both these programmes we will improve educational outcomes for children and young people working in partnership with local partners. We have set a 10-year ambition to boost children’s early reading and communication skills. We are transforming technical education with investment of an extra half a billion pounds per year once T-levels are fully rolled out. Disadvantaged 18-year-olds are now entering full-time higher education at record rates, and we are providing coaching for young jobseekers to put them on track to succeed.

Supporting people on low income to progress in work is also key to our success in tackling inequality. Universal credit removes the structural disincentives to move into work and to work more hours that were a part of the legacy benefits it replaces. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has reported that universal credit is likely to help an extra 300,000 members of working families out of poverty, the majority of which include someone who works part-time. We want to build a clearer picture of how and why people progress in work, and what we can do to support them as they do that. We have started discussions with the Trades Union Congress and the Confederation of British Industry on how we can do this. We are going further with two national pilots on in-work progression; one will train work coaches to help those in work to decide when and how to switch jobs, to achieve that ambitious step up. The other will boost our capability for working with local businesses, by creating jobcentre specialists who encourage local employers to support progression and good-quality flexible working.

Childcare costs can affect parents’ decisions to take up paid work, increase their working hours, or remain in paid work. To overcome this barrier to employment we increased the level of support for childcare costs from 70% in legacy benefits, to 85% within universal credit. This is in addition to providing a significant package of childcare support to parents and carers, including our 30 hours offer for working parents of three and four-year-olds which has rolled out successfully, benefiting around 600,000 children in the first two years of delivery and introducing tax-free childcare worth up to £2,000 a year per child.

Our national living wage, which is among the highest in the world, is expected to benefit over 1.7 million people; and, with the increase to £8.21 from April this year, has increased a full-time worker’s annual pay by over £2,750 since 2016. We have taken action to reduce income inequality through the tax system too. Our tax changes will make basic rate taxpayers over £1,200 better off from April, compared with 2010. Taken together, the most recent changes mean that a single person on the national living wage has, from April, taken home over £13,700 a year—£4,500 more than in 2009-10.

It is absolutely right that we continue to support those who need it and our welfare safety net remains one of the strongest in the world. This year we will spend over £95 billion on benefits for people of working age; and £52.7 billion to support disabled people and those with health conditions. In total, welfare spending in this financial year will be over £220 billion.

We recognise that there is more to do to tackle poverty; and we have taken action to increase the incomes of the poorest in society. In the last Budget we announced...
a £4.5 billion cash boost that will make a huge difference to the lives of working families and provide extra support for people moving onto UC. In particular, we have put an extra £1.7 billion a year into work allowances, increasing the amount that hard-working families can earn before the taper is applied. That is an extra £630 a year for 2.4 million families.

It is vital that we have evidence on the effects of poverty in order to tackle it, and in the run-up to the spending review we will examine what more can be done to address poverty, particularly child poverty, and to support social mobility. We are working with the Social Metrics Commission and other experts in the field to develop new experimental statistics to measure poverty, which will be published in 2020 and, in the long run, could help us to target support more effectively.

The welfare system is not just about providing financial support. The most vulnerable in our society often face complex barriers to employment which can prevent them from moving on with their lives. So we are taking wider action to address barriers specific to different groups and ensure that universal credit works for all those with complex needs.

By supporting care leavers through their difficult transition into adulthood with a series of safeguards and easements, work coaches can have a real impact on a young person's life chances. And around 135 prison work coaches based in resettlement prisons across Great Britain help prisoners gain employment on release, supporting with benefit claims pre-release.

We have a proud record when it comes to supporting victims of domestic abuse. Work search requirements can be suspended for up to six months under universal credit to enable them to stabilise their lives. By the end of the summer, we will have a domestic abuse and homelessness advocate in every jobcentre in England, who can build work coach capability in these areas, and make important links with organisations in the community.

In conclusion, work provides economic independence, pride in having a job and improved wellbeing. Through record employment, investment in early years, education, and other public services, this Government are taking long-term steps to tackle poverty. It is the right approach and the only sustainable one.

[HCWS1734]
Written Statements

Monday 22 July 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Labour Market Reforms

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The good work plan sets out the Government’s vision for the future of the UK labour market and how we will implement the Taylor review recommendations. It forms an integral part of the modern industrial strategy and this Government’s long-term plan to boost the productivity and earning power of people throughout the UK and to develop better jobs for all. We are now delivering the next phase of the good work plan.

Flexibility has been a key factor behind the success of our labour market, but we are aware there are a small minority of employers who transfer too much risk to the individual, sometimes to the detriment of their financial security and personal wellbeing. The Taylor review termed this “onesided flexibility”. The Low Pay Commission found that this was particularly relevant for low-paid, vulnerable workers and has made recommendations to the Government. We are committed to tackling the problem and on 19 July we launched a consultation with proposals to:

- Provide a right to reasonable notice of working hours—with the aim to give workers more certainty about their shifts and work patterns so they can have more control over their working lives.
- Provide workers with compensation for shifts cancelled without reasonable notice—the Low Pay Commission found that the practice of cancelling shifts at the last minute, sometimes on arrival at work or partway through a shift was not uncommon.

Earlier this year, the Government also consulted on measures to prevent the misuse of confidentiality clauses in cases of sexual harassment or discrimination in the workplace. This followed unacceptable cases of their misuse as evidenced in the media, inquiries by the Women and Equalities Committee and individuals’ responses to our consultation. These cases highlighted the seriousness of abuse that has taken place and the impact this has had on the lives of individuals.

We have now published the Government response and will be legislating on the proposals we consulted on, and in some cases going even further. For example, for the first time, no provision in an employment contract on, and in some cases going even further. For example, for the first time, no provision in an employment contract on reasonable notice—the Low Pay Commission found that the practice of cancelling shifts at the last minute, sometimes on arrival at work or partway through a shift was not uncommon.

The Government also recently consulted on proposals to extend redundancy protections for pregnant women and new mothers returning to work. We have now published the Government response to this consultation.

Any form of discrimination against pregnant women and new mothers is unacceptable and unlawful. Despite this, evidence from the Women and Equalities Committee, among others, suggests that new mothers are still being unfairly forced out of work. We are therefore taking action and are committing to extending the redundancy protection period that currently exists for pregnant women for a further six months once a new mother has returned to work. The Government response also looks at how we can increase awareness among pregnant women and new mothers of their maternity rights. As part of this the Government will establish a taskforce which will make recommendations on what improvements can be made to the information available to employers and families.

The reforms we have announced are the next important step in delivering on the Good Work Plan, ensuring we have a labour market that is fit for purpose. We recognise that the world of work is changing and are delivering the necessary reforms to ensure the UK labour market can adapt effectively, and support the needs of both workers and employers.

Copies of the referenced consultations and Government responses will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and will be available electronically on the www.gov.uk website.

[HCWS1788]

Energy Policy: Net Zero Emissions

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): On 27 June, the UK became the first major economy in the world to legislate to reach net zero emissions by 2050.

Achieving this target will require significant changes in the way we produce, deliver and use energy. We will need to harness the power of innovation and new technology to ensure the energy system remains flexible and resilient. We will need to provide confidence to businesses across the country to invest in a greener future by maintaining clear and stable policy frameworks. We will also have to ensure that as we move to cut greenhouse gas emissions across the economy, the security of our energy supplies is never in doubt and energy costs are kept low for all households and businesses.

As we set out on the path to reach net zero emissions, the Government are today outlining a series of important reforms across the energy system. These include new approaches to how low-carbon infrastructure is financed, potential changes to the retail energy market so it works better for all consumers, a new strategy for tackling fuel poverty and significant changes to the way we set the detailed rules that govern the energy system.

The action we are taking today is only a first step. Continuous action over the next three decades by successive Governments will be required if we are to end the UK’s contribution to global warming and inspire the necessary action at a global level.

The Government have today published the following public consultations and reviews:

Regulated asset base financing model for new nuclear projects

The Government committed in January 2019 to publish an assessment of the regulated asset base model as a means of financing new nuclear projects. We are today publishing that assessment as part of a public consultation on the regulated asset base model. The purpose of this
consultation is to set out the basis for our assessment and to seek views from a range of interested parties on how it could be implemented within the current energy system in such a way that allows new nuclear to be built at low cost to consumers. The consultation includes a set of core principles that have resulted from our feasibility assessment and considers important issues such as the approach to risk-sharing under such a model. This consultation will be open for responses until 14 October 2019.

**Business models for carbon capture usage and storage (CCUS) projects**

As we committed to in the CCUS action plan, we are today publishing a consultation on how we can bring CCUS projects to market in the years ahead. This is an important step in order to meet our action plan commitment of delivering the UK’s first CCUS project from the mid-2020s. The consultation seeks views on possible CCUS business models for industry, power, and carbon dioxide transport and storage, as well as a framework to support hydrogen production with CCUS. The consultation sets out the risks that are inherent in first of a kind CCUS projects, and the possible delivery and co-ordination challenges of deploying CCUS at scale. This consultation will be open for responses until 16 September 2019.

**The re-use of oil and gas assets for carbon capture usage and storage (CCUS) projects**

This consultation fulfils the Government commitment in the CCUS action plan to identify existing oil and gas infrastructure that has the potential for re-use and to develop a policy to support the development of CCUS in the UK. It seeks views on whether Government should introduce a discretionary power for the Secretary of State to remove the decommissioning liability from previous oil and gas asset owners if assets are transferred to CCUS projects; and on changing guidance from the Oil and Gas Authority and Government to encourage owners and operators of oil and gas assets to propose a period of suspension prior to decommissioning in circumstances in which there is a reasonable prospect of the asset being acquired by a CCUS project. This consultation will be open for responses until 16 September 2019.

**Flexible and responsive energy retail markets**

The consultation is issued in partnership with Ofgem and sets out a vision for the future energy retail market, the key challenges which the Government and Ofgem wish to address, and the outcomes the retail energy market needs to deliver for all consumers. This includes how the regulatory framework may need to change to facilitate the introduction of innovative products and services that may face barriers today and could support our transition to a greener future. The consultation assesses the case for making reforms which could remove market distortions so as to improve the functioning of the energy retail market as a dynamic and competitive sector. The consultation also outlines how the energy retail market can benefit all consumers, ensuring they are able to secure a fair deal and receive a good level of customer service. This consultation will be open for responses until 16 September 2019.

**Reforming energy industry codes**

This consultation seeks to address the fact that the way the detailed rules governing the energy system are managed may be frustrating the shift towards a greener future. The consultation suggests creating a new function to translate the Government’s vision for the energy system into a strategic direction for codes, as well as giving code administrators more power to change codes, ensuring that vision can be delivered. We propose creating a new process that allows for greater agility in how codes and code changes are governed. We also set out an approach that will ensure we can deliver rules that are clear, accessible and simpler. This consultation will be open for responses until 16 September 2019.

**Fuel poverty strategy**

We are consulting on proposed reforms to the 2015 fuel poverty strategy to ensure that the actions we are taking to support people out of fuel poverty are as effective as possible. This includes a potential change to the way that fuel poverty is measured to ensure that we are able to include all those living in fuel poverty. We also propose making changes to ensure that those most at risk from living in a cold home get the support they need by aligning our fuel poverty policies with medical evidence. We are also proposing a new principle which would ensure that policies contributing to the fuel poverty target are complementary to other Government priorities such as the clean growth strategy. This consultation will be open for responses until 16 September 2019.

**Capacity market five-year review and consultation on proposals for capacity market emissions limits**

We are today publishing a five-year review of the capacity market mechanism. This review has found that the scheme is working effectively and performance against the original objectives has been achieved. In considering the future of the scheme, we propose focusing on specific areas of the scheme that will need to change as we maintain security of electricity supply while also moving towards net zero emissions. One of the first steps we propose to take is to implement a restriction on the most polluting types of energy generation, such as coal, within the capacity market by introducing new carbon emissions limits. To implement these changes, we are today issuing a public consultation on carbon emission limits within the scheme. This consultation will be open for responses until 2 September 2019.

**Facilitating energy efficiency in the electricity system**

Increasing our ambition on improving energy efficiency across the UK energy system will be vital if we are to reach net zero emissions. The electricity demand reduction pilot evaluation we are publishing today has concluded that energy efficiency projects are not yet ready to enter the GB capacity market. We are therefore publishing a call for evidence on market barriers to energy efficiency, and how we can create new markets for energy efficiency and secure its role in the wider energy market. This includes considering how energy efficiency could help reduce the requirement for network reinforcement and help complement the growth in distributed generation. This call for evidence will be open for responses until 25 September 2019.

**Funding for advanced nuclear technologies**

In addition to the above consultations, we are today announcing that we are developing proposals to invest Government money in the creation of innovative small modular reactors (SMRs) which are less expensive to build than traditional nuclear power plants. As stated to this house on 17 January, we have received a proposal from a consortium of businesses, led by Rolls-Royce,
Local Industrial Strategies

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): Our modern industrial strategy is a long-term plan to boost productivity and earning power for people throughout the country.

We set out to work in partnership with places to develop local industrial strategies. These strategies are central to our aim of creating prosperous communities across the country. They are being developed locally and agreed with Government, establishing a strong collaborative approach. They are long-term, based on clear evidence and aligned to the modern industrial strategy.

On 16 May we launched the first of these strategies—the West Midlands local industrial strategy. We followed this with the Greater Manchester local industrial strategy on 13 June. Now, alongside local partners, we are launching the next local industrial strategies for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc (Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Oxfordshire and the South East Midlands) and the West of England.

The Oxford-Cambridge Arc local industrial strategies mark a major contribution to the Government’s wider work on the Arc with their focus on driving productivity by outlining shared priorities across the region as a whole.

The four strategies set out how partners across the Arc will work to: harness the collective strength of the Arc’s research base, driving greater collaboration in science and research; provide the skills needed for the future economy; maximise the benefits of new transport, energy and digital infrastructure; improve business support and finance for high growth companies and encourage foreign direct investment; and take a natural capital planning approach to development, contributing to the clean growth grand challenge mission.

Buckinghamshire aims to grow the county’s creative, space, advanced manufacturing and digital health sectors, building on the world-leading assets it already has such as the Westcott Space Cluster and Pinewood Studios;

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough aims to build an industrial ecosystem that is globally known for tackling the biggest challenges facing society, with interventions tailored to the needs of each of its sub-economies: Greater Cambridge, Greater Peterborough and The Fens;

Oxfordshire plans to build on the county’s world leading science and tech clusters to be a pioneer for transformative technologies and sectors, with its overarching ambition for the county to be a top three global innovation ecosystem by 2040;

The South East Midlands’ overarching ambition is to position the area as the “Connected Core” of the Arc, a place with the right R&D assets, business environment and networks to foster, test and commercialise new innovations.

The West of England local industrial strategy focuses on four key priorities:

Strengthening innovation and driving productivity by: Connecting researchers, businesses and residents through a Global Centre of Innovation Excellence, and testing new products and services through a new West of England network of living labs;

Supporting all residents to contribute to and benefit from economic success by: targeting support to communities facing challenges, tailoring employment and skills support and linking everyone to jobs, training and services through better physical and digital infrastructure that is accessible, sustainable and low carbon;

Providing businesses with the space, networks and skills they need to boost productivity, grow and thrive by: encouraging uptake of modern technology, management and leadership practices; including more regional providers in businesses’ supply chains and widening access to public procurement for small businesses; and supporting low carbon business models;

Investing in infrastructure that reduces energy demand, lowers carbon emissions and is resilient to the impacts of climate change, supporting businesses to adopt new clean technology and energy efficiency measures.

Copies of these five local industrial strategies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

CABINET OFFICE

Defending Democracy Programme

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The UK has worked tirelessly to build our democratic system and values. In recent years, events across the world have demonstrated that sustaining and defending a flourishing democracy is increasingly important.

Therefore, the Cabinet Office is co-ordinating work and expertise across Government under a new defending democracy programme, which has been set up to:
protect and secure UK democratic processes, systems and institutions from interference, including from cyber, personnel and physical threats; strengthen the integrity of UK elections; encourage respect for open, fair and safe democratic participation; and promote fact-based and open discourse, including online.

The Government have already started to roll out measures as part of this. On 5 May 2019 we announced a range of measures to crack down on intimidation, malign influence, interference and disinformation.

Following the Committee on Standards in Public Life report, the Government have published the Online Harms White Paper, committed to a new electoral offence, and will legislate to clarifying “undue influence” which includes acts or threats of violence to manipulate someone’s vote. The Government recognise that rising levels of intimidation in public life can stop talented people, particularly women and those from minority backgrounds, standing for public office. That is why we are taking action to confront it.

As part of the programme, we have also announced a plan for a consultation on electoral integrity, which will seek to address concerns around strengthening provisions which prevent UK democracy from foreign interference. This is something we would certainly invite parliamentarians and others to engage with as it goes forward and will publish in due course.

Though this is a Government programme, we want to work with people from a broad range of perspectives to inform our work. That is why we are inviting the views of parliamentarians, political parties, third party organisations, academics, regulators and others on the programme and its outcomes. At the same time, we will continue to consider all the recommendations already made to the Government.

By taking a broad and inclusive approach, this programme can build a consensus on the way forward to continue to defend our democracy in the future.

[HCWS1772]

Conflict, Stability and Security Fund
Allocations 2019-20

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): My right hon. Friend Lord Young of Cookham made the following written ministerial statement:

I wish to update the House on the progress of the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) for the financial year 2018-19, as well as to announce the initial regional and thematic allocations for this financial year 2019-20.

The CSSF is a cross-Government fund which uses both official development assistance (ODA) and non-ODA resources to deliver against both national security and UK Aid objectives, through security, defence, peacekeeping, peace-building and stability activity. In 2018-19, the CSSF spent £1,256.8 million against a cross-Government allocation of £1,258.8 million (99.84%). A further breakdown of spend against regional and thematic allocation, by Department and by discretionary and non-discretionary spend is included in the CSSF’s annual report for 2018-19, published today.

The report includes examples of successful programmes and results as well as ways in which the CSSF has made improvements. A copy of this document is attached and has been published on www.gov.uk.

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Electoral Integrity: ID Pilots

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): Today, the Cabinet Office published its evaluation of the 2019 voter ID pilots. The evaluation shows that a diverse range of local authorities delivered successful pilots. We know this because for the second successive year, the overwhelming majority of people who came to polling stations were able to cast their vote without difficulty.

When surveyed, people in areas testing the poll card model and the mixed photographic and non-photographic model were significantly more confident in—and satisfied with—the process of casting their vote after polling day. Perceptions that there were sufficient safeguards in place to prevent voter fraud at polling stations increased in areas trialling photographic ID and mixed ID models.

Locally issued ID was made available, free of charge, whenever an elector was unsure that they were able to produce the required ID. In Pendle and Woking, 100 such voters made use of the provision. Woking, who were piloting voter ID for a second year, found the number of people who did not return after being asked to present ID had decreased from 2018. Electoral administrators from Woking have inferred this may be due to local electors viewing the ID requirements as the new standard.

Alongside the Government’s evaluation, the Electoral Commission will publish their evaluation on the voter ID pilots today.

Electoral fraud is an unacceptable crime that strikes at a core principle of our democracy, that everyone’s vote matters. In our current system, there is undeniable potential for electoral fraud and the perception of this undermines public confidence in our democracy.

The success of both rounds of voter ID pilots shows voter ID is a reasonable and proportionate measure to prevent this, ensuring your vote is yours, and yours alone. The introduction of this measure across Great Britain will strengthen the integrity of our electoral system and give the public confidence our elections are secure and fit for the 21st century.

Both last year’s pilots and decades of experience of Northern Ireland—including at the most recent local elections—show voter ID does not have an adverse effect on election turnout or participation. We remain committed to rolling out this effective anti-fraud measure and bringing the whole of the United Kingdom into line with Northern Ireland, which has required ID to vote in elections since 1985.

Running pilots again in 2019 allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of how voter ID will work on a wider scale, and what works best for voters before national roll-out. We will continue to look carefully at the evaluations from both the 2018 and 2019 pilots to help inform our next steps and shape how the final policy will look when it is introduced.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-07-/HCWS1763.

[HCWS1763]

Senior Civil Service and Senior Military Pay Awards

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): I am today announcing the Government’s decision on pay for the senior civil service and senior military.

The Government received the Senior Salaries Review Body’s (SSRB) report on 2019 pay for the senior civil service, senior military and police and crime commissioners on 7 June 2019. This will be presented to Parliament and published on gov.uk.

Thanks to the Government’s balanced approach to public finances, getting debt falling as a share of our economy, while investing in our vital services and keeping taxes low, we are able to continue our flexible approach to pay policy, allowing us to attract and retain the best people for our civil service and senior military.

We consider all pay awards in light of wider pressures on public spending. Public sector pay needs to be fair both for public sector workers and the taxpayer. Around a quarter of all public spending is spent on pay and we need to ensure that our public services remain affordable for the future.

It is also vital that our world class public services continue modernising to meet rising demand for the incredible services they provide, which improve our lives and keep us safe.
The Government value the independent expertise and insight of the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB) and take on board the valuable advice, principles outlined, and constructive challenge to the Government’s recommendations outlined in the report. The Government will follow the SSRB’s recommendations, subject to a small number of differences which are set out below.

Within the current context there remains a need to take into account workforce requirements and affordability when making decisions on senior pay, as well as fairness in the approach for senior and junior grades.

Senior Civil Servants

SSRB recommendations set a 2.2% pay award with money allocated in the following priority order:
- 0.9% targeted at pay progression and anomalies
- 0.2% set aside for minima increases
- 1% increase for all SCS not benefiting from the minima increases, and those benefiting by less than 1% from the minima increases should be “topped up” to a 1% increase (estimated cost of 0.9% of the pay bill)
- 0.2% set aside to implement any specialist pay proposals.

The SSRB also recommended reductions to the maxima and commented on priority work to be undertaken for the 2020-21 pay award.

The Government accept the SSRB’s recommendations in full with the following exceptions:
- The overall figure should be limited to an average 2% increase in line with the figure contained in the delegated pay remit guidance. The reduction of 0.2% will be taken from the money set aside for specialist pay which we will not be implementing this pay year.
- The Government accepts the recommendation to decrease the maxima for all pay bands, but to delay implementation of this to next year whilst further work is undertaken on capability-based pay progression to ensure the levels set are robust and there is a clear and positive narrative for reduction.

In addition to the above action for this year’s pay award, the Government commit to:
- Developing and evaluate a credible robust capability based pay progression system
- continuing to review the SCS performance management system as a priority; and
- keeping under review the impact of the interaction between civil service pensions and the current tax rules on recruitment and retention.

The Government will continue to engage closely with the SSRB to help develop our proposals further and invites the review body to contribute towards the further review of the senior civil service pay framework including the commitments made above.

Senior Military Officers

The Government has rejected the SSRB’s headline pay award recommendation, and instead will implement a 2% consolidated pay award with effect from 1 April 2019. The Government has accepted the SSRB’s recommendations on senior military salaries to maintain the 10% increase to base pay on promotion from one-star rank and to not change the current pay differentials for senior medical and dental officers.

Attachments can be viewed online at https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-07-22/HCWS1771/ [HCWS1771]
2012 in relation to the powers and safeguards principles, engaging with stakeholders, including taxpayers and their representatives. This will be published in early 2020.

Adjudicator

The adjudicator’s independent role in complaints handling is a core component of ensuring public trust in HMRC, and of HMRC’s evolution as a service organisation.

HMRC will undertake a comprehensive review of the findings identified in the 2019 adjudicator’s report and will publish the results of the review by the end of this year. HMRC are working with the adjudicator to ensure that they have effective mechanisms in place to learn quickly and appropriately from complaints and, if necessary, to make changes to their operational policy and processes.

To enable better access for taxpayers to the adjudicator service, HMRC are also developing a secure digital channel for complaints.

Support for Taxpayers

HMRC understand that some taxpayers will always need extra help in their dealings with them and that others may need additional support at a point in time because they are dealing with a difficult life event. Some taxpayers may become anxious or distressed as a result of compliance activities, or when they get into debt. Ensuring that people who need support are treated with empathy and dignity is vital to maintaining wider public trust in HMRC.

HMRC have provided tailored assistance to taxpayers who need extra help and those in vulnerable circumstances since 2014 via their extra support service and also work closely with the voluntary and community sector. Working with their new customer experience committee, and drawing on the experience of the committee’s independent, external advisers, HMRC have recently embarked on a programme to strengthen the support they provide to taxpayers who need extra help. Importantly, this includes extending the extra support service to people who may need additional help to deal with HMRC investigations and to help resolve disputes wherever possible without litigation. HMRC will report on the effectiveness of these measures in their next annual report.

HMRC will continue to work closely with external representatives through their forums, such as the additional needs working group and individual stakeholder forum, to understand taxpayers’ needs better and to improve support for taxpayers.

Transparency

HMRC have undertaken to increase transparency and enhance public trust by publishing more data and information about the exercise of their powers. HMRC will engage with stakeholders, including taxpayers and their representatives, to identify what further data and information HMRC should publish in support of these goals.

This year, as a first step towards that commitment, HMRC will expand the range of performance and management information they publish in their monthly and quarterly performance publications. Previous reporting focused on specific aspects of their telephony and post processes, for instance, call waiting and post turnaround times, as well as compliance yield figures. From August HMRC will publish further information, including but not limited to, their debt management, registrations and repayment services.

Taxpayer experience

Compliance enquiries are a necessary and important feature of HMRC’s work in collecting the right amount of tax. Maintaining public trust in HMRC requires that these enquiries are carried out, but also that they are done in an appropriate way. Compliance enquiries can be worrying for taxpayers and HMRC are committed to ensuring that their procedures are accessible and impartial and that HMRC officers treat taxpayers with professionalism and respect. This includes taking into account the specific circumstances of taxpayers.

HMRC are reviewing taxpayers’ experiences during compliance enquiries. Drawing on taxpayer feedback, this work will look at how each stage of an enquiry or investigation can affect taxpayers. It will seek to identify improvements in the process and draw out appropriate common standards and expectations. This work includes a review of the content, language and tone of letters, to ensure that they are clear, courteous and tailored appropriately to the needs of the taxpayer, including those who need extra help. In this, HMRC are working closely with a range of stakeholder groups and forums to develop best practice, which should help HMRC to improve the way that they interact with taxpayers.

The Government will provide a further update to the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee later this year on all of the areas of work outlined in this statement.

Off-payroll Engagements

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): In 2012, HM Treasury implemented a set of rules which required Departments’ most senior staff to be on payroll, and to seek assurance in relation to the tax arrangements of their long-term, high-paid contractors who are off-payroll.

Reforms to IR35 off-payroll working rules in April 2017 require public bodies to deduct tax and NICs if the off-payroll worker works like an employee, compliance of which is monitored by HMRC.

Following a review of the rules, I have concluded that the off-payroll rules implemented in 2012 are now superseded by the IR35 reforms, and the requirement for Departments to include set contractual provisions and conduct an assurance process are no longer necessary.

However, it remains essential that board-level appointments and/or those with significant financial responsibility should be on the payroll of the Department or other employing body, unless there are genuine exceptional circumstances that do not exceed six months. The HMT off-payroll rules have been amended to reflect the outcome of this review, and updated guidance has been published on the Government website, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-tax-assurance-process-of-public-sector-appointees

This guidance includes increased transparency requirements, whereby the duration of off-payroll engagements of board members and/or senior officials with significant financial responsibility is to be reported in Departments’ annual accounts in future reporting cycles. This will replace the need for annual reviews.

[HCWS1774]
DEFENCE

Armed Force Pay Review Body 2019

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): I am today announcing the Government’s decision on pay rises for the armed forces.

The Armed Forces Pay Review Body (AFPRB) has made its recommendation for the 2019-20 pay award of 2.9%. We are accepting this recommendation in full (to be implemented in September salaries, backdated to 1 April 2019), and I am today laying their 2019 report.

Last year, the Government announced the largest pay rise in nearly a decade for almost a million public sector workers. This year’s award builds on this and focuses attention on increasing pay for the most junior sailors, soldiers, and airmen and women, to ensure that they continue to receive a living wage. Consequently, the basic pay for other ranks on completion of their initial training will now be £20,000. This pay rise of over 6% represents an increase of £1,140 for over 7,200 newly trained sailors, soldiers, and airmen and airwomen.

The pay award also represents an annual increase of £995 in the nominal average salary in the armed forces (which is at the Corporal level), as well as an annual increase of £769 in starting salary for an officer.

For all cohorts, this is in addition to the non-contributory defined benefit pension and access to incremental pay progression.

The AFPRB has also made recommendations on rises and changes to other targeted forms of remuneration and on increases to food and accommodation charges which have been accepted. Where applicable, these rate changes will also be backdated to 1 April 2019.

Thanks to the Government’s balanced approach to public finances, getting debt falling as a share of our economy, while investing in our vital services and keeping taxes low, we are able to continue our flexible approach to pay policy, allowing us to attract and retain the best people for our armed forces.

We consider all pay awards in light of wider pressures on public spending. Public sector pay needs to be fair both for public sector workers and the taxpayer. Around a quarter of all public spending is spent on pay and we need to ensure that our public services remain affordable for the future.

It is also vital that our world class public services continue modernising to meet rising demand for the incredible services they provide, which improve our lives and keep us safe.

[HCWS1770]

Combat Air Strategy

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): The Combat Air Strategy was launched a year ago on the opening day of the Farnborough Airshow, at the birthplace of aviation. It re-affirmed the Government’s commitment to the combat air sector, laying out a clear vision for our nation to remain at the leading edge of this sector and providing a clear roadmap to achieve this.

On publication of the strategy, my right hon. Friend, the then Secretary of State for Defence, made a commitment to update the House annually on implementation of the strategy and the programmes it launched. Today I provide this update.

It is worth reflecting on the strategy and its key themes. First, it recognised the strength of our industry and its contribution to the wellbeing of our nation. This sector is economically, strategically important and is enables sovereign decision-making on where and how to deploy our military capability. Secondly, it makes clear that partnering with like-minded allies is the best means to deliver our collective objectives. The update will therefore cover both themes—domestic developments, as well as international.

Domestic update

Alongside the launch of the strategy, the Department re-affirmed our commitment to the approximately £2 billion Future Combat Air System Technology Initiative (FCAS TI). This initiative will mature the technologies needed for our future combat air systems and crucially, develop key skills across both Government and industry. The central pillar of FCAS TI is Team Tempest, a co-funded partnership between Government and our industry partners. Over the last year this partnership has driven a step change in relationships and behaviours between Government and industry by aligning incentives, sharing costs and benefits and creating common interest in pace and agility. The team is on track to delivering 17 European firsts and seven world firsts. The first of these has already been achieved—the embedding of an electrical starter generator by Rolls-Royce within the main body of a powerful military aircraft engine. This increases the power density and reduces the complexity of future aircraft engines, resulting in more efficient engine designs and is fully exploitable to Rolls-Royce’s multi-billion pound civil business. This technology will continue to be matured in the coming years, leading to a fully integrated novel power and propulsion system.

This partnership, and the private and public funding underpinning it, already supports over 1,000 jobs, many of them in high-end design, across the breadth of the country, from BAE Systems in Lancashire, to Rolls-Royce in Bristol and to Leonardo in Edinburgh and Luton. This number is set to rise to 1,800 by the end of this year.

The strategy recognised that there is significant capability residing in UK companies of all sizes and therefore, we are engaging with companies beyond our Team Tempest partners. The Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend, the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), hosted an Industry Engagement Day on the 19 March at Farnborough where 180 companies representing a wide range of capabilities and sizes, received briefs on the technologies being matured by Team Tempest and the opportunities that exist for further collaboration. I am pleased to announce that the Team Tempest partners have subsequently engaged an additional 500 companies and so far, have let over 120 sub-contracts in support of Team Tempest activities.

The combat air sector is likely to be a key driver in new technologies and skills in areas such as automation, machine learning, advanced manufacturing and big data which will have broader benefit to the economy. Crucial to the long-term sustainability of this sector is ensuring that the skills needed in the future are identified, the workforce trained and that ultimately these skills
are transferred to the next generation. Team Tempest has therefore established a dedicated STEM engagement team to inspire young people to be involved in this sector. This approach, along with the assurance provided by the strategy has resulted in record numbers of young people joining the workforce. This year, Leonardo MW will recruit 104 graduates and 62 apprentices, with the majority planned to be involved in Team Tempest activities. Similarly, BAE Systems is planning to recruit approximately 700 apprentices and 300 graduates to grow the percentage (currently 10%) of their Team Tempest workforce that are graduates and apprentices.

Working closely with officials from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), the Department has launched a skills index to monitor the health of industrial and Government skills critical to the delivery of our national objectives. Industry have provided their inputs and we are analysing the results and intend to present our findings in September. The skills index will be used to inform and measure the success of interventions such as FCAS TI, to ensure the health of the sector.

**International update**

On F35, in February, the avionic and aircraft component repair hub in North Wales was awarded a second major assignment of work worth some £500 million by the US Government. This will create hundreds of additional jobs in the UK and was the result of working closely with industry to deliver a national campaign approach.

On Typhoon, the strategy confirmed our commitment to continue to invest in this remarkable platform. In June, NETMA, on behalf of the UK and the other European partner nations, awarded a €54 million contract for the Typhoon long-term evolution study to industry which will explore how to maximise Typhoon’s capability for this decade and beyond.

The FCAS TI programme is maturing technologies for national usage, as well with our international partners. We are contracting our industry to work with their French counterparts on technologies that would maximise interoperability of our current and future platforms, recognising that, as currently envisioned, the Franco-German Système de Combat Aérien Futur (SCAF) acquisition programme does not meet the objectives laid out in our strategy. We are also investing in the development of the next generation lift fan for the F35B, to reduce weight and improve the overall effectiveness of this world beating platform.

Our next generation acquisition programme will define and deliver the capabilities required when the backbone of the RAF, the Typhoon, leaves service. The team delivering this is working at pace, having within a few months of forming, delivered the strategic outline (business) case, which confirmed acquisition options to deliver our future combat air capability, which are now being explored and tested with potential international partners.

Despite challenging international dynamics, the Department has made great strides in our discussions with potential partners. With the support of wider Government (most notably officials from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Trade) and our industry, we have launched feasibility studies with potential partners.

We have discovered that there is a great appetite to collaborate with us. We offer a unique partnering approach, recognising the need to deliver ours and our partners’ benefits together, learning from our rich history of collaboration. This approach provides the firm leadership needed and appears to be an attractive alternative to the traditional, dominant-junior partner relationships.

Last week I signed a memorandum of understanding with my Swedish counterpart on this topic. This marks a significant step in aligning our nations, recognising both nations have highly capable combat air sectors. We will work together to mutually develop our understanding of the systems required to deliver our future requirements and how best to develop, deliver and ultimately support them. Beyond Sweden, we are furthering our engagement with other potential partners and I aim to sign similar arrangements over the next year.

From progress to date, we believe that Europe can afford two separate Combat Air Programmes. We are investing in technologies, such as open systems architectures and advanced design and manufacturing techniques which offer significant reductions to the time and cost of design, manufacture, in-service upgrades and modifications. We are also ensuring that collaboration will be with partners whose strategic objectives align with our own, including the determination to reduce costs. We recognise that in an effective and efficient collaboration, there will be an optimum number of partners, which may include those outside of Europe.

The strategy’s next major steps are to continue the concept phase until December 2020, gathering evidence on the acquisition options presented and then submit the outline business case. This will select the preferred acquisition route and concept to be taken forward into the assessment phase.

**Support for Armed Forces Personnel and Veterans**

**The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt):**

Our armed forces do an incredible job to protect us and our nation. They endure great hardships and separation from their loved ones, and they place themselves in harm’s way and bear the physical and mental scars of traumatic experiences. They are prepared to risk their lives for us. We owe them a huge debt, and we also owe them justice and fairness.

The Government are clear that the armed forces are not above the law. It is right that whenever the armed forces embark on operations outside of the UK our people and their chain of command are bound to abide by the criminal law of England and Wales, as well as international humanitarian law as set out in the Geneva Conventions. Our service men and women are required to conform to the highest standards of personal behaviour and conduct. And when they fall short they must be held to account. Justice must be served.

The Government believe that, other than in exceptional circumstances, the conclusion of investigations into allegations made against members of the armed forces should draw a line—addressing the uncertainty faced by armed forces personnel concerned about the prospect of reinvestigation and prosecution many years after the event. But the law as it stands cannot allow that line to be drawn with any confidence. That is why the Government believe change is needed to afford armed forces personnel and veterans greater protection from the threat of
prosecution for alleged historical offences committed in the course of duty outside the UK. Armed forces personnel and veterans should not be left with the threat of prosecution hanging over their heads for years to come, in circumstances where their actions have been investigated at the time.

Similar issues arise in relation to civil litigation. Military operations in Iraq resulted in litigation against the Ministry of Defence on an industrial scale: nearly 1,000 claims seeking compensation for personal injury or death (most of which also sought compensation for human rights violations), and approximately 1,400 judicial review claims seeking European Convention on Human Rights-compliant investigation and compensation. Although the law does provide for a time limit in such cases, the courts are currently given broad discretion as to whether to enforce that limit. The effect is that claims have routinely been brought late, with huge numbers of compensation claims permitted to proceed long after the relevant time limit.

The later a claim is brought, especially in respect of allegations emanating from a war zone, the harder it is to assess in a fair and proportionate manner. Records may no longer be sufficiently detailed to be able to prove or disprove specific allegations, and the memories of those involved in incidents fade over time. In such circumstances, the Government may have to choose between settling claims—the merits of which have not been established—or putting armed forces personnel and veterans through the ordeal of giving evidence on the Ministry of Defence's behalf. This is unfair to our personnel and to the taxpayer, who must pay the associated legal costs.

All of this goes to the heart of what is known as "lawfare"—the judicialisation of war. And the risks and impacts of lawfare are clear: in terms of the financial costs; the stress and strain placed on veterans; the potential impact on the morale of serving personnel; and the impact on the ability to attract future armed forces personnel; and the risk that decisions taken on operations may be corrupted in order to avoid the possibility of legal proceedings many years in the future—the "chilling effect" feared by military commanders.

This is why I announced on 21 May (HCWS1575) my plans to take forward work to address this important and concerning issue. I am pleased to be able to announce today the launch of a public consultation on legal protections measures for the armed forces and veterans.

The consultation document contains proposed measures which we believe can be enacted in a manner which is consistent with our obligations under domestic and international law, while providing genuine benefits to our personnel:

First, a proposal to legislate for a presumption against prosecution of current or former armed forces personnel for alleged offences committed in the course of duty outside the UK more than 10 years ago. This measure would in effect raise the threshold to be applied by prosecutors when considering whether a prosecution is genuinely in the public interest in such cases. Two different options are set out in the consultation document for how this measure could be enacted.

And secondly, a proposal to ensure that going forward, the law reflects the unique pressures faced by armed forces personnel while deployed on operations outside the UK, through the creation of a new partial defence to murder. This would be available to current and former armed forces personnel who caused a death in the course of duty outside the UK through using more force than strictly necessary for the purposes of self-defence, providing that the initial decision to use force was justified. If convicted, the defence would reduce a conviction for murder to manslaughter.

As part of the consultation, we are also seeking views on a proposal to restrict the courts’ discretion to extend the normal time limit for bringing civil claims for personal injury and or death in relation to historical events outside of the UK.

We hope that the proposals set out in the consultation will help ensure that our armed forces receive the justice and fairness that they are owed. And, through the consultation, we hope to test and refine what is proposed with the aim of bringing forward legislation as soon as possible.

[HCWS1784]

UN Mission: Sahel Region

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt):

Reflecting our continued commitment to multilateralism and international peace and security, the UK continues to support increased engagement in the Sahel under the Government’s new strategic approach to Africa.

We have committed to reinforcing our support for countries on the front line of instability, including stepping up to the UK’s role in tackling the underlying causes of poverty and conflict in Mali and the wider Sahel region (Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso and Mauritania).

I therefore wish to announce to the House the intention to expand the UK’s contribution to the United Nations multidimensional integrated stabilisation mission in Mali (MINUSMA) by deploying a long-range reconnaissance task group of 250 personnel in 2020. The UK will support the mission in implementing its mandated tasks—to promote stability in central Mali and to protect civilians, including supporting the rights of women and children.

The UK’s intent is to provide the UN with high-quality forces to missions where their capabilities are most in demand. The UK contribution will provide improved situational awareness and information provision that will help the mission—military and civilian—in support of the mandate, to progress towards a long-term and sustainable peace in Mali. This will signal a significant shift in the UK’s approach to peacekeeping as we bridge the gap between those who pay and those who deliver by providing a highly employable, highly capable task force.

This announcement is a significant uplift from the two military staff officers the UK currently contributes to MINUSMA HQ, and the funding of a civilian role to support the UN’s work on Sahel issues. It also demonstrates a continued commitment to UN peacekeeping following the completion of our commitment in 2020 to the UN mission in South Sudan.

The UK is committed to supporting the international community in combating instability in Mali, as well as strengthening our wider military engagement across the Sahel region, and is proud to do so under the auspices of the United Nations.

[HCWS1779]
EDUCATION

Teachers’ Pay and Conditions

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): The school teachers’ review body (STRB) has recommended a 2.75% uplift to the minima and maxima of all pay ranges and allowances in the national pay framework, which is due to be implemented in autumn 2019.

Last year, the Government announced the largest pay rise in nearly a decade for almost a million public sector workers. Building on this, this year I have decided to accept in full the STRB’s recommendations for a 2.75% uplift to the minima and maxima of all pay ranges and allowances.

The pay award will both raise starting salaries and increase the competitiveness of the pay framework. As a result, minimum starting salaries for classroom teachers will see an increase between £652 (Inner London) and £816 (Rest of England), and classroom teachers at the top of the main pay range could see an increase between £652 (Inner London) and £816 (Rest of England), and classroom teachers at the top of the upper pay range, it could mean an increase of between £1,084 and £1,327.

As a result, the pay ranges for all teachers and leaders will see an uplift. Thanks to the flexible performance-based pay system we have, schools can choose to give teachers and leaders a higher pay rise where this is appropriate to their local context and budget.

As this award is more than the 2% we assessed was affordable in our evidence to the STRB, I will invest a further £105 million in the existing teachers’ pay grant this financial year. This is on top of the £321 million funding that schools are already receiving through the teachers’ pay grant in 2019-20.

Last year, we specifically targeted early career pay because of the growing retention challenges within the first five years of a teacher’s career. The STRB has recognised the improvements we have made to the unqualified and main pay ranges following the 2% uplift to the main pay range in 2017 and 3.5% uplift to both in 2018.

It is now vitally important to increase the competitiveness of the pay framework and help address the teacher supply challenges across the workforce. This year’s pay award will also support the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy, which I published in January this year. The strategy underpins the early career framework, which provides a fully funded two-year package of support for all early career teachers.

In addition to their pay, teachers continue to benefit from defined benefit pensions, which are amongst the most generous available.

Thanks to the Government’s balanced approach to public finances, getting debt to fall as a share of our economy, while investing in our vital services and keeping taxes low, we are able to continue our flexible approach to pay policy, allowing us to attract and retain the best people for our schools.

We consider all pay awards in light of wider pressures on public spending. Public sector pay needs to be fair both for public sector workers and the taxpayer. Around a quarter of all public spending is spent on pay and we need to ensure that our public services remain affordable for the future.

It is also vital that our world-class public services continue to modernise to meet rising demand for the incredible services they provide, which improve our lives and keep us safe.

I am grateful for the in-depth considerations the STRB has given in concluding their report and recommendations for the 2019 teachers’ pay award.

I will deposit in the Libraries of both Houses a full list of the recommendations and my proposed approach for all pay and allowance ranges.

My officials will write to all of the statutory consultees involved in the STRB’s 29th remit and invite them to contribute to a consultation on my response to these recommendations and on a revised school teachers’ pay and conditions document and pay order. The consultation will last for eight weeks.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council 15 July 2019

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I attended the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 15 July. It was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Brussels.

Current affairs

The High Representative and Foreign Ministers discussed the most pressing issues on the international agenda. This included Turkey’s current drilling activities in the eastern Mediterranean.

Foreign Ministers also discussed the recent developments in Sudan. Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto reported on his visit to the region on behalf of the EU. Ministers noted that the agreement reached between the Transitional Military Council and Forces for Freedom and Change on 11 July was an important breakthrough, and underlined the importance of supporting the civilian transition, including through additional financial support.

Ministers also touched on Venezuela, following the visit of special adviser Enrique Iglesias to Caracas on 7-10 July. They reiterated the EU’s support for a political solution through the Oslo process, while underlining strong concerns over the human rights situation following the report by the office of the high commissioner for human rights, Michelle Bachelet.

The High Representative also covered the EU-Ukraine summit, the fifth anniversary of the Downing of MH17, her recent visit to the Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) and the outcome of the fifth EU-G5 Sahel Ministerial meeting in Ouagadougou (9 July).

I briefed the Council on my recent engagement on Iran. The Council discussed the tense situation in the Gulf region and recent announcements and steps by Tehran to reduce its implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Ministers referred
to ways of reducing the ongoing risk of military escalation and reiterated the EU’s regret at the decision by the US to re-impose sanctions on Iran.

Ministers also took stock of ongoing EU efforts to enable the continuation of legitimate trade with Iran, including through the special purpose vehicle “INSTEX” which is now operational. They also urged Iran to reverse the steps taken and reaffirmed that the EU’s commitment to the nuclear deal depended on full compliance by Iran.

The High Representative spoke to Ministers about her visit to Baghdad on 13-14 July. Foreign Ministers took stock of developments in Iraq and discussed how the EU could provide further support.

Central African Republic

Ministers reflected on how the EU could strengthen its support to encourage further implementation of the peace agreement signed in Bangui on 6 February 2019. They agreed to start working on plans for a possible civilian Common Security and Defence Policy mission.

External aspects of migration

Ministers agreed that efforts to address migration should be stepped up. They noted that greater financial resources were needed, especially for the EU trust fund for Africa. Ministers also discussed the importance of accelerating resettlement of persons needing international protection and making progress on the disembarkation of migrants rescued at sea.

Lunch with the Minister of Foreign Affairs for Moldova Nicolae Popescu

Foreign Ministers conveyed their support, as well as their expectations, on the implementation of reforms related to the association agreement, and their willingness to resume conditional EU financial support.

Council conclusions

The Council agreed a number of measures:

The Council adopted conclusions on Iraq.

The Council adopted conclusions on Turkish drilling activities in the eastern Mediterranean.

The Council adopted conclusions on the EU’s priorities at the 74th UN general assembly.

A decision was adopted by the Council on sanctions against North Korea following the annual review.

The Council authorised the opening of negotiations on a joint political declaration of the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States and the European Union on the 2030 agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) implementation.

The Council adopted the EU’s position in view of the second EU-Cuba joint council that will take place on 9 September in Havana.

The Council approved the update of the military requirements for military mobility within and beyond the EU.

The Council approved the adoption of an ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) statement on aviation partnership.

The Council approved the adoption of an ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) statement on ‘Promoting women, peace and security at the ASEAN Regional Forum’.

The Council transposed an amendment adopted by the UN concerning one person listed under the South Sudan sanctions framework.

The Council adopted the position to be taken on behalf of the EU in the Joint Committee established by the framework agreement on partnership and co-operation between the EU and the Philippines.

The Council adopted the position to be taken by the EU in the Cote d’Ivoire-EU EPA Committee regarding adoption of protocol 1 concerning the definition of the concept of “originating products” and methods for administrative cooperation (rules of origin).

The Council endorsed the text of six working papers and one information paper to be submitted by Finland on behalf of the European Union and its member states to the 40th assembly of the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO).

The Council adopted a decision authorising the Commission to enter into negotiations on the modernisation of the Charter Treaty (10738/19). The Council also adopted negotiating directives (10745/19 ADD 1). In parallel, the representatives of the governments of the member states that are parties to the energy charter treaty adopted a decision authorising the Commission to enter into negotiations for the elements falling under the competence of the member states.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Community Pharmacy Contractual Framework

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): I am delighted to be able to announce a landmark five-year settlement for the Community Pharmacy Contractual Framework. This deal will transform the role of community pharmacy and embed them as the first port of call for minor illness and health advice in England.

Every day, in England there are around 1.6 million visits to community pharmacies. No appointment is necessary, and a person does not need to be registered with a pharmacy to benefit from their support or advice. The potential for community pharmacies to play a greater role across a wide range of health priorities is evident.

Over the last few months we have worked with the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee (PSNC) to develop a future vision for community pharmacy and expand their role across three key areas: prevention, urgent care and medicines safety.

We have agreed a settlement that will now translate this vision into practice and begin to transform the role of community pharmacy. It will see community pharmacies better utilised and integrated within the primary medical and community services we are working to deliver.

This agreement will come into effect from October 2019 and will mark the start of a series of developments that will continue over the course of the settlement period, through to 2024.

We will continue to work with the PSNC, and NHS England and improvement to further deliver this programme of work in partnership.


The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I am responding on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the 32nd report of the NHS Pay review Body (NHSPRB). The report has been laid before Parliament today (Cm 147). Copies of the report are available to hon. Members from the Vote Office and to noble Lords from the Printed Paper Office.

HCWS1773
The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I am responding on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the 47th report of the Review Body on Doctors’ and Dentists’ Remuneration (DDRB). The report has been laid before Parliament today (Cm148) and a copy can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Companies/2019-07-22/HCWS1765/. I am grateful to the Chair and members of the DDRB for their report.

The Government are today announcing pay rises for doctors and dentists working across the NHS.

Building on our ambition to make the NHS the best place to work, as set out in the NHS interim people plan, this is a pay rise that recognises the hard work and dedication of doctors and dentists and puts forward an approach for a potential multi-year deal with contract reform for specialty and associate specialist (SAS) doctors to enhance recruitment, retention, morale and productivity for this group.

We have recently agreed multi-year deals for both non-medical Agenda for Change staff and doctors and dentists in training and this is part of our approach to make the NHS the best employer in the world while supporting the NHS workforce to deliver excellent patient care.

Thanks to the Government’s balanced approach to public finances—getting debt falling as a share of our economy, while investing in our vital services and keeping taxes low—we are able to continue our flexible approach to pay policy, allowing us to attract and retain the best people for our hospitals.

We consider all pay awards in light of wider pressures on public spending. Public sector pay needs to be fair both for public sector workers and the taxpayer. Around a quarter of all public spending is spent on pay and we need to ensure that our public services remain affordable for the future.

It is also vital that our world-class public services continue modernising to meet rising demand for the incredible services they provide, which improve our lives and keep us safe.

This pay rise represents one of the biggest uplifts in pay for medical staff for over a decade. In addition to their pay, medical staff continue to benefit from defined-benefit pensions, which are among the most generous available.

Today’s pay award is worth:
- Between £1,940 and £2,630 for consultants
- Between £970 and £1,820 for specialty doctors
- Between £1,360 and £2,250 for associate specialists

The DDRB were asked not to make a pay recommendation for general medical practitioners as this is the first year of the recently announced five-year contract deal. As part of this agreement, core general practice funding will increase by £978 million per year by 2023-24 providing greater certainty for GMPs to plan ahead.

The Government’s response to the DDRB recommendations takes account of affordability in the context of the NHS long-term plan and the 2019 spending review. Given the NHS budget is now set for the next five years, there is a direct trade-off between pay and staff numbers and our response takes account of this trade-off.

The Government’s response is as follows:

**Consultants**
- A 2.5% general uplift in pay backdated to April 2019.
- The value of both national and old style local clinical excellence awards (CEAs) to be frozen.

**Specialty Doctors (New Grade 2008) and Associate Specialist (Closed Grade) (SAS Doctors)**
- The Government take note of the DDRB’s comments on the particular issues of morale and motivation in relation to this group that led to their pay recommendation. We agree that investment in raising the profile and attractiveness of SAS doctor roles is important and we are committing to negotiations on a multi-year pay agreement, incorporating contract reform for SAS doctors. SAS doctors will receive:
  - A 2.5% general uplift in pay backdated to April 2019.
  - The potential for an additional 1% on top of the 2.5% already paid to be added to pay in 2020-21 conditional on contract reform, through a multi-year agreement.

**Doctors and Dentists in Training**
- On 27 June the Government announced that junior doctors had overwhelmingly backed a four-year deal incorporating pay increases and improved flexibility and working conditions. This brings to an end the junior doctors dispute and the British Medical Association (BMA) and NHS employers have now collectively agreed the amended junior doctor contract.

The four-year deal guarantees pay increases of 2% per annum for the next four years and there will in addition be around £90 million of investment into the contract including a new pay point for the most senior doctors in training, an allowance for those working less than full time to support flexible working and increased pay for those working the most weekends or whose shifts end in the early hours of the morning. Taken alongside an 8.2% four-year pay rise, this will give junior doctors and current medical students the support they fully deserve.

**General Dental Practitioners**
- A 2.5% general uplift in the pay element of their contract backdated to April 2019.

**General Medical Practitioner Trainers and Appraisers**
- A 2.5% increase in full to the value of the GMP trainers grant and the GMP appraisers’ grant.

[HCWS1765]
HOME DEPARTMENT

Chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs: Reappointment

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): I am pleased to announce that Dr Owen Bowden-Jones has been re-appointed to the ACMD both as a member and as its Chair. This re-appointment is for a three-year term, beginning on 1 January 2020. Dr Bowden-Jones is an experienced clinician who provides assessment and treatment for people experiencing harms from emerging problem drugs.

The ACMD was established under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and provides advice to Government on issues related to the harms of drugs. It also has a statutory role under the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016.

[HCWS1781]

Police Remuneration Review Body 2019: Government Response

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The fifth annual report of the Police Remuneration Review Body was published today. In line with our letter setting the body’s remit it has made recommendations on pay and allowances for police officers at all ranks in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Government have considered the recommendations of the report insofar as they relate to police officers in England and Wales, which the Home Office is responsible for. We wish to express thanks to the Chair and members of the review body for their work on the report and pay recommendations.

Last year, the Government announced the largest pay rise in nearly a decade for almost a million public sector workers. Building on this, this year the Government have accepted in full the recommendations of the PRRB that a consolidated increase of 2.5% should be awarded to all ranks at all pay points. It has also accepted a corresponding increase to London Weighting and the Dog Handlers’ Allowance and an increase in the on-call allowance for officers in the federated ranks from £15 to £20 for each 24-hour period on-call. These will be implemented with effect from 1 September 2019.

We asked the PRRB to review the National Police Chiefs’ Council’s proposals for progression pay for police apprentices. The PRRB recommended that subject to the current arrangements for apprentice progression.

The Government have accepted this recommendation. Thanks to the Government’s balanced approach to public finances—getting debt falling as a share of our economy, while investing in our vital services and keeping taxes low—we are able to continue our flexible approach to pay policy, allowing us to attract and retain the best people for our police forces.

We consider all pay awards in light of wider pressures on public spending. Public sector pay needs to be fair both for public sector workers and the taxpayer. Around a quarter of all public spending is spent on pay and we need to ensure that our public services remain affordable for the future. In addition to their pay, police officers continue to benefit from defined benefit pensions, which are among the most generous available.

It is also vital that our world class public services continue modernising to meet rising demand for the incredible services they provide, which improve our lives and keep us safe.

The Police Remuneration Review Body Report (CP 139) has been laid before Parliament and copies are available in the Vote Office and at www.gov.uk.

[HCWS1769]

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures: 1 March to 31 May 2019

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of his TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

| TPIM notices in force (as of 31 May 2019) | 3 |
| TPIM notices in respect of British citizens (as of 31 May 2019) | 3 |
| TPIM notices extended (during the reporting period) | 0 |
| TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period) | 1 |
| TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period) | 0 |
| Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices (during the reporting period) | 4 |
| Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period) | 0 |
| The number of current subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (as of 28 February 2019) | 1 |

The TPIM review group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. The second quarter TRG meetings took place on 4 and 13 June 2019.

On 15 March 2019 an individual was convicted for seven breaches of his TPIM notice and was sentenced to 16 months’ imprisonment.

On 22 March 2019 the trial of an individual charged with breaching his TPIM notice was discontinued as the jury could not reach a majority verdict. The CPS elected not to seek a retrial as it was assessed not to be in the public interest.

On 13 May 2019 an individual was sentenced for one breach of his TPIM notice. He was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment (suspended for two years), a 12-hour curfew to be observed for 12 months, 150 hours’ unpaid work, 18 months’ attendance at an extremist risk guidance and identity help programme and a victim surcharge and collection order.

[HCWS1780]
HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Strengthening Communities

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): On Saturday 20 July I published “By deeds and their results: How we will strengthen our communities and nation”.

The document sets out the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government’s vision for stronger communities, explaining why communities matter, what strong communities look like, and what Government and partners can do to support their creation.

It also signals the intention that the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government will work with other Government Departments to champion the importance of communities in every aspect of society, and focus its future work on building stronger communities across the country.

When communities are strong, society is strong. Communities can improve health and wellbeing, enable economic prosperity, help improve the local environment, and provide support in times of crisis. But eight years on from the Localism Act—the last piece of legislation focused on supporting communities—the challenges facing communities have evolved, and the time is right to assess and change the way in which Government can support communities. This is particularly necessary given the long-term divisions which have been exposed following the vote on the UK’s future membership of the European Union.

“By deeds and their results” commits the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to several actions, including:

- Holding a national conversation with communities across England about their view of who we are as a nation, their vision for the future of their community and our country, and what local and national Government can and should be doing to support their community to thrive. We want Government and all public bodies to renew their understanding of their role in building stronger communities—this should be informed by direct conversations with people, in partnership with our existing local democratic institutions. The conversation will commence following the UK’s formal departure from the European Union.
- Establishing a series of civic deal pilots to test how Government put into practice the principles in “By deeds and their results”. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will work jointly with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on these pilots. We will work with each pilot to consider how Government activities can be better aligned and co-ordinated to support communities in identifying and delivering their own priorities.
- Publishing a communities White Paper to renew Government’s focus on building stronger communities across England. This will consider, for example, how community rights are strengthened, promoted and made easier to take up; how funding for communities can be more simplified, integrated and less risk averse; and how communities can best shape local services and decision-making more broadly. The final scope of the White Paper will be developed in partnership with communities, including through the national conversation and civic deal pilots.

“By deeds and their results” is underpinned by four pillars that will inform all work to strengthen communities across our Department:

1. Trust, connectedness and local pride;
2. Active citizenship and local control;
3. Shared community spaces;
4. Shared prosperity, with no community left behind.

This publication represents the next step in an ongoing conversation with communities that will shape the Department’s future activity. By working in partnership with all stakeholders—including other Government Departments, councils, businesses, faith groups and civil society organisations—we can create an environment that supports and enables stronger communities to flourish.

[HCWS1786]

Rented Housing and Park Home Consultation

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The housing landscape has fundamentally changed since the introduction of the Housing Act 1988—an Act that covers both the social and the private rented sector, as well as providing the tenure framework for a number of other landlords. With one in five households now in the private rented sector, with more families with children and older people renting their homes, it is time for a generational change to renting which better meets the needs of this important market.

Yesterday therefore, my Department launched a number of consultations, which will take forward this Government’s commitment to protect tenants, support landlords, drive up standards in the rental sector and make the housing market fairer for everyone.

Cracking down on rogue landlords

The Government are determined that those renting their homes are not forced into inadequate or unsafe housing. The majority of landlords and property agents in the private rented sector provide decent and well-managed accommodation, but there is a small number who knowingly flout their legal obligations and rent out substandard accommodation. These few criminals account for a disproportionate amount of the 25% of private rented homes which are non-decent.

The Prime Minister committed to widen access to information on the database of rogue landlords and property agents to tenants. In its current form, the database is viewable only to local authorities. It is targeted at the most serious and prolific criminals, those who have been convicted of specified banning order offences such as failure to make a property habitable when instructed by the local authority, through to serious crimes such as specified drug and sexual offences.

Our consultation, “Rogue Landlord Database Reform: Widening Access and Considering the Scope of the Database of Rogue Landlords and Property Agents”, seeks views on how to open-up the database so tenants can know more about the landlord who they plan to, from or already rent from. We also want to consider the scope of the database, this consultation therefore also seeks views on whether the database should cover a wider range of relevant criminal, civil and housing regulation breaches to help further raise standards across the sector.

Abolishing section 21 “no fault” evictions and supporting landlords to reclaim their property

On 15 April, I announced plans to abolish section 21 of the Housing Act 1988, putting an end to so-called “no fault” evictions and giving tenants the certainty that they will not be asked to leave their home without a valid reason.
The Government want to deliver a balanced and effective tenancy regime that is fair to both landlords and tenants and yesterday published “A New Deal for Renting: resetting the balance of rights and responsibilities between landlords and tenants”. This consultation seeks views on how tenancies should operate in future. It is the first step in a journey that will deliver on our commitment to bring greater fairness and transparency to tenants and ensure they have the security they need to plan for the future.

The consultation also proposes three new grounds and asks for views on the current grounds for eviction and how they can be improved. Landlords should have confidence that they will be able to regain possession of their property if they need to, and the consultation further explores whether the courts could use the accelerated procedure for dealing with possession order applications under some or all of the mandatory grounds in section 8 of the Housing Act 1988.

Taken together, the reforms proposed across these two consultations will build on Government action to drive up standards across the sector, deliver the rental sector the country deserves and needs, and create a housing market that works for everyone.

Protecting residents of park homes

Finally, we have also published a consultation seeking views on how the fit and proper person test for park homes sites will work in practice. In the Government response to the review of park homes legislation, we committed to introducing the test subject to a technical consultation to ensure the effective operation of the test. When implemented, the test will strengthen local authorities’ powers to target the worst offenders and remove unscrupulous and criminal site operators from the park homes sector.

I am making a copy of all consultations available in the Library of the House [HCWS1787]

New Unitary Councils

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): In my written statement of 1 November 2018 [HCWS1058] to the House, I committed to set out in due course the specific circumstances in which I would be prepared to issue a formal invitation to councils under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, to submit proposals for the establishment of new unitary councils.

Today I am confirming the circumstances in which I would be prepared to issue such an invitation; how I intend to assess any unitary proposals councils make in response; and our continued approach to any proposals for the establishment of new unitary councils.

Today, I want to provide further clarity for those councils who might consider the possibility of restructuring, by setting out the factors councils should consider and the processes to be followed—including with regard to local support.

For councils wishing to restructure to form unitary local government, the first step of the statutory process as set out under the 2007 Act is for me to invite them to submit proposals. There are two circumstances in which I will consider issuing such an invitation.

The first circumstance is where the following two conditions are met:

There is a local request for an invitation.

That I consider that the request demonstrates local opinion is coalescing around a single option which is reasonably likely to meet the existing publicly announced criteria for unitarisation.

In forming my view I would carefully consider the request, including the groups making and supporting it and their reasons for so doing. Where I issue an invitation, I would do so to all those councils that I consider to have regard to the area concerned, whether or not they were among those who had made the original request.

The second circumstance is where I consider that doing so would be appropriate given the specific circumstances of the area, including in relation to the long-term sustainability of local services. This is the situation in which my predecessor, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), issued an invitation to the councils in Northamptonshire.

Following such an invitation, it would be for the councils concerned to decide whether to develop and submit proposals for unitarisation, either individually or jointly by two or more councils.

I confirm that I will assess any locally-led unitary proposal that I receive against the criteria for unitarisation which we announced to Parliament in 2017 and which I and my predecessor have consistently used since then. These criteria state that subject to Parliamentary approval a proposal can be implemented, with or without modification, if I conclude that across the area as a whole the proposal is likely to:

improve the area’s local government;
command a good deal of local support across the area; and
cover an area that provides a credible geography for the proposed new structures, including that any new unitary council’s population would be expected to be in excess of 300,000.

On district council mergers, I confirm that where two or more district councils submit a proposal to merge, I will assess this against the criteria for mergers which we announced to Parliament in November 2017 and which we have used since then. The statutory process for such mergers does not involve my inviting proposals, and I recognise that particularly small district councils may
wish to propose merging as a natural next step following a number of years of successful joint working, sharing of services and senior management teams.

The criteria for district council mergers are that, subject to Parliamentary approval, a proposal to merge would be implemented if I had reached a judgment in the round that if so implemented it would be likely to:

- improve the area’s local government;
- command local support, in particular that the merger is proposed by all councils which are to be merged and there is evidence of a good deal of local support; and
- the area is a credible geography, consisting of two or more existing local government areas that are adjacent, and which, if established, would not pose an obstacle to locally-led proposals for authorities to combine to serve their communities better and would facilitate joint working between local authorities.

This statement is intended to provide clarity to councils and communities and help ensure that time and effort are not wasted on pursuing proposals which are unlikely to get the go ahead. It is important that those seeking to pursue locally led proposals are confident that there is a broad basis of common local support for the proposals to avoid unnecessary local conflict and distraction from the delivery of quality public services. The statement underlines the need for any proposals to be innovative, improve services, enhance accountability, have local support and deliver financial sustainability if they are to be taken forward.

Moreover, restructuring is only one of the different ways that councils can move forward. Joint working with other councils and partners could also be an appropriate and sustainable way forward. Such joint working can take a variety of forms ranging from adopting joint plans, setting up joint committees, and sharing back office services, to establishing combined authorities, and may extend across county boundaries. Those in an area will know what is best—the very essence of localism to which the Government remain committed.

[HCWS1790]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Consultation on UK Export Finance’s Foreign Content Policy: Response

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Government will today publish the response to the consultation on UK Export Finance’s (UKEF) Foreign Content policy. It sets out the approach UKEF will take to determine the level of non-UK goods, services and intangible assets in transaction supported by UKEF.

The purpose of the new approach is to ensure that UKEF’s support is flexible and meets the needs of UK exporters to help them win business overseas, fulfilling UKEF’s mission to ensure that no viable UK export fails for lack of finance or insurance from the private sector, while operating at no net cost to the taxpayer.

The consultation, published in April 2019, was part of UKEF’s commitment in the Government’s export strategy to review its products and policies to ensure they reflect the full breadth of its capability and the needs of business. The consultation received 28 responses, which were largely supportive of the approach proposed by Government in the consultation and reinforced the need for its foreign content policy to adapt to increasingly globalised supply chains.

The new policy ensures that UKEF will implement a principles-based approach to foreign content, recognising the full contribution of the UK supply chain. This approach will supplement UKEF’s current UK content requirement, making it easier for UKEF to consider support for scenarios which are outside of a specific export contract, but which nevertheless are conducive to supporting and developing UK exports.

This approach will broaden the availability of UKEF support for all sectors including those to which it has not traditionally provided support. To align with this expectation, UKEF will be updating its definitions to clarify UKEF’s ability to support intangible assets.

A copy of the consultation response will be placed in the Libraries of both House.

[HCWS1761]

JUSTICE

Enforcement Agents

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): Further to a statement made by the then Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer) [Official Report, 26 November 2018: Vol.650, c.2WS], I wanted to update the House on the Ministry of Justice’s review of the implementation of the enforcement agent reforms contained in the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act 2007. These reforms, which came into force in 2014, aimed to provide protection to debtors from the aggressive pursuit of their debt from enforcement agents, while balancing this against the need for effective enforcement.

Our review was launched with a call for evidence on 26 November 2018 that ran to 17 February 2019. This sought to provide further information on the operation of the reforms following the Government’s publication of the first post-implementation review on 2 April 2018. This review found that the reforms had led to many positive changes, including improved transparency and consistency, both in terms of the enforcement process and the fees charged by enforcement agents. The report noted, however, that some enforcement agents were still perceived to be acting aggressively and not complying with the new rules.

We received nearly 300 responses to the call for evidence from: individuals who have been visited by enforcement agents; enforcement agents, firms and trade associations; local authorities and other creditors; advice organisations and charities; MPs and members of the judiciary.

I am grateful to the Justice Committee for conducting an inquiry into this important issue. We are carefully considering its recommendations for further reform. We will provide a full response to the report and to our call for evidence, following further engagement with stakeholders over the summer.
Based on their data, civil enforcement agents now enforce around 3 million civil cases each year. Creditors need an effective, sustainable way to ensure that they receive the money owed to them. At the same time, the Government must ensure that those in debt, especially the vulnerable, including those with mental health issues, are treated fairly and given the protections they deserve.

Enforcement agents carry out an important job in often very challenging circumstances.

Many firms have made considerable efforts to make sure that they are treating those in debt fairly, but complaints continue. All enforcement agents must operate to the same high standards. So, we will be pushing forward with a reform package to make sure that people do not face aggressive action from enforcement agents and to improve trust in the industry as a whole.

One area of our focus will be how people can make complaints against enforcement agents. Data submitted to our call for evidence has shown that the volume of complaints made about enforcement agents is much lower than would be expected relative to the volume of debts enforced, and compared to similar industries. While this may in part be due to improvements in the sector, we believe that there are a number of barriers in the current complaints system that may deter people from making a complaint. We will look to address these with enforcement agents and others with a view to making the complaints system more effective, transparent and independent.

We are also considering what role independent regulation of enforcement agents could potentially play in ensuring that vulnerable debtors are treated fairly. We believe that regulation of this sector could be strengthened but we do not yet have a firm view on the form this should take. It is an issue that would benefit from further discussions with stakeholders. We are clear that any further regulation must be effective, proportionate and sustainable.

Alongside considering these reforms, we wish to bring quicker changes to the system to improve how enforcement agents operate. Our call for evidence and the Justice Committee’s inquiry found strong evidence that body-worn cameras are important in protecting both those in debt and enforcement agents, raising standards in the industry and enabling complaints to be properly investigated. We will be taking forward work to make use of body-worn cameras mandatory for all private enforcement agents and to produce best practice guidance.

Under the current system, all enforcement agents have to demonstrate knowledge of the law, customer care, dealing with conflict situations and identifying vulnerable situations. We believe that there is a good case, however, to look again at the guidance and requirements for how enforcement agents interact with those in debt, with a view to addressing any unfair treatment of vulnerable people, including those with mental health issues.

The Ministry of Justice proposes to engage with the enforcement industry, debt advice agencies, creditors and others on these and other issues over the summer before responding in full to its call for evidence and the Justice Committee report. The response will include a full analysis of the variety of evidence submitted to the review and set out proposals for reform to enhance the regulation of enforcement agents. We will consult on any proposals for legislative reform.

This work forms part of wider cross-Government efforts to improve the treatment of those in debt. This includes work by HM Treasury to implement a “breathing space” and statutory debt repayment plan for people in problem debt and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government review of how local authorities can improve the way they collect council tax debt.


The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): I am today announcing the Government’s decision on pay rises for prison staff.

The prison service pay review body has made its recommendations for the 2019-20 pay award and we are accepting these recommendations in full.

Last year, the Government announced the largest pay rise in nearly a decade for almost a million public sector workers. Today we are building on that with a pay award that is worth at least 2.2% for all prison staff and 3% for our Band 3 officers on the “fair and sustainable” terms and conditions. This is the second year in a row we have put in place awards over 2% for our prison staff and this year’s settlement represents the highest consolidated increase for over 10 years.

In addition to the headline increases we will also implement the totality of the other review body recommendations. This represents a full package for staff that will support us to recruit and retain prison officers and managers, contributing to safer prisons and reduced reoffending. In addition to their pay, prison officers continue to benefit from defined-benefit pensions, which are amongst the most generous available.

For a Band 3 officer on the modern terms and conditions the pay settlement is worth on average £1,277.

Alongside this investment in pay, prison officers are being trained to be more effective and gain experience in critical areas. The key worker role within the new offender management in custody model is currently being rolled out across prisons. This has been enabled by the investment in additional Band 3 officers, and supports officers at this grade to build more effective relationships with prisoners in order to improve safety and help reduce reoffending.

Thanks to the Government’s balanced approach to public finances—getting debt falling as a share of our economy, while investing in our vital services and keeping taxes low—we are able to continue our flexible approach to pay policy, allowing us to attract and retain the best people for our prisons.

We consider all pay awards in light of wider pressures on public spending. Public sector pay needs to be fair both for public sector workers and the taxpayer. Around a quarter of all public spending is spent on pay and we need to ensure that our public services remain affordable for the future.

It is also vital that our world class public services continue modernising to meet rising demand for the incredible services they provide, which improve our lives and keep us safe.
The report has been laid before Parliament today 22 July 2019 and is available online at: https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commmons/2019-07-22/HCWS1768/. I am grateful to the chair and members of the review body for their report.

Response to Opposition Day Debate: Prisons and Probation

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): Today I would like to update the House on prisons and probation following the Opposition day debate of 14 May 2019.

Our prison and probation systems have faced challenges in recent years, with changes in population, changes in the nature of crimes being committed and wider societal changes impacting the criminal justice sector, such as the use of Spice and other psychoactive substances. We need to ensure that our prisons and probation services provide appropriate punishment, and work with offenders to stop the root causes of criminality, supporting them to re-join their communities.

HMP Birmingham was an exceptional case caused by a number of complex factors and the Government had been working closely with G4S to try and resolve the issues in HMP Birmingham. However, it became increasingly clear that G4S alone was not able to make the improvements that were so badly needed. That is why the Government took decisive action to step in and did so at no additional costs to the taxpayer.

However, the Government are clear that the exceptional experience of HMP Birmingham is no more representative of the wider contribution of the private sector to our justice system than individual failings in the public sector are in the public estate. The Government remain committed to ensuring a mixed market for service delivery in the justice system. Partnering with the private and voluntary sectors offers the taxpayer greater value for money, greater diversity of provision and greater innovation than we would see from the public sector alone. Our policy remains a commitment to what works; we will continue to resist ideological calls to spend taxpayers money in a particular sector, regardless of value proposition.

Government contracts are never awarded lightly: each is awarded following a robust process. The Government have always been compliant with procurement regulations and follows these diligently when assessing supplier’s suitability.

Through the competition processes we undertake a rigorous financial and operational assessment of bids put forward by any existing or potential operator to ensure bids are of sufficient quality, value for money and affordability. The Government also ensure, through the procurement and contract management processes, that we have sufficient measures in place to have confidence in the delivery and maintenance of the contracted services over their lifetime.

The chief inspector of prisons has highlighted many examples of excellent performance by private prisons in his inspection reports and competition for custodial services in England and Wales is well established, and has been in place since the early 1990s. Privately managed prison providers achieve the majority of their targets, and their performance is closely monitored by the robust contract management processes HMPPS has in place.

Privately-managed prisons have also pioneered the use of modern technology to improve the running of establishments and help promote rehabilitation — innovations that in many cases are still not widely found in the public estate. This includes the development of in-cell telephony to help prisoners maintain ties with their families; interactive story-time activities between prisoners and their children; and the introduction of electronic kiosks, which allow prisoners to have greater control of managing their day-to-day lives.

Private probation providers have drawn on prior experience delivering employability services to improve the sourcing of unpaid work placements for offenders on community sentences, with nine out of 13 community rehabilitation companies rated “Good” for the delivery of unpaid work by HM Inspectorate of Probation. CRCs have also demonstrated their potential to drive innovation in rehabilitation programmes, with London CRC helping pioneer the safer streets partnership to tackle gangs and knife crime and Kent, Surrey and Sussex CRC developing the first behavioural intervention targeted at stalking offences.

The Government therefore rejects the call to end plans to run competitions for new private prisons. We are also committed to ensuring a mixed market for service delivery in the probation system, with offender management delivered by the National Probation Service, but up to £280 million allocated for contracting of unpaid work and rehabilitative services from the private and voluntary sector. In addition, we plan to ring-fence an initial £20 million per year for a regional outcome and innovation fund to be spent on innovative, cross-cutting approaches. There will inevitably in any large organisation be occasional instances where service delivery is not as expected, regardless of whether the public or private sectors are responsible. In these instances, we ensure prompt action is taken to rectify any identified issues, and to learn lessons. This Government will not shy away from learning lessons where they are required—and will not seek to denigrate the dedicated work of large numbers of those who deliver our public services simply because of who their employer is.

Instead, this Government are committed to ensuring that all our prisons, public or private, are places of safety and reform, and that our probation services maximise their performance in keeping the public safe by helping offenders on community orders or leaving prison to turn their lives around in the community.

PRIME MINISTER


The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Today, I am pleased to announce the publication of the third annual report of the National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR). This also provides an annual update on the National Security Capability Review (NSCR). I will be placing a copy of the report in the Libraries of both Houses and publishing the report on gov.uk.

In the SDSR, we committed to giving Parliament an annual update on implementation of the strategy. This annual report sets out our progress in delivering on our
SDSR and NSCR commitments and shows how the United Kingdom continues to meet the threats and challenges posed by a changing world, proving the merits of fusion doctrine, as introduced in last year’s NSCR.

The NSCR reinforced our vision and values set out in the National Security Strategy and SDSR of a secure and prosperous United Kingdom with global reach and influence. Our overarching national security objectives: protect our people; project our global influence; and promote our prosperity, continue to be the foundation of our national security approach. In support of each of these objectives, we have made significant progress on a cross-Government programme of activity, overseen by a sub-committee of the National Security Council (NSC).

Much has changed since the National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review was published in November 2015 - not least the United Kingdom’s historic decision to leave the European Union. Whilst the principal threats to our national security remain the same, we face a challenge from a resurgence of state based threats. These threats are more complex and are testing the norms of the rules-based international system on which we have come to rely for our prosperity and security. Nevertheless, NATO remains the bedrock of the UK’s defence and the leading instrument of our national security.

Our outlook remains outward facing and the UK will not shy away from defending democratic principles across the globe whilst ensuring British values are safeguarded at home. We value that outreach, and our partnerships and relationships across the world which are the envy of friend and foe alike. They have proven time and again to be a critical factor in our successes on the global stage.

In the SDSR, we made 89 principal commitments. As at March 2019, we have completed 32, with the rest being progressed. The SDSR pledged to deliver a number of complex major projects and programmes, some with a delivery timescale of a decade or more; progress on these is as we would expect at this stage. The NSCR provided 27 further significant commitments of which 3 have already been completed.

We remain the only country in the G20 to meet both the expenditure targets of 2% of GDP on defence and 0.7% of gross national income on overseas development, driving forward the implementation of the sustainable development goals.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): In the good work plan, the Government announced the largest upgrade to workers’ rights in a generation and set out a series of ambitious reforms to ensure the UK leads the world in meeting the challenges of the changing world of work. Building on these reforms, today the Government have launched a consultation on measures to support parents to enter, remain in and return to the workforce. Employees who feel that they are more in control of the balance between home and work commitments are more likely to be engaged at work. Their employers will benefit from greater employee loyalty, commitment and motivation and are likely to be able to draw on a wider pool of talent when recruiting.

The consultation seeks views on:

- high-level options for reforming parental leave and pay, and the costs, benefits and trade-offs of potential reforms;
- a proposal for a new entitlement to neonatal leave and pay for parents of babies who require neonatal care following birth;
- whether employers should have a duty to consider whether a job can be done flexibly and make that clear when advertising a role;
- options for requiring large employers (those with 250 or more employees) to publish their family-related leave and pay policies.

The Government’s modern industrial strategy is creating a fairer and more equal workplace, to boost productivity and earning power for all. The consultation supports this by helping people manage their wider commitments in life benefiting both families and employers.

The consultation on parental leave and pay will run for 16 weeks and will end on 8 November.

The remaining consultations will run for 12 weeks until 11 October 2019. The consultation can be found at:


I am placing a copy of the consultation in the Library of the House.
**Written Statements**

**Tuesday 23 July 2019**

**BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY**

**Consumer Update**


The three challenges are: reducing consumer harm caused by the “loyalty penalty” in sectors such as cash savings, mortgages, household insurance, mobile phone contracts and broadband; second, addressing the new competition issues that are arising in digital markets, including in relation to the market power of large platforms; third, harnessing the power of competition to raising the UK’s productivity.

In conjunction with this speech, the Government last week brought forward publications relating to the role and performance of the UK’s competition institutions. Together, these pave the way for further consideration of potential reforms to address the challenges identified.

**Strategic steer to the Competition and Markets Authority**

On Thursday 18 July, I published the Government’s strategic steer to the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA). For each Parliament the Government issues a non-binding strategic steer to the CMA. The intention of the steer is to support the CMA in achieving its legal duties and objectives to promote competition, both within and outside the UK, for the benefit of consumers and the UK economy. The steer provides a transparent statement of how the Government sees competition fitting with its wider objectives for the economy alongside the CMA's accountability framework.

**Review of aspects of competition law**

I also laid before Parliament on 18 July the review of aspects of the law on competition as required under sections 46 and 56 of the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013. The review considers the effectiveness of competition enforcement and changes made to the competition regime by the 2013 Act.

The review finds that the direction of travel is broadly positive. More competition cases are being opened, merger reviews and market studies are being brought to a conclusion more quickly, and stakeholder views suggest a good degree of confidence in the regime.

The review notes that we need to consider how well-equipped the UK’s competition framework is to respond to current and future competition challenges. In its upcoming Competition Green Paper, the Government will take a wide-ranging look at the institutions, powers and tools that promote and enforce competition in the UK.

**Consultation on the statutory audit services market**

The Government have also published a consultation in response to the statutory audit services market study by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA).

We have a problem with audit quality, as has been recognised and analysed by Sir John Kingman’s review, the BEIS Select Committee, the CMA and, more recently, the Financial Reporting Council itself. This is why it is right that we continuously review our audit regime to maintain the UK’s world-leading position.

In October 2018, I asked Lord Tyrie, Chair of the CMA, to consider what can be done to improve competition in the statutory audit sector. I took this action because I want the UK to continue to benefit from a high-quality, competitive and resilient audit services market. Good governance underpins our modern industrial strategy and audits are a vital contributor to the trust and confidence required in a modern economy.

The CMA’s final report concluded that the statutory audit market has fallen short of what the UK needs in a modern economy, and made a series of compelling and wide-reaching recommendations to improve quality and increase choice in the audit market. I am most grateful to Lord Tyrie and his colleagues for their detailed and comprehensive study, which captures evidence and views from a wide variety of stakeholders. I share their concerns, and I am pleased that this study complements a wider body of work being undertaken to improve audit quality.

Most importantly, we have endorsed Sir John Kingman’s recommendation to replace the Financial Reporting Council with an independent statutory regulator with a new mandate and powers.

The Government are committed to creating a fit-for-purpose and proportionate regulatory regime that delivers a competitive and resilient audit market that works for shareholders, investors and the wider public. I would welcome views on the CMA's final proposals. I would also strongly encourage proposals from the sector outlining what they believe could be done to address the CMA's concerns on a voluntary basis ahead of regulatory intervention. The Government will then develop a full set of proposals for reform taking account of both the recommendations from the CMA and the outcome of Sir John Kingman’s Review of the Financial Reporting Council. I do not believe that the Government need wait on the outcome of Sir Donald Brydon's review of the purpose of audit before continuing with the process of reform of the audit market.

The consultation document will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and is available on the gov.uk website. The consultation is open for 8 weeks and I look forward to the continued contribution of interested parties.

[HCWS1794]

**Government Chemist Review**

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The 22nd annual review of the Government chemist has been received. The review will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses plus those of the devolved Administrations in Wales and Northern Ireland. The review will also be laid before the Scottish Parliament.
The Government chemist is the referee analyst named in Acts of Parliament. The Government chemist's team carry out analysis in high-profile or legally disputed cases. A diverse range of referee analysis work was carried out during 2018, which included pioneering work undertaken to detect mycotoxins in sultanas and Brazil nuts; pesticides in animal feed and formaldehyde in food contact materials, and on molecular biology approaches to support “consumer as analyst” devices for food testing.

**DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT**

**News UK: Sharing Journalistic Resources**

*The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright):* On 10 January 2019, News UK submitted an application to vary certain conditions put in place in 1981 by the then Secretary of State for Trade. The changes proposed by News UK would allow The Times and The Sunday Times to share journalistic resources, subject to the agreement of each newspaper's editor.

Having considered News UK's application and representations made following an invitation to comment issued by DCMS on 17 January, I announced, in a written ministerial statement dated 11 April, that I was minded to accept News UK's application to vary the 1981 conditions.

However, in considering the proposed new undertakings as a whole, I also noted that the existing governance arrangements lacked clarity and certainty over roles and responsibilities. Following discussions between News UK and Officials, News UK submitted revised undertakings which substantially meet my concerns.

On 27 June, as required by legislation, I issued a further consultation notice seeking views on the changes to News UK's revised undertakings. Two responses were received. Neither response raised any issues that would warrant me seeking further modifications to the undertakings from News UK. Accordingly, I have today formally decided to accept the new undertakings and have today issued a notice of acceptance. A copy of the notice of acceptance with the final signed undertakings and the revised articles of association of Times Newspapers Ltd (TNL) and Times Newspapers Holding Ltd (TNHL) will be published on the Government website. My Department will shortly publish in the issues note circulated to News UK prior to the discussions with Officials.

The new undertakings creates an explicit requirement for the CMA and the Secretary of State to monitor the effectiveness of the obligations placed on News UK and the TNHL Independent National Directors (INDs). As part of this, I can confirm that in line with the Government's commitments on the handling of media merger cases, that DCMS will publish a non-confidential version of the reports from the TNHL INDs which have to be submitted to DCMS and the CMA annually.

**EDUCATION**

### Parliamentary Question: Correction

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): Information supplied by the HR Capability and Business Partnering Division of the Department for Education has been identified as containing incorrect facts in the response provided to two parliamentary questions from the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), concerning the number and proportion of staff employed in each group of the Department that are apprentices.

In response to PQ226124, the correct figures for the end of February 2019 are that the Department for Education employed 251 apprentices. These can be broken down as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>No of Apprentices</th>
<th>No of Employees per Area</th>
<th>Proportion that are Apprentices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Early Years and School Group</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1901</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and Skills Funding Agency</td>
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<td>1543</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Equalities Office</td>
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<td>103</td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher and Further Education Operations Group</td>
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<td>501</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Care, Mobility and Equalities</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>677</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Advisers Office</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>251</td>
<td>6479</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Government Equalities Office is captured in Department for Education data because they were still employees of the Department for Education at the end of February. Legal Advisers Office remain departmental employees.

Following the identification of this issue, we have completed an audit of our database. A rigorous new process has been put in place to ensure the robustness of our data.

**Higher Education Student Finance**

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): I am announcing details of student finance arrangements for higher education students undertaking a course of study in the 2020-21 academic year starting on 1 August 2020.

Maximum tuition fees for the 2020-21 academic year in England will be maintained at the levels that apply in the 2019-20 academic year, the third year in succession that fees have been frozen. This means that the maximum level of tuition fees for a standard full-time course will remain at £9,250 for the 2020-21 academic year.
Maximum undergraduate loans for living costs will be increased by forecast inflation (2.9%) in 2020-21. And the same increase will apply to maximum disabled students’ allowances for students with disabilities undertaking full-time and part-time undergraduate courses in 2020-21. Maximum grants for students with child or adult dependants who are attending full-time undergraduate courses in 2020-21 will also increase by forecast inflation in 2020-21.

We are also increasing support for students undertaking postgraduate courses in 2020-21. Maximum loans for students starting master’s degree and doctoral degree courses from 1 August 2020 onwards will be increased by forecast inflation (2.9%) in 2020-21. And the same increase will apply to the maximum disabled students’ allowance for postgraduate students with disabilities in 2020-21.

Further details of the student support package for 2020-21 can be found at gov.uk.

I expect to lay regulations implementing changes to student finance for undergraduates and postgraduates for 2020-21 late in 2019 or early in 2020. These regulations will be subject to Parliamentary scrutiny.

The Government will consider the recommendations of the independent panel to the review of post-18 education and funding, published on 30 May 2019, and will conclude the review at the spending review later this year.

Higher education student finance for 2020-21

Fees for full-time and part-time undergraduate students.

Maximum fees for full-time and part-time undergraduate courses will remain at 2019-20 levels in 2020-21.

The maximum fee for standard full-time courses offered by approved (fee cap) providers with an access and participation plan (APP) and a teaching excellence and student outcomes award (TEF) will remain at £9,250 in 2020-21.

The maximum fee for full-time accelerated degree courses offered by approved (fee cap) providers with an APP and a TEF will remain at £11,100 in 2020-21.

The maximum fee for part-time courses offered by approved (fee cap) providers with an APP and a TEF will remain at £6,935 in 2020-21.

Lower maximum fees will remain at 2019-20 levels in 2020-21 for (i) courses offered by providers without an APP and/or a TEF and (ii) overseas study years, work placement years and short final years of full-time courses.

Students undertaking courses at approved (fee cap) providers will be able to apply for up-front tuition fee loans to meet the full costs of their tuition.

Maximum fees for undergraduate courses offered by approved providers are not capped. Students undertaking courses at approved providers will be able to apply for up-front tuition fee loans towards the costs of their tuition which will remain at 2019-20 levels in 2020-21: up to £6,165 for a standard full-time course; up to £7,400 for a full-time accelerated degree course and up to £4,625 for a part-time course.

Living costs support for full-time undergraduate students.

Loans for living costs for new full-time students and continuing full-time students starting their courses on or after 1 August 2016.

Maximum loans for living costs for new full-time students and eligible continuing full-time students starting their courses on or after 1 August 2016 will be increased by forecast inflation (2.9%) in 2020-21.

The maximum loan for living costs for 2020-21 will be £9,203 for students living away from home and studying outside London. The equivalent loan rate for students living away from home and studying in London will be £12,010; for those living in the parental home during their studies, £7,747; and for those studying overseas as part of their UK course, £10,539.

Loans for living costs for new full-time students and continuing full-time students starting their courses on or after 1 August 2016 who are eligible for benefits.

Maximum loans for living costs for new full-time students and eligible continuing full-time students starting their courses on or after 1 August 2016, and who are eligible for benefits, will be increased by forecast inflation (2.9%) in 2020-21.

The maximum loan for living costs for 2020-21 will be £10,490 for students who are eligible for benefits who are living away from home and studying outside London. The equivalent loan rate for students who are eligible for benefits who are living away from home and studying in London will be £13,098; for those living in the parental home during their studies, £9,140; and for those studying overseas as part of their UK course, £11,732.

Loans for living costs for new full-time students and continuing full-time students starting their courses on or after 1 August 2016 who are aged 60 or over on the first day of the first academic year of their course.

The maximum loan for living costs in 2020-21 for new full-time students and eligible continuing full-time students starting their courses on or after 1 August 2016 who are aged 60 or over on the first day of the first academic year of their course, will be increased by forecast inflation (2.9%) to £3,993.

Maintenance grants and special support grants for full-time students who started their courses before 1 August 2016.

The maximum maintenance grant and special support grant for eligible full-time students who started their courses on or after 1 September 2012 but before 1 August 2016, will be increased by forecast inflation (2.9%) to £3,801 in 2020-21.

The maximum maintenance grant and special support grant for eligible full-time students who started their courses before 1 September 2012 will be increased by forecast inflation (2.9%) to £3,489 in 2020-21.

Loans for living costs for full-time students who started their courses on or after 1 August 2016.

Maximum loans for living costs for eligible students who started their courses on or after 1 August 2016 will be increased by forecast inflation (2.9%) in 2020-21.

The maximum loan for living costs will be £6,597 for students who are living away from home and studying outside London. The equivalent loan rate for students
living away from home and studying in London will be £9,205; for those living in the parental home during their studies, £5,247; and for those studying overseas as part of their UK course, £7,837.

**Loans for living costs for eligible students who started their courses before 1 September 2012.**

Maximum loans for living costs for eligible students who started their courses before 1 September 2012 will be increased by forecast inflation (2.9%) in 2020-21.

The maximum loan for living costs will be £5,938 for students who are living away from home and studying outside London. The equivalent loan rate for students living away from home and studying in London will be £8,309; for those living in the parental home during their studies, £4,604; and for those studying overseas as part of their UK course, £7,068.

**Long courses loans.**

Maximum long courses (living costs) loans for new and continuing students who are attending full-time courses that are longer than 30 weeks and three days during the academic year will be increased by forecast inflation (2.9%) in 2020-21.

**Targeted support for undergraduate students with dependants and undergraduate students with disabilities.**

**Dependants’ grants.**

Maximum dependants’ grants (adult dependants’ grant, childcare grant and parents’ learning allowance) will be increased by forecast inflation (2.9%) in 2020-21 for all new and continuing full-time undergraduate students.

The maximum adult dependants’ grant will be increased to £3,094 in 2020-21.

The maximum childcare grant payable in 2020-21, which covers 85% of actual childcare costs up to a specified limit, will be increased to £174.22 per week for one child only and £298.69 per week for two or more children.

The maximum parents’ learning allowance payable in 2020-21 will be increased to £1,766.

**Disabled students’ allowances.**

Maximum grants for undergraduate students with disabilities will be increased by forecast inflation (2.9%) in 2020-21.

For a full-time course: to £23,258 for a non-medical personal helper, £5,849 for major items of specialist equipment and £1,954 for other disability related expenditure.

For a part-time course: to £17,443 for a non-medical personal helper, £5,849 for major items of specialist equipment and £1,465 for other disability related expenditure.

**Support for part-time undergraduate students.**

**Fee and course grants for students who started part-time courses before 1 September 2012.**

Maximum fee and course grants for students who started part-time courses before 1 September 2012 will be increased by forecast inflation (2.9%) in 2020-21.

Maximum fee grants will be increased to £959, £1,150 or £1,442, depending on the intensity of study of the course. The maximum course grant will be increased to £314.

Loans for living costs for new part-time students and continuing part-time students starting degree level courses on or after 1 August 2018.

Maximum loans for living costs for new part-time students and continuing part-time students who started degree level courses on or after 1 August 2018 will be increased by forecast inflation (2.9%) in 2020-21.

The maximum loan for living costs for 2020-21 will be £9,203 for students living away from home and studying outside London. The equivalent loan rate for students living away from home and studying in London will be £12,010; for those living in the parental home during their studies, £7,747; and for those studying overseas as part of their UK course, £10,539.

Part-time students qualify for a proportion of the full-time loan for living costs depending on their intensity of study compared with a full-time course.

**Support for postgraduate students.**

**Loans for students undertaking postgraduate master’s degree courses.**

Maximum loans for new students starting postgraduate master’s degree courses in 2020-21 will be increased by forecast inflation (2.9%) to £11,222.

**Loans for students undertaking postgraduate doctoral degree courses.**

Maximum loans for new students starting postgraduate doctoral degree courses in 2020-21 will be increased by forecast inflation (2.9%) to £26,445.

**Disabled students’ allowance.**

The maximum grant for postgraduate students with disabilities will be increased by forecast inflation (2.9%) to £20,580 in 2020-21.

More details of higher education student finance arrangements for the 2020-21 academic year will be published on Government websites in due course.

[HCWS1793]

**HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE**

**Advancing Our Health: Prevention in the 2020s**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): Further to the prevention vision published on 5 November 2018, I wish to inform the House of the publication of the Green Paper, “Advancing our Health: Prevention in the 2020s”. The consultation will launch today and will run for 12 weeks.

For the first 70 years of the NHS, we have been successful in helping people live longer. Life expectancy has increased by almost 30 years over the past century. Cancer survival rates are up, mortality rates from heart disease and stroke are down.

Despite this progress, over 20% of our lives are spent in poor health. On average, men born today can expect to live 16 years in poor health and women 19 years. There is also a clear social gradient, with people in deprived areas living shorter lives in poorer health. Now we must move from thinking about life span to health span: the number of years we can expect to live healthy, independent lives.
The NHS is already making good progress, placing prevention at the heart of its long-term plan and supported by our record £20.5 billion additional investment. In the years ahead, the challenge is to deliver on these commitments, to move from a national treatment service, focused on illness, to a national wellness service, focused on good health, and to work even more closely with local authorities who have specific responsibilities around prevention and influence many of the determinants of good health.

As well as modernising prevention services, we also need to lay the foundations for good health across society and make healthy choices easier. This is because less than a quarter of our health is shaped by the services we receive.

Our health is our greatest asset. Just as we save for our retirement, we should be investing in our health throughout life. We know that some people find this easier than others, not because of innate differences in their values or beliefs, but because of differences in their experiences and circumstances. We believe that everybody has the right to a solid foundation on which to build their health. This means giving our children a good start and growing the conditions for good health throughout life.

When it comes to living a healthy life, the modern world presents many challenges. It can feel like the odds are stacked against us. This Green Paper is not about nannying but making healthier choices easier for people, so they are empowered to make decisions that are right for them and their families. To live a healthy, happier life, evidence suggests our focus should be on: eating a healthy diet, being physically active, being smoke-free and taking care of our mental health.

The commitments in the Green Paper help us towards our mission of healthy, happier lives. We aim to publish a Government response by Spring 2020, setting out our proposals in more detail.

Health is a shared responsibility. Only by working together can we achieve our vision of healthier, happier lives for everyone.

Pensions: NHS Clinicians

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): The NHS pension scheme is a generous and valuable part of the package of pay, terms and conditions for NHS staff, which continues to compare favourably with schemes in other sectors. However, the interaction between the NHS pension scheme and the tapered annual allowance means some clinicians are facing unintended consequences. The tapered allowance rightly aims to see more higher earners contributing towards the public purse by reducing the amount they can save into their pensions tax-free.

The Government have been listening to concerns about the impact on patient care as clinicians decline to take on additional work or seek early retirement in response to the prospect of incurring pension tax charges, and evidence that some NHS clinicians are changing their working patterns due to this issue. The Government are determined to find a solution that provides the right balance of incentives for clinicians to provide the services that patients need. Retaining and maximising the contribution of our highly skilled clinical workforce is crucial to delivery of the ambitions for patient care set out in the long-term plan for the NHS.

The Government have therefore launched a full public consultation setting out proposals to make the NHS pension scheme more flexible for clinicians, to give them more control over their pension growth and tax liabilities. Greater pension flexibility will help clinicians avoid cutting their hours allow them to undertake additional shifts to reduce waiting lists, or take on further supervisory responsibilities.

The consultation proposes a 50:50 flexibility, which lets clinicians halve their pension contributions in exchange for halving the rate of pension growth, balancing simplicity with the need to offer flexibility. Following discussions with clinicians and employers, the consultation goes further and invites views on other measures that Government should consider.

For NHS pension scheme members who do incur annual allowance tax charges, the “scheme pays” facility offers an alternative to finding funds up front to meet any tax charges for saving into their pension while they work. Instead they can choose for the pension scheme to pay the tax charge. The pension scheme will then recoup the tax paid plus interest from the value of their pension at retirement. The consultation proposes a potential improvement to the calculation of “scheme pays” deductions so that it is more transparent and staff can better assess the effect on their pension.

The consultation will listen to feedback on all potential ideas on pension flexibility before making changes in time for the new tax year.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Firearms Licensing: Statutory Guidance

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Today, I am publishing a public consultation on the introduction of statutory guidance to the police on firearms licensing. The proposed guidance aims to ensure that the highest standards of public safety are maintained in the firearms licensing process, improving consistency between police forces and in court when licensing decisions are appealed. It is being introduced following a recommendation made by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services in September 2015, which found that police forces were not always following the Home Office firearms guidance, resulting in inconsistent application of the law.

We have acted on this recommendation and the Policing and Crime Act 2017 made provision for the Home Secretary to issue statutory guidance to the police on their firearms licensing functions. The police will have a duty to have regard to the guidance, which will include existing safeguards relating to firearms ownership, such as police background checks or the criteria around applicants with a history of domestic violence.

The draft guidance in the consultation also contains new proposals on the arrangements for assessing the medical suitability of firearms applicants, following consideration of how the system is currently operating, and concerns raised about the variation in practice across the country. It is important that the arrangements
support doctors in providing the necessary medical information to the police who have responsibility for firearms licensing, and that the police are able to require sight of the medical information before they proceed to grant the firearm certificate. I am seeking views on these arrangements from all those with an interest so that we can ensure the system operates as effectively as possible. It is vitally important to ensure that those in possession of firearms are medically fit, to safeguard the public and the firearm certificate holder themselves.

The consultation is seeking views from police forces, firearms owners and other interested parties and the wider public on the contents of the proposed statutory guidance. I am also consulting the National Police Chiefs’ Council and the Chief Constable of Police Scotland, as required by the legislation. I will consider very carefully the views which are put forward during the consultation, which will last for a period of eight weeks, following which the Home Office will publish the new statutory guidance. I am committed to efficient and effective operation of the firearms licensing system, and once the statutory guidance has been in place for a suitable period, I intend to review the operation of the new medical arrangements to ensure they are working effectively.

Copies of the consultation along with the draft guidance and impact assessment will be made available on gov.uk and will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

**Immigration**

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid):** I am today making an announcement on a number of issues related to immigration. These include an expansion of the shortage occupation list (SOL) in line with the recommendations of the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) and a planned future amendment in the Immigration Rules to Section 67 leave. I am also providing an update on the Home Office’s response to cheating in English language tests and the Border, Immigration and Citizenship System (BICS) independent review.

*Migration Advisory Committee review of the shortage occupation list*

On 29 May, the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) published the outcome of its full review of the shortage occupation list (SOL). I am very grateful to the MAC for a very thorough and comprehensive piece of work. The MAC recommended a number of changes to the main UK-wide SOL, expanding the list to cover a range of high-skilled occupations, including a number of health and social care, engineering and digital technology occupations.

The Government are happy to accept all of the MAC’s recommendations on the composition of the SOL and the necessary amendments will be made in the autumn immigration rules changes.

The MAC also suggested that, in order to combat the particular challenges faced by some remote communities, the Government should pilot a scheme that facilitated migration to these areas. The Government accept that this is an idea worth pursuing. Further details will be given in due course.

**Section 67 leave**

In June 2018, we introduced section 67 leave to fulfil our legal obligation to those children transferred to the UK under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016. This ensures that those unaccompanied children transferred to the United Kingdom under section 67, and who do not qualify for refugee status or humanitarian protection, are able to remain in this country and build a life here. This form of leave allows them to study, work, access public funds and healthcare, and is a route to settlement which they would not ordinarily have had.

Currently, the immigration rules only provide for section 67 leave to be granted to those who have already had an application for refugee status or humanitarian protection refused. This means that upon arrival in the United Kingdom, the child is required to go through the process of claiming asylum, including providing an account of why they fled their country of origin.

We intend to amend the existing rules to allow those transferring under section 67 to receive this form of leave immediately, as soon as they arrive. This will provide the children, and the local authorities who will care for them, with additional reassurance and guarantee their status in the UK at the earliest opportunity.

Children who have already been transferred to the UK under section 67 and are currently having their asylum claims assessed will also be entitled to section 67 leave automatically once this amendment has been made. Children granted section 67 leave on arrival will still have the opportunity to claim asylum. Should they be successful in an asylum claim, those who qualify will receive refugee or humanitarian protection status.

The Government are absolutely committed to transferring the specified number of 480 unaccompanied children under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016 as soon as possible.

**The Home Office’s response to cheating in English language tests**

Five years ago, the scale of this issue was uncovered by Panorama. Their footage revealed systematic cheating in test centres run on behalf of the company ETS. Further investigation showed just how widespread this fraud was. Twenty-five people who were involved have been convicted and sentenced to over 70 years in prison. Further criminal investigations are ongoing, with a further 14 due in court next month.

Our approach to taking action on students has been endorsed by the courts, who have consistently found the evidence the Home Office had was enough to prompt the action that was taken at the time.

Despite this, there have remained concerns that some people who did not cheat may have been caught up and I am aware that some people found it hard to challenge the accusations against them. So earlier this year, I commissioned officials for advice.

This is a complex matter given that we need to work within existing legal frameworks relating to appeal rights, judicial review and administrative review.

I have therefore asked officials to review our guidance to ensure that we are taking the right decisions in these cases to ensure we are properly balancing a belief that deception was committed some years ago against other factors that would normally lead to leave being granted, especially where children are involved. We will update...
The changes highlight that the clothing and personal effects that detainees may retain include menstrual and other health, hygiene and welfare products. A decision to withhold any such products must be subject to a further specific risk assessment.

Access to toilet and washing facilities must now also take account of the detainee's dignity. For example, in cells subject to CCTV monitoring, privacy in the toilet area should be ensured by any appropriate means and detainees should be made aware of this when they are placed in the cell.

The changes make it explicit that strip searches and intimate searches of detainees must take due regard of their dignity. This includes the detainee’s health, hygiene and welfare needs including menstruation.

The above provisions around health, hygiene and welfare products take into account the possible needs of transgender individuals.

These revisions were prompted by concerns raised by the Independent Custody Visiting Association (ICVA) that in some cases women were being left without basic menstrual products in police cells.

They received overwhelming support following a public consultation last year, and we have subsequently sought and secured the agreement of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), in her role as Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee, that these straightforward revisions to the codes can be brought into force as soon as possible, as per the commitments made by the then Government during the introduction of section 67(7A) of PACE in 2003, without the approval of a resolution by each House.

I am grateful for the work and support of partners across the policing system, ICVA, and dedicated custody staff across the country. We all share a commitment to ensuring the dignity of detainees, and these changes will to help ensure the needs of individuals are met across the board.

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I am grateful for the work and support of partners across the policing system, ICVA, and dedicated custody staff across the country. We all share a commitment to ensuring the dignity of detainees, and these changes will to help ensure the needs of individuals are met across the board.
The changes made today do not affect the current threat level. The threat level to the UK from terrorism remains at SEVERE, and the threat level to Northern Ireland from Northern Ireland-related terrorism also remains at SEVERE, meaning that an attack is highly likely.

Threat levels are designed to give a broad indication of the likelihood of a terrorist attack. They are a tool for security practitioners working across different sectors and the police to use in determining what protective security response may be required. They also keep the public informed and give context to the protective security measures which we all encounter in our daily lives.

There remains a real and serious threat against the United Kingdom from terrorism and I would ask the public to remain vigilant and to report any suspicious activity to the police regardless of the threat level.

The decision to change the terrorism threat levels are taken by the independent from Ministers. The joint terrorism analysis centre set the national threat level and the security service set the Northern Ireland-related terrorism in Northern Ireland threat level. These are based on the very latest intelligence, considering factors such as capability, intent and timescale. Threat levels are kept under constant review.

[HCWS1797]

JUSTICE

Prison Service Pay Review Body

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): I am pleased to announce that the Prime Minister has appointed Tim Flesher CB as chair of the Prison Service Pay Review Body. This appointment is for three years, with Mr Flesher’s term commencing on 1 August 2019 and ending on 31 July 2022. This appointment has been made in accordance with the Governance Code on Public Appointments.

[HCWS1800]

TRANSPORT

Crossrail

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): It has been a challenging year for the Crossrail project. Since August 2018 when Crossrail Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of Transport for London (TfL), announced that the opening of the Elizabeth line through central London would be delayed, the project has been fully reviewed and reset.

Crossrail Ltd, TfL and the Department for Transport (DfT) have taken significant action in response to issues raised in the independent reviews by KPMG, as well as the reports from the National Audit Office, the Public Accounts Committee and the London Assembly’s Transport Committee. Lessons have been learned and Crossrail Ltd and both project sponsors, DfT and TfL, remain fully committed to the completion of the project which will transform London rail transport, and carry around 200 million passengers per year.

Actions taken this year have included:

The commissioning and completion of two wide-ranging and detailed independent reviews into the project’s governance, and commercial and financial agreements, with all recommendations acted upon by June 2019.

The agreement in December 2018 to an additional £2.15 billion financing package to deliver the final stages of the project in a way that is fair to the UK taxpayer.

The appointment of a new executive leadership team within Crossrail Ltd, a review of the organisational structure to ensure maximum efficiency, and the strengthening of the Crossrail board to ensure the right skills are in place right across the organisation and its board.

The announcement in April 2019 of a revised schedule which confirmed a six month window for delivery of the central tunnel section between Abbey Wood and Paddington, not including Bond Street, with a mid-point in December 2020, with more certainty to follow as testing progresses.

The publication in April 2019 of a joint report by the Department for Transport and the infrastructure projects authority (IPA) on lessons learned from the sponsorship of major projects including Crossrail.

Despite the challenges, the project has seen some key achievements during this year. Main dynamic testing of the trains commenced in January, and Crossrail Ltd recently achieved a further milestone with the commencement of close-headway testing of multiple trains in June.

Fifteen new Class 345 trains are in operation on the eastern and western parts of the route, building reliability and achieving a high standard of performance. Testing of the trains in the Heathrow tunnels is continuing and a TfL Rail service between Paddington and Reading is planned to commence in December of this year. This will be another important stepping stone to the opening of the full railway as soon as possible after the central section is completed.

The Network Rail (NR) On Network works on the eastern and western sections of the Crossrail route are well advanced. Over the past year, work completed has included the installation of the steelwork for new accessible footbridges, stairs and lift shafts at Ealing Broadway, West Ealing and Acton Main Line. The contracts to build and upgrade six ticket halls between Acton Main Line and West Drayton have been awarded, and the new ticket halls at Forest Gate and Gidea Park have now opened to the public.

Updated costings for Network Rail’s programme show that the costs are now forecast at around £2.8 billion. The additional costs are the result of some work taking longer than planned and have been managed by Network Rail from within its own internal budgets. No further funding has been provided from Government, and this has not had an impact on any other programmes.

Further details on Crossrail Limited’s funding and finances in the period to 29 May 2019 are set out in the table below.
The coming months will be critical for the project as Crossrail Ltd work to complete the installation and integration of the tunnel, stations and signalling systems, and Network Rail continue their works on surface sections of the route. It remains a hugely complex project and uncertainty and risk remains across the programme, with significant testing and integration work remaining. The new leadership team has committed to being fully open and transparent as it works through the final stages of the project, which is supported by the Department and TfL. However, it is positive that Crossrail Ltd now has a new plan in place to complete the outstanding works and bring the Elizabeth line into passenger service at the earliest possible date. When complete, the Elizabeth line will transform the rail network in London, reducing overcrowding and increasing central London rail capacity by 10%.

During the passage of the Crossrail Bill through Parliament, a commitment was given that an annual statement would be published until the completion of the construction of Crossrail, setting out information about the project’s funding and finances. The relevant information is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total funding amounts provided to Crossrail Limited by the Department for Transport and TfL in relation to the construction of Crossrail to the end of the period, (22 July 2008 to 29 May 2019)</td>
<td>£13,165,913,790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expenditure incurred (including committed land and property spend not yet paid out) by Crossrail Limited in relation to the construction of Crossrail in the period (30 May 2018 to 29 May 2019) (excluding recoverable VAT on Land and Property purchases)</td>
<td>£1,481,243,170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total expenditure incurred (including committed land and property spend not yet paid out) by Crossrail Limited in relation to the construction of Crossrail to the end of the period (22 July 2008 to 29 May 2019) (excluding recoverable VAT on Land and Property purchases)</td>
<td>£13,958,459,007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The amounts realised by the disposal of any land or property for the purposes of the construction of Crossrail by the Secretary of State, TfL or Crossrail Limited in the period covered by the statement.</td>
<td>£143,778,674</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The numbers above are drawn from Crossrail Limited’s books of account and have been prepared on a consistent basis with the update provided last year. The figure for expenditure incurred includes moneys already paid out in relevant period, including committed land and property expenditure where this has not yet been paid. It does not include future expenditure on contracts that have been awarded.

[HCWS1802]
The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I am today, along with the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), publishing the 2018-19 annual report and accounts for the Independent Office for Police Conduct [HC 2501]. This will be laid before the House and published on www.gov.uk. The report will also be available in the Vote Office.

Justice and Home Affairs Council

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): An informal meeting of EU Interior and Justice Ministers took place on 18 to 19 July in Helsinki, Finland. The Home Office Europe Director, Chris Jones, represented the UK for interior day. The Ministry of Justice Director, International and Rights, Paul Candler, represented the UK on justice day.

Interior day began with a discussion on the future of EU internal security, where the presidency noted its intention to discuss further at the October JHA Council to inform the new Commission’s work programme. In a broad ranging discussion, a number of issues were raised including: the new Commission President’s commitment to promote cross-border co-operation; the importance of enhancing Europol; the use of EU funding programmes to support internal security activity; the need to modernise Prum; the importance of SIS II; and tackling child exploitation. The UK intervened to support the broad thrust of the presidency’s paper, focusing on the importance on access to data and challenges from new technology, especially the need for early engagement with the private sector to protect law enforcement capabilities.

The Council then discussed the future of EU migration policy. Ministers raised a broad range of issues, with a focus on the revision of the EU’s common European asylum system legislation, which remains unresolved. Other issues raised including the need to address lack of co-operation by third countries on readmission, a focus on EU-Africa co-operation to tackle illegal migration, disembarkation platforms in third countries, the need for better external checks at the EU’s borders, and the problem of secondary movements. The UK did not intervene.

Over lunch, the Finnish presidency presented to Ministers on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) by law enforcement, after which followed a brief discussion on the benefits and risks from the use of AI. Discussion addressed the need to protect people from both private sector capabilities and state actors, and considered how EU privacy concepts needed to be reconsidered in the law enforcement context. The Commission highlighted plans to prioritise consideration of the impact of AI, 5G and risks to digital infrastructure. The UK did not intervene.

After lunch, Ministers undertook a table-top exercise focused on identifying and dealing with hybrid threats. Ministers were asked to consider and vote on responses to a fictional scenario. The post-scenario discussion considered the use of the EU’s solidarity clause. The UK did not intervene.

Justice day began with a discussion on the strengthening of the rule of law. Justice Ministers agreed that significant domestic responsibility for rule of law fell to them and their Ministries. National courts implemented EU law and ensured mutual trust was possible, while judicial training and judicial co-operation mechanisms were vital. All Ministers agreed, therefore, that the Justice Council should have a role. The UK noted commitment to the rules-based international order, highlighting in particular the work of the Venice Commission, the importance of sustainable development goal 16, and the benefits of direct judicial co-operation.

The Council then discussed criminal judicial co-operation, in particular, alternatives to detention and the issues relating to prison overcrowding. Discussion centred around the aim of considering alternatives to prison. For most, the aim was not reduction of prison populations but, rather, improved rehabilitation. Member states were clear that national rules should not be harmonised, but regarded mutual trust in appropriate sanctions, and in prison conditions, as a precondition for mutual recognition.

Over lunch, Ministers discuss civil judicial co-operation and multilateralism, including The Hague conference and other fora such as UNIDROIT and UNCITRAL.
Petition
Monday 8 July 2019

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Green Deal Scheme

The petition of residents of Glasgow East

Declares that the Government-backed Green Deal Scheme has adversely affected residents of Glasgow East both financially and psychologically; further that many residents have, in good faith, invested their life saving or accrued several thousands of pounds of debt to pay for work that was carried out by companies approved by the Green Deal Scheme; further that in some cases the work including the installation of insulation and of solar panels, was incomplete; further that some were sub-standard and in many cases residents were given incorrect information which led them to believe that they would save or make money when in fact they have simply lost money; and further that in other cases the installer did not apply for building warrants and as a result they are unable to sell their properties, or have the peace of mind that their homes are safe to live in, or that the insurance policies residents continue to pay, are valid without a building warrant.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to compensate financially and protect people who have found themselves suffering in this way after signing up to this Government-backed scheme using Government-approved installers.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by David Linden, Official Report, 14 May 2019; Vol. 660, c. 199.]
Petition

Wednesday 17 July 2019

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS hospital services in the Consett area

The petition of residents of North West Durham,

Declares that a succession of Government funding reductions has led to fewer services being delivered at Shotley Bridge Hospital; and further that this reduction of services threatens the viability of a community hospital in the Consett Area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to ensure there is no reduction of local NHS Hospital services in the Consett area.

And the petitioners remain, etc. —[Presented by Laura Pidcock, Official Report, 26 June 2019; Vol. 662, c. 769.]

Observations from The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond):

This Government are committed to ensuring that people across the country are able to access the right care at the right time and in the right place. However, it is the Government’s view that Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) are best placed to make decisions on commissioning health services for their communities, based on local need and working closely with local authorities and other partners.

In the Consett area, Shotley Bridge Community Hospital currently provides a range of services including diagnostic services, a chemotherapy unit, outpatients and community based clinics and, rehabilitation beds (inpatient ward) and has a urgent care centre.

NHS North Durham Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) is committed to retaining a local presence for the majority of services being provided and is working with a range of partners to consider how it can ensure services are sustainable for patients in North West Durham, including those currently provided on Shotley Bridge Community Hospital site.

The Shotley Bridge Reference Group regularly meets to discuss and report on any future plans based on the local clinical strategy for delivering the best care for patients and based the feedback received from the local population. This reference group has representation from the local MP and councillors.

The Government are committed to increasing funding and announced last year that the NHS will receive increased funding of £39 billion by 2023. That equates to a 3.4% a year real terms increase in funding over the next five years. This long-term funding commitment means the NHS has the financial security to develop its 10-year plan.
Petitions

Monday 22 July 2019

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Education Funding

The petition of residents of the constituency of Colchester in Essex,
Declares that more money should be allocated to schools and colleges to ensure that every child in Colchester receives the education they deserve; that while Education funding has increased, the cost pressures on schools and colleges have increased at a faster rate and schools and colleges having to take difficult decisions that will impact on the education they are able to provide; further notes that schools need certainty of funding in order to set three year budgets.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to:

Allocate more money to schools and colleges.

Provide schools and colleges with at least a three year funding settlement to provide certainty.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Will Quince.] [P002501]

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Hull Paragon Station Gate

The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom,
Declares that it is wrong to restrict access to the only pick-up and drop-off point at Hull Paragon Station, by closing the Anlaby Road gates throughout the day; notes that for many disabled people, this is the only accessible route into the station (access to only disabled car parking spaces); further notes that First TransPennine's suggestion that people should call a mobile number and wait to be admitted will result in (a) disabled people being left vulnerable while waiting to be admitted, (b) longer journey and waiting times and (c) disabled people being treated differently to able bodied people and calls on First TransPennine to provide unrestricted access to this point.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to put pressure on the Government to work with First TransPennine Express and provide unrestricted access to the only pick-up and drop-off point and disabled car parking spaces at Hull Paragon Station, by leaving the Anlaby Road gate open throughout the day.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Emma Hardy, Official Report, 9 July 2019; Vol. 663, c. 284.] [P002489]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Ghani):

The closure of the Anlaby Road gates is for a three-month trial which started on 17 June and will finish on 6 September, after which TransPennine Express (TPE) will assess whether the results of the trial justify extending the closure. TPE closed this gate to try and curb vandalism and antisocial behaviour in full consultation with, among others, the British Transport Police (BTP) and it was a BTP approved solution to at least carry out a three-month trial to see if this reduced vandalism and antisocial behaviour. TPE is assessing the results of the trial on a week-by-week basis and at the end of the trial, it will assess the results overall based on the evidence gathered.

Ultimately, though, it is the Government’s view that this is an operational matter for the station operator, TPE, to consider. The Anlaby Road exit/entrance at Hull Paragon station is not the only accessible route into and out of the Interchange. Passengers who have a disability or those who require extra assistance to use train/bus services and want to use the Anlaby Road exit/entrance can call the dedicated number which is clearly signposted and provided audibly at the entrance. TPE also provides full travel assistance for older and disabled customers. This can be arranged and booked at any time up to two hours before arrival/departure (if travelling from Hull to a TPE managed station) by calling TPE’s Assisted Travel Team on 0800 107 2149 or using an on-line booking form.

The toilets at Hull Paragon station were rebuilt as new as part of a £1.6 million refurbishment and were opened last year. TPE is looking to expand the toilets and waiting room. This is currently going through the design process and is due to be built later this year. It has received funding of £90,000 for this project, which will be to a high anti-vandalisation specification. This work will start after a programme of works by the station operator has been carried out.

1 www.tpexpress.co.uk/travelling-with-us/assisted-travel

St Rollox Railway Works

The petition of Residents of Glasgow,
Declares that the permanent closure of St Rollox Railway Works would lose hundreds of well-paid jobs; further that the restoration of Garratt steam locomotive ‘Springbok’ which was originally built in Springburn and is currently decaying in the Summerlee Heritage Park, Coatbridge would provide an excellent project to maintain the workforce until a new operator for the site could be found; further that the restoration of a steam engine for heritage purposes would not engage state-aid restriction; further that there is a need for the UK and Scottish Governments to collaborate on finding a sustainable railway engineering use for the St Rollox Railway Works site to extend the current 160 years of industrial excellence and railway engineering in Springburn; further notes that signatures have been collected on another petition to save the St Rollox Railway Works.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with the Scottish Government to jointly financially support the restoration of the Garratt steam locomotive ‘Springbok’ and to use the time thus provided to identify a new operator to guarantee the future of the St Rollox Railway Works.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mr Paul Sweeney, Official Report, 10 July 2019; Vol. 663, c. 412.] [P002492]
Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones):

When the possible closure of the St Rollox works was debated in the House of Commons earlier this year, colleagues and I recognised the historical importance of the site, and agreed that the closure and associated job losses would have a significant impact on the local economy. I noted then the proposal that those with an interest in the site might find a new arrangement that allows continued operation at the site on a commercial basis and in the interest of all parties.

I recognise the importance of the rail supply chain. Thousands of individual companies have helped to deliver a safe railway with relatively high passenger satisfaction against the background of a doubling of passenger numbers since privatisation. These companies are also significant employers in the communities where they operate and make an important contribution to the UK economy.

Both delivery of rail services and economic development are devolved matters. I would encourage local partners to continue to work together to deliver a suitable outcome.
Petitions

Tuesday 23 July 2019

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Lloyds Bank, Yateley branch

The Humble Petition of residents of the United Kingdom, Sheweth,

That Lloyds Bank have proposals to close their Yateley branch on 29 August 2019; further that this high street branch is particularly highly valued, especially by older residents and small business owners who often pop in to manage their finances; further that there has been an increase of branch usage in the last year by businesses, proving the demand for a high street branch; and further that if accounts are moved to Camberley or Fleet, this becomes between a one-and two-hour journey by public transport, which is clearly not in the best interests of our community.

Wherefore your petitioners pray that your honourable house urges HM Government to take all possible steps to urge Lloyds Bank to reconsider this decision and to make sure that the banking industry considers the social implications of their actions.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.—[Presented by Mr Ranil Jayawardena, Official Report, 3 July 2019; Vol. 662, c. 1311.]

Observations from The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

The Government thank the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Ranil Jayawardena) for submitting the petition on behalf of his constituents about the planned closure of the Yateley branch of Lloyds bank.

The Government are sorry to hear about residents’ disappointment at the planned closure of this bank branch.

Lloyds Banking Group, like all banking providers, needs to balance customer interests, market competition, and other commercial factors when considering their branch strategies. Decisions on opening and closing branches are taken by the management team of each bank on a commercial basis, and the Government do not intervene in those decisions.

However, the Government do believe that banks should act in the best interests of their customers and are committed to increasing competition and encouraging innovation to ensure all bank customers can benefit from better products and services. The Government continue to engage actively with the banking industry and consumer groups on these issues on an ongoing basis.

In May 2017, the major high street banks signed up to the access to banking standard, committing to work with customers and communities to minimise the impact of branch closures and put in place alternative banking services. The standard commits banks to ensure customers are well informed about branch closures, the bank’s reasons for closure and options for continued access to banking services. These options should include specialist assistance for customers who need more help. The operation of the standard is monitored and enforced by the independent lending standards board, ensuring that banks are held accountable for the way they treat their customers when a branch closes.

In addition, since January 2017, the Post Office has had an agreement with the high street banks that allows more banking customers to access a wider range of services at the Post Office than ever before. The arrangement allows 99% of personal and 95% of small business customers to carry out their everyday banking at more than 11,500 Post Office branches in the UK. While the range of services offered by the Post Office may be more limited than that offered in a traditional bank branch, the services provided through the Post Office’s extensive network ensures that essential banking facilities remain available in as many communities as possible. Since 2010, Post Office branch numbers have been at their most stable for decades and 99.7% of the national population now lives within three miles of a branch. Furthermore, 92.9% of the national population live within one mile of their nearest post office branch. Almost 98.7% of the rural population lives within three miles of a post office.

Both initiatives have the Government’s full support, and banks are aware that the Government expect their involvement to be genuine and unqualified.

The Government cannot reverse the changes in the market and in customer behaviour; nor should they determine firms’ commercial strategies in response to those changes. However, the Government will continue to take positive action to maintain access to vital banking services and ensure banks support communities across the UK when their local branches close.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Treating epilepsy/multiple sclerosis with cannabis oil

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom, declares that the petitioners are disturbed by the Home Office ban on doctors prescribing cannabis oil and THCA to those with epilepsy or multiple sclerosis, especially the two children Billy Caldwell who needs a prescription urgently, and Alfie Dingley; further that this is very urgent as the Sunday Times on May 20th stated that Mrs Caldwell only has enough medication to last until June and her son’s epileptic fits were very serious and life threatening and he needed oxygen before he had the treatment, first in Holland and then in County Tyrone in Northern Ireland, whereas with the treatment he can lead a normal life; further that a few weeks ago his doctor, Doctor Brendan O’Hare, was warned not to write any more prescriptions for Billy, and further that cannabis can be dangerous in the wrong amounts, but in the correct dosage, prescribed by a doctor it can be very beneficial.

The petitioners therefore requests that the House of Commons urges the Government to urge the Home Office and the Department for Health and Social Care...
as a matter of urgency to inform Dr O'Hare, that he can resume his prescriptions for the child Billy, although they include THCA; further that we urge the Government to inform Mrs Dingley that her doctor can prescribe medicines containing cannabis to her son Alfie whose epileptic seizures were reduced by 60 to 70% in Holland with cannabis oil but are much worse now, without it; further to urge the Government to write to the Multiple Sclerosis Society to say that doctors may now prescribe cannabis; further to urge the Government to allow doctors to prescribe cannabis-based products (cannabidiol) which is supposed to be legal in the UK, and THC, which is a Class A drug, to patients and to provide doctors with an easy-to-fill-in 2-page form to get a licence to do so, instead of ordering them to stop the treatment as they did to Billy's doctor, and further to urge the Government to announce that it will allow doctors to prescribe treatments derived from cannabis whenever the patients need it, such as those with severe epilepsy and multiple sclerosis, to prevent desperate patients having to go to illegal drug dealers.

And the petitioners remain, etc. —[Presented by Caroline Lucas, Official Report, 25 June 2019; Vol. 662, c. 3P. ]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy):

The law was changed on 1 November 2018 to allow clinicians on the General Medical Council’s Specialist Register to prescribe cannabis-based products for medicinal use (CBPM), where it is clinically appropriate and in the best interest of patients. No licences are required to prescribe.

While cannabis and cannabis-based products remain a Class B drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, there is now a legitimate route to access these products for medicinal use. Patients will not be able to obtain these products from their GPs but will require a referral to a specialist who can prescribe on the basis of individual need. The supply of cannabis-based medicines to patients will be discussed at the stage in their treatment when the specialist doctor has considered and discounted all licensed interventions. Cannabis-based medicines may therefore only be suitable for a small number of patients with severe, treatment-resistant conditions.

While the law does not restrict the conditions for which these products may be prescribed, interim clinical guidance has been issued by the Royal College of Physicians, British Paediatric Neurology Association and Association of British Neurologists. The interim guidance focuses only on areas where the evidence base is most developed, namely chronic pain, intractable nausea and vomiting, spasticity (including multiple sclerosis) and severe, treatment-resistant epilepsy.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) has been commissioned to develop updated clinical guidelines on the prescribing of CBPM, the scope of which is limited to the management of the conditions covered in the interim guidance. The guidelines will be published by October 2019. It will be based on the best available international evidence and will have been produced using NICE’s world-renowned process for identifying and assessing relevant studies and delivering such guidance. NICE is expected to consult on the draft guidance between 23 July-20 August 2019.

It is clear that we do not yet know enough about the benefits and potential harms of using cannabis-based products as medicines. Apart from those products that have market authorisations (including Sativex and Nabilone), and are being prescribed on the NHS, other cannabis-based products are unlicensed medicines that have not had their quality, safety or efficacy assessed by the medicine regulators nor, their cost-effectiveness determined by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. This is the foundation of NHS decisions about routine funding for medicines.

In the meantime, the normal NHS medicines governance systems apply, as they do to all locally funded unlicensed treatments, and are being used to support good clinical practice and safe and effective prescribing. Decisions will be taken, at NHS Trust level on a case-by-case basis, based on the needs of the individual patient and the evidence of efficacy and cost-effectiveness available.

The NHS does not have unlimited resources. NHS Trusts and Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) have to make difficult decisions about commissioning care, but they do this based on patient needs, clinical evidence and cost-effectiveness. CCGs are statutorily obliged to provide the best possible care, balancing demand with supply for the benefit of all their patients and local populations. Access to cannabis-based products for medicinal use will be considered as part of this.

Cannabis-based medicines are no different from any other drug in that they have effects and side-effects. This is why it is so important to develop our knowledge about the safety and efficacy of cannabis-based products when they are used as medicines. To further the evidence-base, the National Institute for Health Research has issued two calls for research in this area and is working with the industry and researchers to ensure that the evidence is developed in a way that will inform decisions on public funding. This research call is open to all good quality proposals covering any indication and disorders unresponsive to existing treatments. Ministers have called on the industry to take part in clinical trials and be transparent in sharing the results of this research.

The Department cannot comment on or intervene in the cases of individual patients. However, ministers are determined that, where it is clinically right thing to do, patients should receive cannabis-based products for medicinal use. Decisions relating to the prescribing of cannabis-based medicines need to be made on a case-by-case basis, and whether or not to treat must remain a clinical decision.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has initiated a review to the barriers being faced by patients seeking access to cannabis-based medicines. The review is now complete, and the Government are carefully considering NHS England-Improvement’s report (to be published shortly) alongside the recent Health and Social Care Select Committee’s Inquiry Report on medicinal cannabis which was published on 3 July 2019.
The petition of Residents of the constituency of East Worthing and Shoreham.

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world.

The petitions therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc. —[Presented by Tim Loughton, Official Report, 18 June 2019; Vol. 662, c. 206.] [P002464]

Petitions in the same terms were presented by the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) [P002466]; the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) [P002467]; the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) [P002469]; the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) [P002472] and the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) [P002475].

Observations from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Climate change is the biggest challenge of our times. The Government are committed to tackling the threat that climate change poses, through its domestic and international action.

To this end, the Government have legislated to reduce UK net emissions to zero by 2050. The Government are also bidding to host the 26th Conference of Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, in partnership with Italy. Our presidency of COP26 would seek to bring about transformative change in global action to tackle climate change.

EDUCATION

Funding for Russell Hall Primary School

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom

Declares that Russell Hall Primary School has seen a decline in funding per pupil and a reduction in the lump sum allocated to the school by almost £65,000 in 2018/19 and by the same in 2019/20; further that the school is facing a significant deficit budget and is having to make staff redundancies to save money, including the reduction of vital frontline teaching staff, the restructure of support staff roles and the end of additional services currently available to children such as the Early Bird Club.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to increase per pupil funding and reverse the cuts made to school budgets.

And the petitioners remain, etc. —[Presented by Judith Cummins, Official Report, 22 May 2019; Vol. 660, c. 274.] [P002455]

Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):

We recognise the budgeting challenges schools face and that we are asking them to do more. The Government have prioritised school spending, even while having to take difficult public spending decisions in other areas. As a result, core funding for schools and high needs has risen from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion this year. Funding remains high by historic standards: IFS figures show that real terms per pupil funding for 5 to 16 year olds in 2020 will be more than 50% higher than it was in 2000 and more than 70% higher than in 1990.

Spending plans beyond 2019-20 have not yet been set and naturally, we cannot pre-empt these decisions.

The introduction of the national funding formula (NFF) for schools has delivered on our promise to reform the unfair, opaque and outdated schools funding system. It is now directing money where it is most needed, based on schools’ and pupils’ characteristics, rather than the accidents of geography or history. Since 2017, we have given every local authority more money for every pupil in every school, while allocating the biggest increases to the schools that have been most underfunded.

The majority of school funding is determined by reference to the pupils attending a school. In addition, the NFF provides every school with a fixed lump sum of £110,000. This lump sum helps schools to manage fluctuations in their funding when pupil numbers or characteristics change. We have set the NFF lump sum at £110,000 because we think it is important to maximise how much funding is determined by the number and characteristics of pupils. The lump sum should be considered as a contribution to the fixed costs that schools are likely to face; it is not intended to match any set of precise costs.

We have provided protection in the NFF so that every school has been allocated an increase of at least 0.5% per pupil in 2018-19 and 1% in 2019-20, over its 2017-18 baseline. While the lump sum in the NFF is lower than the amount Bradford local authority had previously allocated, that has been taken into account in ensuring that every school in Bradford’s final NFF allocation provides at least these minimum increases in funding.

In order to smooth the transition towards the NFF, local authorities continue to be responsible for designing the distribution of funding in their areas, which could result in differences between the illustrative NFF allocations and a school’s final budget.

Despite prioritising spending on schools and making the distribution of that funding fairer across the country, we do recognise that budgets remain tight. That is why we are supporting schools and headteachers to make the most of their budgets and reduce costs on things like energy, water bills and materials. In August 2018 we announced the school resource management strategy, which provides schools with practical advice on savings that can be made on the more than £10 billion non-staff spending costs across England last year. The document is available on the gov.uk website at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-excellent-school-resource-management.
School funding

The petition of residents of Henley on Thames, Oxfordshire and of friends of the schools in the Henley area.

 Declares that a funding review is needed in relation to schools in the Henley constituency; further that this school funding review should address how funding increases will be made in relation to schools in the Henley constituency in real terms beyond the amounts already being spent on schools and how to eliminate the gap between the best and lowest funded schools in the constituency; further that there must be a review of areas of inflationary pressures and situations where schools provide additional services such as social care, or deal with criminal behaviour to examine the real costs of providing education; further that there must be an assessment into the extent and access to capital funding; further that the basic entitlement must form an appropriate percentage of the national funding formula used locally; further that the Department and Treasury must ensure that small primary schools in the constituency remain integral to their communities.

 The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to ask the Department of Education and the Treasury to conduct a review of school funding in Henley that addresses the issues stated above, in advance of the comprehensive spending review; and further requests that the findings of this review are communicated to the House of Commons.

 And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by John Howell, Official Report, 22 May 2019; Vol. 660, c. 774]

Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):

 We recognise the budgeting challenges schools face and that we are asking them to do more. The Government have prioritised school spending, even while having to take difficult public spending decisions in other areas. As a result, core funding for schools and high needs has risen from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion this year.

 Spending plans beyond 2019-20 have not yet been set and naturally, we cannot pre-empt these decisions. The right level of investment in our schools is crucial for a strong highly skilled productive economy and the Education Secretary will continue to back head teachers to have the resources they need to carry on delivering a world-class education.

 The national funding formula (NFF) has delivered on our promise to reform the unfair, opaque and outdated schools funding system. It is now directing money where it is most needed, based on schools’ and pupils’ characteristics—not accidents of geography or history. Since 2017, we have given every local authority more money for every pupil in every school, while allocating the biggest increases to the schools that have been most underfunded, as we continue to address historic injustices.

 However, the purpose of the national funding formula is not to give every school the same level of per pupil funding. Some schools will receive more funding than other schools due to a variety of factors, such as their level of additional needs. It is right that schools with lots of pupils with additional needs, such as those indicated by measures of deprivation or low prior attainment, should get extra funding to help those pupils who are most likely to fall behind.

 The significant majority of school funding is allocated through the basic per pupil factors of the NFF. We chose to prioritise pupil-led funding in the national funding formula and used some of the additional £1.3 billion for 2018-19 and 2019-20 over and above the sums announced at the 2015 spending review, to increase the basic amount that every pupil will attract under the NFF compared to our original proposals, reflecting views received during the NFF consultation process. However, as with all other factors in the NFF, we will keep the basic per pupil amount under review and continue to consider improvements to these in consultation with stakeholders.

 We recognise that small schools, particularly small primary schools in remote areas, do not necessarily have the same opportunities to find efficiencies as those elsewhere. The NFF provides a lump sum of £110,000 for every school as a contribution to the costs that do not vary with pupil numbers. This gives schools certainty that they will attract a fixed amount each year in addition to their pupil-led funding. In addition, the sparsity factor in the formula allocates additional funding of £25 million specifically to schools that are both small and remote. A small, rural primary school eligible for sparsity funding will attract up to £135,000, in total, through the lump sum and sparsity factors.

 We are collecting updated data on the condition of the school estate in England, which is due to complete in autumn 2019 and which will help inform future funding policy. We will also continue to look carefully at capital funding in preparation for the next spending review, along with all our priorities for the education system.

 The petition of parents, families and carers of pupils at Vale View Primary School, Reddish,

 Declares that Vale View Primary School, Mill Lane in Reddish is trying to close early on Friday afternoons to save money meaning that parents will either have to leave work early to pick their children up, or pay for child care in school; further that it will disrupt children’s learning; further that Vale View is not the only school proposing this; further that schools across the country are affected thanks to real term funding cuts of £2.5 billion; further that schools are being asked to make cuts to staffing, drop subjects and other activities and are asking parents to chip in to help run them; further that we think it’s ridiculous that in 2019 schools are being forced to shut their doors early, or cut entire subjects because the government won’t give them the money they need; further that investment in schools is investment in our children’s future; further notes a related online petition on this same matter that has received 113,610 signatures; and further that the government should be doing everything it can to make sure children in England have the best start in life and the best education to help them succeed.

 The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to ask the Government to increase funding for schools, so they can afford the staff and equipment they need without taking cost saving measures like cutting school hours.

 And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Andrew Gwynne, Official Report, 5 June 2019; Vol. 661, c. 233.]

[15P-24 July 2019-16P]
**Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):**

The structure of the school day and week should not be the cause of inconvenience to parents and carers, and it is unacceptable for schools to shorten their school day or week unless it is a direct action to support and enhance their pupils’ education.

We are determined to create an education system that offers opportunity to everyone, no matter what their circumstances or where they live. Children only get one chance of a great education, so the Government have prioritised school spending, even while having to take difficult public spending decisions in other areas. As a result, core funding for schools and high needs has risen from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion this year. Funding is also high by historical standards, figures from the Institute for Fiscal Studies show that real-terms per pupil funding for five to 16-year-olds in 2020 will be more than 50% higher than it was in 2000. However, we do recognise the budgeting challenges schools face, and that we are asking them to do more.

School funding for the current year has already been determined. Spending plans beyond 2019-20 have not yet been set, and naturally we cannot pre-empt these decisions. The right level of investment in our schools is crucial for a strong, highly skilled productive economy and the Education Secretary will continue to back headteachers to have the resources they need to carry on delivering a world-class education.

Since 2017, the national funding formula (NFF) has given every local authority more money for every pupil in every school, while allocating the biggest increases to the schools that have been most underfunded. Under the NFF, Vale View Primary School has attracted 2.8% more funding per pupil, compared to 2017-18 (based on 2018-19 pupil data). This is equivalent to an extra £113 per pupil.

Local authorities continue to be responsible for designing the distribution of funding in their areas in order to smooth the transition toward the NFF, and this could mean a school’s final allocation from their local authority could be different from their notional NFF allocation.

Despite prioritising spending on schools and making the distribution of that funding fairer across the country, we do recognise that budgets remain tight. That is why we are supporting schools and headteachers to make the most of their budgets and reduce costs on things like energy, water bills and materials. In August 2018 we announced the School Resource Management Strategy, which provides schools with practical advice on savings that can be made on the more than £10 billion non-staff spending costs across England last year. The document is available on the gov.uk website at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-excellent-school-resource-management.

The petition of residents of Woodcote and friends of Langtree School,

Declares that a funding review is needed in relation to schools in the Henley constituency; further that this school funding review should address how funding increases will be made in relation to schools in the Henley constituency in real terms beyond the amounts already being spent on schools and how to eliminate the gap between the best and lowest funded schools in the constituency; further that there must be a review of areas of inflationary pressures and situations where schools provide additional services such as social care, or deal with criminal behaviour to examine the real costs of providing education; further that there must be an assessment into the extent and access to capital funding; further that the Basic Entitlement must form an appropriate percentage of the National Funding Formula used locally; further that the Department and Treasury must ensure that small primary schools in the constituency remain integral to their communities.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to ask the Department of Education and the Treasury to conduct a review of school funding in Henley that addresses the issues stated above, in advance of the Comprehensive Spending Review; and further requests that the findings of this review are communicated to the House of Commons.

And the petitioners remain, etc. —[Presented by John Howell, Official Report, 2 July 2019; Vol. 662, c. 1174.]

[P002483]

**Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):**

We recognise the budgeting challenges schools face and that we are asking them to do more. The Government have prioritised school spending, even while having to take difficult public spending decisions in other areas. As a result, core funding for schools and high needs has risen from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion this year.

Spending plans beyond 2019-20 have not yet been set and naturally, we cannot pre-empt these decisions. The right level of investment in our schools is crucial for a strong highly skilled productive economy and the Education Secretary will continue to back headteachers to have the resources they need to carry on delivering a world-class education.

The national funding formula (NFF) has delivered on our promise to reform the unfair, opaque and outdated schools funding system. It is now directing money where it is most needed, based on schools’ and pupils’ characteristics -not accidents of geography or history. Since 2017, we have given every local authority more money for every pupil in every school, while allocating the biggest increases to the schools that have been most underfunded, as we continue to address historic injustices.

However, the purpose of the national funding formula is not to give every school the same level of per pupil funding. Some schools will receive more funding than other schools due to a variety of factors, such as their level of additional needs. It is right that schools with lots of pupils with additional needs, such as those indicated by measures of deprivation or low prior attainment, should get extra funding to help those pupils who are most likely to fall behind.

The significant majority of school funding is allocated through the basic per pupil factors of the NFF. We chose to prioritise pupil-led funding in the national funding formula and used some of the additional £3 billion for 2018-19 and 2019-20, over and above the sums announced at the 2015 spending review, to increase the basic amount that every pupil will attract under the NFF compared to our original proposals, reflecting views received during the NFF consultation process. However, as with all other factors in the NFF, we will
keep the basic per pupil amount under review and continue to consider improvements to these in consultation with stakeholders.

We recognise that small schools, particularly small primary schools in remote areas, do not necessarily have the same opportunities to find efficiencies as those elsewhere. The NFF provides a lump sum of £110,000 for every school as a contribution to the costs that do not vary with pupil numbers. This gives these schools certainty that they will attract a fixed amount each year in addition to their pupil-led funding. In addition, the sparsity factor in the formula allocates additional funding of £25 million specifically to schools that are both small, and remote. A small, rural primary school eligible for sparsity funding will attract up to £135,000, in total, through the lump sum and sparsity factors.

We are collecting updated data on the condition of the school estate in England, which is due to complete in autumn 2019 and which will help inform future funding policy. We will also continue to look carefully at capital funding in preparation for the next spending review, along with all our priorities for the education system.
Petitions

Thursday 25 July 2019

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Greater Manchester Spatial Framework

The petition of Residents of Boothstown,

Declares that they and other affected parties are opposed to GMA 31 of the revised Greater Manchester Spatial Framework which removes the land east of Boothstown from the Green Belt; and further that development on this land would be to the detriment of the quality of life and wildlife to the residents of Boothstown.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to do all in its power to stop this land being removed from the Green Belt and protect this green space from development.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Barbara Keeley.]

UK bid to host UN climate conference 2020

The petition of residents of the constituency of Gloucester,

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Richard Graham.]

OBSERVATIONS

CABINET OFFICE

Climate change

The petition of residents of the constituency of Eddisbury,

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Antoinette Sandbach. Official Report, 18 June 2019; Vol. 662, c. 206.]

Observations from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Michael Gove):

Climate change is the biggest challenge of our times. The Government are committed to tackling the threat that climate change poses, through its domestic and international action.

To this end, the Government have legislated to reduce UK net emissions to zero by 2050. The Government are also bidding to host the 26th Conference of Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, in partnership with Italy. Our presidency of COP26 would seek to bring about transformative change in global action to tackle climate change.
Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 9 July 2019

WORK AND PENSIONS

Pensioner Poverty

The following is an extract from Work and Pensions questions on 1 July 2019.

Martyn Day: Does the Minister think it right that the UK has the lowest state pension in the developed world?

Guy Opperman: The reality of the state pension in this country is that it has risen by £1,600 in real terms through the triple lock. It also needs to be looked at in the context of the significant high private pensions that, thanks to automatic enrolment and other reforms, show that this is comparable to many other European countries.

[Official Report, 1 July 2019, Vol. 662, c. 913.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman).

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day).

The correct response should have been:

Martyn Day: Does the Minister think it right that the UK has the lowest state pension in the developed world?

Guy Opperman: The reality of the state pension in this country is that it has risen by £1,600 in cash terms through the triple lock. It also needs to be looked at in the context of the significant high private pensions that, thanks to automatic enrolment and other reforms, show that this is comparable to many other European countries.
Ministerial Correction

Thursday 11 July 2019

JUSTICE

Child Imprisonment

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on Child Imprisonment on 25 June 2019.

Edward Argar: The age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is 10. Custodial sentences are available for children from that age, although their use is restricted, and the courts have a statutory duty to consider a child’s welfare during sentencing. Children under 12 will only ever receive a custodial sentence for the most serious offences where neither a community sentence or fine can be justified. Furthermore, we recognise that needs can differ among different age groups, and the sentencing guidelines reflect that. For example, detention and training orders are not available for under-12s, and can only be given to children aged 12 to 14 if they are considered to be persistent offenders. Returning to the definition of “child”, about 95% of those who receive a custodial sentence are 16 and 17-year-olds. That is still a small number. I take the underlying point that the hon. Member for South Shields is making, but we should be clear about the age that is predominantly reflected in those who receive custodial sentences.


Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar).

An error has been identified in my response to the debate on Child Imprisonment.

The correct response should have been:

Edward Argar: The age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is 10. Custodial sentences are available for children from that age, although their use is restricted, and the courts have a statutory duty to consider a child’s welfare during sentencing. Children under 12 will only ever receive a custodial sentence for the most serious offences where neither a community sentence or fine can be justified. Furthermore, we recognise that needs can differ among different age groups, and the sentencing guidelines reflect that. For example, detention and training orders are not available for under-12s, and can only be given to children aged 12 to 14 if they are considered to be persistent offenders. Returning to the definition of “child”, about 82% of those in custody are 16 and 17-year-olds. That is still a small number. I take the underlying point that the hon. Member for South Shields is making, but we should be clear about the age that is predominantly reflected in those who receive custodial sentences.
Ministerial Corrections

Monday 15 July 2019

WORK AND PENSIONS

Inequality and Social Mobility

The following is an extract from the Opposition day debate on Inequality and Social Mobility on 12 June 2019.

Amber Rudd: Our safety net is one of the strongest in the world. We deliver the fourth most generous level of welfare support in the OECD. In this financial year, total welfare spending will be more than £220 billion.


Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions:

An error has been identified in my contribution to the debate.

The correct information should have been:

Amber Rudd: Our safety net is one of the strongest in the world. We are the fourth most generous country, according to the UN World Happiness Report. In this financial year, total welfare spending will be more than £220 billion.

EDUCATION

Education Funding

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on Education Funding on 4 June 2019.

Nick Gibb: I refer my hon. Friend and other hon. Members to the schedules that show how the national funding formula is made up. Local authorities will attract the same figure for every primary school pupil in 2019-20, regardless of where they are in the country, and the same figure for secondary and key stage 4. That represents about 73% of the total funding per pupil. The remaining 27% is made up of additional needs. For example, a pupil who has qualified for free school meals in the last six years will attract £540 in primary and £785 in secondary. If that secondary school pupil is in band D of the income deprivation affecting children index, they will attract another £515. If that secondary school pupil has low prior attainment based on primary school results, they will attract an additional £1,550. If that secondary school pupil has English as an additional language, they will attract an additional £1,385. That applies whether that pupil lives in Sheppey, Greenwich or York. The only difference will be that those figures are multiplied by the percentage area cost adjustment.

[Official Report, 4 June 2019, Vol. 661, c. 75WH.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for School Standards:

Errors have been identified in my response to points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) and others.

The correct response should have been:

Nick Gibb: I refer my hon. Friend and other hon. Members to the schedules that show how the national funding formula is made up. Local authorities will attract the same figure for every primary school pupil in 2019-20, regardless of where they are in the country, and the same figure for secondary and key stage 4. That represents about 73% of the total funding per pupil. A further 18% is made up of additional needs. For example, a pupil who has qualified for free school meals in the last six years will attract £540 in primary and £785 in secondary. If that secondary school pupil is in band D of the income deprivation affecting children index, they will attract another £515. If that secondary school pupil has low prior attainment based on primary school results, they will attract an additional £1,550. If that secondary school pupil has English as an additional language, they will attract an additional £1,385. That applies whether that pupil lives in Sheppey, Greenwich or York. The only difference will be that those figures are multiplied by the percentage area cost adjustment. The final 9% is made up of school-led funding.
Ministerial Correction  

Tuesday 16 July 2019  

TRANSPORT  

High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill  

The following is an extract from the Report stage of the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill on 15 July 2019.

Ms Ghani: I thank the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) for her support for the Bill. She referred to businesses. There are 2,000 businesses already involved on the line and 9,000 people working on the line, and 98% of the businesses involved in HS2 are small and medium-sized enterprises.


Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani):

An error has been identified in my response to a point made by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith).

The correct information should have been:

Ms Ghani: I thank the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) for her support for the Bill. She referred to businesses. There are 2,000 businesses already involved on the line and 9,000 people working on the line, and 98% of the businesses involved in HS2 are British and 70% are small and medium-sized enterprises.
Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 17 July 2019

DEFENCE

National Shipbuilding Strategy

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on the National Shipbuilding Strategy on 11 July 2019.

Stuart Andrew: All of our vision is for a shipbuilding sector that does not need a contract for a couple of non-complex warships; it could also work in the civil sector.


Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew):

An error has been identified in my response to the debate.

The correct wording should have been:

Stuart Andrew: All of our vision is for a shipbuilding sector that does not need a contract for a couple of non-complex ships; it could also work in the civil sector.
Ministerial Correction

Monday 22 July 2019

CABINET OFFICE

Contaminated Blood Inquiry

The following is an extract from questions to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office on 10 July 2019.

Diana Johnson: The Minister is absolutely right, but with one victim dying every 96 hours and compensation still not being paid, I wrote to the Prime Minister, along with seven Opposition party leaders, to ask for compensation to be paid now. The Prime Minister has refused. I then wrote to the two Conservative party leadership candidates on 21 June, because they are making huge spending commitments, but I have not had the courtesy of a response. Perhaps the Minister could help me with that.

Mr Lidington: I am happy to try to prompt a response to the hon. Lady’s letter. She will know that the Department of Health and Social Care has announced a major uplift in the financial support available to beneficiaries of the infected blood scheme in England, and talks are now going on with the devolved Governments about trying to get a UK-wide agreement. Questions of legal liability fall therefore to compensation and are expressly a matter for the independent inquiry.

[Official Report, 10 July 2019, Vol. 663, c. 302.]

Letter of correction from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office.

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson).

The correct response should have been:

Mr Lidington: I am happy to try to prompt a response to the hon. Lady’s letter. She will know that the Department of Health and Social Care has announced a major uplift in the financial support available to beneficiaries of the infected blood scheme in England, and talks are now going on with the devolved Governments about trying to get a UK-wide agreement. **Any award of compensation will depend on a determination of legal liability, to which the inquiry’s determinations and recommendations may be relevant.**
Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 23 July 2019

EDUCATION

Murders in Northamptonshire: Serious Case Reviews

The following is an extract from the response to an Urgent Question on Monday 10 June 2019.

Nadhim Zahawi: There has been and continues to be a great deal of debate about the transparency of the child protection system in England, but there is a presumption that all serious case review reports are published. That is why local safeguarding children boards and the new safeguarding partnerships are required to send copies of all serious case reviews to the panel, the DFE and Ofsted within at least seven days, as I have mentioned. At that point, they would need to provide justification for any decision not to publish the report. The panel has not yet received the draft serious case review in relation to child JL. Once the draft serious case review is received, the panel will consider carefully if there is any justification for not publishing the report. I hope that reassures the hon. Gentleman.


Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi).

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne).

The correct response should have been:

Nadhim Zahawi: There has been and continues to be a great deal of debate about the transparency of the child protection system in England, but there is a presumption that all serious case review reports are published. That is why local safeguarding children boards and the new safeguarding partnerships are required to send copies of all serious case reviews to the panel, the DFE and Ofsted within at least seven days, as I have mentioned. At that point, they would need to provide justification for any decision not to publish the report. The panel has not yet considered Northamptonshire’s draft serious case review in relation to child JL which it received on Friday 7 June. Once the draft serious case review is reviewed, the panel will consider carefully if there is any justification for not publishing the report. I hope that reassures the hon. Gentleman.
Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 24 July 2019

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Situation in the Gulf

The following is an extract from the Foreign Secretary’s statement on the situation in the Gulf on 22 July 2019.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s prescient remarks in recent weeks about the need to expand our naval presence. To help with that, will he ask the Defence Secretary to change the classification of our much-valued Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships to warships, as our allies classify them, so that we can bring forward the building of planned new ships in the UK?

Mr Hunt: I have just asked the Defence Secretary that very question, to which the answer is yes. [Official Report, 22 July 2019, Vol. 663, c. 1131.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) during the statement on the situation in the Gulf.

The correct response should have been:

Mr Hunt: I have just asked the Defence Secretary that very question, to which the answer is yes, for future ships being built in the UK.